

Cycling in Iceland

Iceland is a dream destination for many visitors and touring via cycle is an exciting and memorable way to experience the country's natural beauty. It is safe to travel here if you are properly prepared, and you will find most Icelanders both helpful and friendly. The freedom to experience the wild countryside brings the responsibility of visitors to keep Iceland's vast but sensitive nature unspoiled when travelling. The CYCLING ICELAND map, made by dedicated cyclists, provides cycling-specific advice on lonely tracks and hazardous highways, campsites, guided bike tours and other services.

We wish you a pleasant and safe journey. Enjoy cycling in Iceland!

Cycling in Iceland is a great experience, but challenging. Be prepared for ...



Adverse weather conditions. Weather in Iceland can change from one minute to the next. Expect extreme wind speeds, cold, rain and even snow. Bring warm clothing and adjust your travel plans to the weather.



Rugged nature. Steep rocks, crevasses, boiling hot springs, glaciers, and ocean beaches with heavy surf pose hazards to visitors. Respect nature and use caution even if there is no warning sign.



Sensitive vegetation and soil. Due to the cold climate, loose volcanic soils, and increased tourism, trampling of vegetation and erosion are major problems. Offroad driving is strictly prohibited. Follow designated paths, and treat nature with care.

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Egilsstaðir	701
Ísafjörður	533
Akureyri	426
Borgarnes	107

Sparse population. It can be 200 km to the next shop, public transport or other services. Take enough food and spare parts, and let others or www.safetravel.is know of your plans before travelling in lonely areas.



Heavy car traffic. Car traffic has increased massively in recent years. On large parts of route 1, traffic exceeds 3000 cars per day (one car every 10 seconds during daytime). Roads are narrow and there are no bike paths. Cycling on remote roads, and public transport are safer.



Mass tourism. Iceland is visited now by more than 2 million tourists per year. At places like Geysir or Gullfoss you will meet hundreds of visitors. As most tourists seek to find nature by car, cyclists suffer from heavy traffic on main roads and sparse public transport. Cycling in remote areas is a better experience.



Iceland is expensive. Staple foods have relatively fair prices, but for all other goods and services expect to pay much more than in most other countries.



Camping on campsites: On many campsites in Iceland, cars are allowed to be driven next to the tent. When you set up your tent at 8 p.m. on a nice green spot, you may find yourself surrounded by 2-ton SUVs, caravans, etc., at 11 p.m. and there may be a party throughout the (bright) summer night. Campsites with a car-free area for tents only may be more quiet. Use the campsite list on www.cyclingiceland.is to find cycling-friendly sites.



Camping outside of designated campsites is a hotly debated topic, particularly related to overnight parking of camper vans, offroad parking, too little distance to inhabited houses and private property, garbage and human waste. Rules have become stricter in recent times. Nevertheless, free camping with a small tent and a bicycle far away from the next house is legal and will not disturb anyone. Take care to leave the place clean and in its natural state.

ABOUT US

Cycling Iceland aims to provide cyclists with all essential information about cycling in Iceland. Published by Hjólafærni á Íslandi, 20 June 2018. Editor: Sesselja Traustadóttir, in cooperation with Andreas Macrander, Ómar Smári Kristinsson, Nína Ivanova and Ingi Gunnar Jóhannsson. While we take great care in compiling all information, we can not assume responsibility for any errors.

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CYCLING ICELAND MAP 2017, published online on www.cyclingiceland.is

printed edition (English and Icelandic) available at selected tourist informations and campsites, and you are welcome to order it from hjolafaerni@hjolafaerni.is, www.hjolafaerni.is, tel. +354 864 2776.

UPDATES 2018, published online on www.cyclingiceland.is:

Iceland map 2018 + Reykjavík map 2018 + Public transport map 2018

List of campsites and huts 2018 + Cycling in Iceland 2018 (this text).



The weather

Iceland enjoys a cool and windy oceanic climate. The summers are short, and the best time for cycling is late May to early September. During this time, the average temperature is 10–12°C (50–54°F). A few warmer days may exceed 20°C (68°F), but near freezing temperatures are equally common. Most days offer a mixture of clouds and sunshine, but rain showers are frequent. When lows approach, conditions can be quite wet on one side of the country. In the interior highlands and on mountain passes, it is often colder and wind, fog, rain or snow is more common.

Keep in mind that the weather in Iceland is much more variable and windy than in other countries. Strong winds often pick up within 10 minutes, and it can be calm in one place with a rough storm just 5 km away. Always carry warm clothing with you, even for short day trips. Wind and rain can cool you down quickly, and there is little shelter as trees are rare. Always consult the weather forecast (en.vedur.is, tel.: 902-0600, or ask the locals) before setting off. Wind speed and gusts (*vindhviður*) from windy places on the main roads are shown on electronic signs 10–30 km before those areas and also on www.road.is. At wind speeds above 15–20 m/s, cycling becomes dangerous. Close to some mountains, gusts easily exceed 30 m/s, even pushing your bike can be impossible.

Adjust your travel plans according to the weather. If it is too windy to cycle, wait at a safe place until the weather has improved. If you must cycle against the wind, consider cycling in the late evening and at night as the wind often calms down in the evening. This has the added benefit of encountering far less car traffic and experiencing wondrous bright summer nights, however, access to shops and services is of course limited.



The roads

Most **main roads** are asphalted, although the surface is sometimes rough. The main highway in Iceland, Route 1, circles the country in around 1400 kilometers. Car traffic has increased by more than 100% during the last five years on many tourist routes. With cars rushing past every few seconds, most main roads in southwest Iceland do not meet general European safety standards for cycling on roads, being narrow (less than 8 m wide), or having a multi-lane layout without any space for cyclists. Only a few roads have wide shoulders or cycle paths.

Use the map to find the best routes. We recommend cycling on **minor roads**, using public transport, or cycling during the night when there is less traffic. In more remote parts of the country, traffic volume is lower, but vehicles still move fast. The roads also become narrower, especially once you exit Route 1. Secondary roads are still mostly gravel. There is far less traffic on the gravel roads, but you may encounter long stretches with potholes, washboards or loose sand.

Special hazards for cyclists are cars overtaking too closely, car drivers blinded by low sun, poor visibility in rain and fog, blind hills, sidewind, and loose gravel. One-lane bridges should be entered only when you are sure that no car will enter the bridge while you are crossing the bridge – do not trust drivers to see and stop. Except for Hvalfjörður and Vaðlaheiði tunnels, cycling is permitted in all tunnels. Conditions for cycling in these are quite good as traffic volume is fairly low. All tunnels are illuminated, but you need lights on your bike in order to be seen.



The interior highlands

The mountain roads in the interior highlands are usually closed until late May or even as late as July, depending on the seasonal snow melt. The Road Administration (www.road.is) has up-to-date information on road and weather conditions and summer opening dates. The highland roads are all rough gravel/dirt roads of varying quality, ranging from packed mud to bumpy washboards, loose gravel and even sand, on which it may be impossible to cycle when it is too dry. Many rivers must be crossed at fords and can become dangerous during or after rain, and, in the case of glacial rivers, during warm periods. You may therefore have to wait until late night or early morning to cross certain glacial rivers during the summer.

The map also shows selected abandoned roads and singletrack paths without motorized traffic. These provide car-free connections over footbridges, mountain passes and through the highlands. In some eroded or steep spots you may need to carry your bike, and you should obtain accurate information about the conditions on these unserviced trails before setting off.

For all highland roads and tracks, mountain bikes with fat knobby tires for good traction and comfort and low gear ratios to help climb steep hills are recommended. Please remember that the nearest lodging in the highlands can be far away, and there are generally no shops or services. There may be terrible weather conditions, including sandstorms or snow. Large areas have no mobile telephone coverage, and some tracks are very lonely. Depending on the road surface, progress can be very slow and you may cover as little as 25 km per day. Keep in mind that this map does not show road quality and roads with more traffic are not necessarily better than those with few cars. This map alone is not sufficient for travelling in the highlands. We recommend obtaining detailed topographical maps.

Always ask local tourist information centers, hut wardens and other travellers about current weather, and road/track conditions before setting off. If you travel on lonely tracks or hike away from any roads, make sure that friends, hut wardens or www.safetravel.is know about your travel plans, so that help can be arranged in case of emergency.



Cycling into and out of Reykjavík and Akureyri

Within the Capital Area there is a rather good network of bike paths, see the Reykjavík map above for the best routes. Five colour-coded main routes are being signposted in 2018. In addition, cycling on all minor roads is usually ok; many of these have bike paths as well. Note that cycling on sidewalks and walking paths is legal in Iceland, but cyclists have to show regard for pedestrians. Some narrow or uneven sections are marked as “slow” paths on the map; cycling on nearby “orange” roads is faster. Cycling on the large motorway-like main roads is not recommended.

Outside of the Capital Area there are no bike paths, and there is heavy and fast traffic on the main roads. Route 1 is especially narrow and dangerous for cycling, but the road to Keflavík is wider. It is much better to cycle on the smaller roads to Krýsuvík, Nesjavellir, Þingvellir and the old road Þingvellir–Laugarvatn, or around Hvalfjörður via Mosfellsheiði/Kjósarskarð/Geldingadragi.

Public transport is a good option to avoid traffic. To the north, you may use the buses to Akranes or Borgarnes, that will take you through the Hvalfjörður tunnel which is closed for cycling. To South Iceland, you can take a bus to e.g. Hveragerði, Selfoss or Hvolsvöllur.

East of Akureyri: Route 1 over Víkurskarð pass is narrow, hilly and with heavy traffic. It is much nicer to cycle over Vaðlaheiði (see the Akureyri map). This gravel road is in fairly good condition, it is open despite of tunnel works at both ends. The climbs are steady and below 10% grade, and there are few cars. The new Vaðlaheiði tunnel will be prohibited for cyclists, but once the tunnel is open, Víkurskarð may become more cycling-friendly due to less traffic.



Traffic regulations

Cycling is allowed on all roads except the Hvalfjörður and Vaðlaheiði tunnels. However, most main roads in southwest Iceland are hazardous for cycling. In the Capital Area, it is better to use the bike paths. When cycling on roads, cyclists should cycle on the right side of the lane farthest to the right, and allow motor vehicles to pass. Cycling on sidewalks and walking paths is legal in Iceland, but cyclists have to show regard for pedestrians. All off-road or off-track driving/cycling is strictly prohibited. The tire tracks easily erode the loose soil, and the vegetation is very sensitive and takes years to recover in Iceland’s cold climate.

Bicycles are required to have head- and taillights when cycling in darkness, through tunnels or when visibility is poor, but not in daylight. Children under 15 years are legally required to wear bicycle helmets. Children under 7 years may ride on the road only under supervision of a person 15 years or older.

Equipment

Always carry warm, wind- and rainproof clothing; gloves and a warm hat may be necessary even in the summer. Tents must be able to withstand strong winds. We recommend a robust trekking bike or, for the highlands, a mountain bike with fat knobby tires. Low gears are essential for steep climbs and headwind. Good lights on the bike and a high-visibility reflective vest improve safety when cycling on main roads, at night and in tunnels. Wearing parts such as tires, brake pads, chain and bearings should be in good condition, as the next bike shop may be far away. You should carry tools and spare parts for field repairs. The most common problems are flat tires, broken spokes, a broken chain, loose or lost screws and nuts, split derailleur and brake cables and broken aluminum luggage racks.



Accommodation

The Cycling map shows all campsites and all places with indoor accommodation. In the highlands, all huts and shelters which can be reached by bike, bus or boat are shown. Cyclists should be prepared for camping as the next house may be too far away.

Huts: Huts in the highlands are quite likely to be full and should be booked well in advance.

Camping: Travellers are expected to use the designated campsites. On cyclingiceland.is we provide cycling-specific information about all ca. 250 campsites in Iceland. We particularly recommend sites that have a car-free area for tents only, if you don't like 2-ton SUVs parking directly next to your tent. The campsite list also provides information about wind shelter, hot showers, drying of wet clothes, indoor facilities, tools for bike repairs etc. Download the list on your smartphone or print it.

Camping outside of campsites: If you are not able to reach the next campsite, hikers and cyclists are permitted to put up a normal hiking tent for one night anywhere along the road / track / path except on cultivated land, in areas too close to residential buildings, and in especially protected areas. Note that in the lowlands there are usually fences along the road. Ask the owner for permission before camping on farmland or private ground. Always take care to leave all stones, moss, grass and trees in their natural state and take all garbage with you. Secure your tent to withstand sudden strong winds that may start at any time.

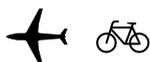
Camper vans and caravans always have to use designated campsites. In inhabited areas of South Iceland, tents are also obliged to use designated campsites; free camping is restricted to wilderness areas at least several km away from any houses or cultivated areas.



Food and drink

Food can only be purchased in towns and a few other highway locations. You must therefore take enough food to last several days if you are crossing the highlands. As Iceland is sparsely populated, there may be 100–200 km between shops even on Route 1, e.g. between Mývatn and Egilsstaðir and between Höfn and Skaftafell.

Water can usually be accessed quite easily in the countryside from streams and rivers. Never take water from areas downstream of farms or fields. Instead, you should visit the farms and ask for tap water. Water from glacial rivers should only be drunk in an emergency and should preferably be filtered. Two liters of water carrying capacity is usually enough, however, in sand and lava areas without any surface water, it may be necessary to carry more water.



Travelling by plane and arrival at Keflavík airport

Cyclists bringing their bikes on flights to Iceland must generally pack them in suitable boxes.

Keflavík airport: There is no space to pack/unpack bicycles in the terminal building, but 100 m straight ahead of the arrivals exit, you will find the "Bike Pit", a special container with assembly stands, pumps and tools. Bike boxes can be stored at Bílahótel (building marked "Geysir", 800 m away at Arnarvöllur 4, tel. 455-0006, www.luggagestorage.is, see Keflavík map). A good option is also to take a bus to Reykjavík and start cycling there – Reykjavík campsite / City hostel also offers tools, an assembly stand, and storage of bike boxes.

Cycling from/to Keflavík airport: A bike path to the town of Keflavík begins at the bike container. For all other destinations, you need to cycle on the roads. The main road to Reykjavík is quite wide for the most part, but there is heavy traffic.

Buses from Keflavík airport to Reykjavík: *Flybus*, *Airport Express* and *Airport Direct* connect with all flights. From their bus terminals in Reykjavík (BSÍ, Holtagarðar and Grandi), all also provide onward transport to Reykjavík campsite/City hostel, other guesthouses and hotels. *Strætó* route 55 operates to Hafnarfjörður or BSÍ, but this particular bus does not convey bikes.

Domestic flights depart mostly from Reykjavík city airport (there are two terminals, see the Reykjavík map). Bikes can be taken on all domestic flights, but you should ask the airlines beforehand when travelling with a bike. Boxes are not required on domestic flights, but turn the handlebar and put some padding on sensitive parts.



Travelling by bus and bike

The Public Transport map, www.publictransport.is, shows all scheduled bus, ferry and plane routes in Iceland. For timetables, fares, etc., refer to the operators' websites. Sightseeing tours which do not allow rides from A to B are not shown. Please note that in 2018, several bus routes have been withdrawn. The entire northeast beyond Húsavík is no longer served, and in the east between Egilsstaðir and Höfn, several changes between local buses are required and bikes are not conveyed.

Pre-booking and schedules: Always contact the operator to check if the bus is on schedule, and if/how bikes are conveyed on that particular bus. For *Strætó*, reservations are not possible and bikes are conveyed for free. Most routes operate once or twice per day. In southwest Iceland, there are additional services, which may have more available space for bikes than the long distance buses. Some remote routes operate only a few times per week. Some *Strætó* routes, indicated with dashed lines on the map, run on demand only. Call the operator several hours before departure. Some smaller public operators may not carry bikes at all, e.g. most routes of *SVAust*. In summer, there are additional bus routes operated by private companies (*IOYO*, *Icelandbybus*, *Trex*, *Westfjords Adventures*, etc.). All of these carry bikes, but most now require pre-booking for both passengers and bikes.

Bus stops: Long-distance buses depart from different locations in Reykjavík (see the Reykjavík map): *Strætó*: Mjódd, a few services also from BSÍ terminal. *IOYO* and *Flybus*: BSÍ terminal. *Airport Express*: Holtagarðar. *Airport Direct*: Grandi. *Icelandbybus*: Harpa and campsite. *Trex*: City center and campsite. Buses have scheduled stops in every village. With a bike, we strongly recommend to use scheduled stops only. If necessary, drivers may set down passengers anywhere along the route where the bus can stop safely, e.g. at parking sites or junctions with smaller roads. For getting on the bus between scheduled stops, call the operator beforehand and agree on a suitable place for the bus to stop. Due to heavy traffic, drivers need to be prepared to stop, waving hands alone is not sufficient. In the Capital Area and other areas with local buses, buses only stop at marked stops.

Transport of bikes: *Strætó* mainline services often have an outside bike rack. On most other buses, bikes are taken in the luggage compartment and some minibuses have luggage trailers, but a few buses do not convey bikes at all. Most services have capacity for about $4 \pm x$ bikes, but the bus driver decides how many bikes can be accepted. Occasionally, buses on the main routes are full of bikes. Cyclists travelling in a group may be better off chartering their own transport.

Tickets: For all rural buses, you can buy tickets on the bus with cash or credit card. *Strætó* tickets are also sold at a few places in rural areas and at swimming pools and "10/11" shops in the Capital Area; packs of 20 tickets cost 5% less and are cheaper than using the app. On pre-booked trips, it is usually sufficient to present the booking number. Bicycles are free at *Strætó*, while most other operators charge about 4000 kr for a bike.

Capital Area: The yellow *Strætó* city buses accept up to 2 bicycles, if the space is not needed for other passengers, children's prams or wheelchairs. Tickets must be paid for in cash (ca. 460 kr, no change given) or bought in advance; bikes go free of charge. Nevertheless, cycling is usually the better choice within Reykjavík.



Travelling by ferry and bike

The Smyril Line ferry Norröna operates once a week all year round between Hirtshals (Denmark), Tórshavn (Faroe Islands) and Seyðisfjörður. Summer sailings should be booked no later than 6 months in advance – there is always space for bikes, but cabin places sell out quickly.

All domestic car ferries transport bikes, and you can usually take a bike on passenger boats as well. Bikes don't need to be pre-booked, but always contact the operators to confirm sailings.

Ferry Herjólfur to Vestmannaeyjar: The harbour in Landeyjahöfn is sometimes closed due to bad weather or shallow water. On such days, the ferry operates from Þorlákshöfn, *Strætó* route 52 terminates in Hvolsvöllur, and a special bus connects with the ferry in Þorlákshöfn.

Ferry Baldur across Breiðafjörður: Cyclists who want to visit the small island Flatey have their bike lifted on/off the ship by crane, while for through passages, bikes are conveyed on the car deck.



Winter in Iceland

On a nice winter day, you can enjoy a wonderful day trip cycling with studded tires on the ice-covered bike paths of Reykjavík. You can rent a bike with studded tires at several of the bike rental companies in Reykjavík. All bike paths within the Capital Area (see the Reykjavík map) are regularly cleared of snow. The main routes are cleared every morning, on secondary paths clearing may take longer after heavy snowfalls. Black ice and some snow are very common, so studded tires are essential for winter riding. All paths are illuminated during the night, so if you want to watch northern lights, it is best to go to the few dark areas at Gróttá, Skerjafjörður or Laugarnes.

WARNING: Outside of built-up areas, cycling in Iceland in winter can be extremely hazardous.

In winter (October to April), the weather in Iceland is often extremely harsh. Blizzards, driving rain, snow and ice on the roads, and darkness make for extremely adverse conditions. Without trees and houses, there is no shelter from wind and cold, and cyclists and hikers are at extreme risk of hypothermia. Only the main roads connecting towns and villages are cleared from snow. Some gravel roads in the Westfjords and Eastfjords, and all highland roads are closed. There are fewer buses, and vehicles are often smaller and with less space for luggage. Buses are often cancelled due to storms and snow.

There are a few cyclists riding in Iceland in winter, but outside of built-up areas experience with survival in Arctic conditions, best equipment, and close knowledge of local conditions and weather are essential. Expect to be stuck for days or a week because of blizzards; clear and calm days are rare.



Health care

Emergency number: 112

Rural areas: General medical advice is provided by medical centers (*heilsugæsla*, open on weekdays only) in most villages/towns with >100 inhabitants. Pharmacies are in most towns. In small places, the local shop might sell a limited range of medicine upon request. Specialist doctors, dentists and hospitals are only found in the largest towns in each part of the country.

Capital Area: On weekdays, go to any *heilsugæsla*. On evenings and weekends, contact Læknavaktin in Kópavogur, Smáratorg, tel. 1700. Pharmacy open 08–24 every day close to Reykjavík campsite: Lyfja, Lágmúli 5. **In emergency, call 112, and there is a 24h emergency ward at Landspítali hospital in Fossvogur.**