

# THE LAND OF FIRE AND ICE

**A remote volcanic island, home of Vikings and glaciers, turns out to be one of the world's most inspiring riding destinations**

**STORY AND PHOTOS:** MICK MATHESON

**T**he sky glowed orange and gold just before midnight. The sun was sliding sideways above Iceland's black-blue and white landscape and the open mouth of a water-filled volcano dominated the foreground. The crispness of the still air, which was just beginning to turn chilly, enhanced the silence. Steam eddied from the ground in places, a subtle sign of the immense power below our feet — the volcanic eruptions that built this entire country in just a few million years.

Stunning and dramatic, for sure, but Iceland's probably not the first place to cross your mind when you wonder, hmm, which country would I like to ride around?

Two quirky minds that did answer Iceland belong to Mike and Denise Ferris, who have ridden in all sorts of places leading their Ferris Wheels tours. They decided this remote North Atlantic island, which gets bigger every year as the European and North American tectonic plates are jemmied apart, was the most exotic, attractive place they hadn't seen. And more than 20 people agreed so wholeheartedly that they paid their money to come along on the first tour. ►







■ Joc and Mahalath revel in the uneven flow of a typical highland road

↑ Continental divide: never have Joc and Malahath been so close as when one was in America, the other in Europe...

## “Junior had splashed out on a \$10 set of rain gear, which was shredded in the storm”

Mike and Denise were right. Standing on top of that volcanic crater, watching the sun begin its brief dip below the horizon before skimming up again for another long Icelandic day, I rejoiced. What an amazing place to be, let alone ride a bike.

I had cheated tonight, though. The G650 was back at the hotel. We'd had a few drinks so Hjörta, our always cheerful and very knowledgeable Icelandic assistant, had brought us up here in the van. Hjörta loves his homeland and knows every good view, most of the history and all the cultural anecdotes you could absorb.

One evening, he pulled out his phone and showed us a photo of himself sideways on his dirt bike on a frozen lake in the dim light of a winter's day.

“That is in Reykjavik,” he said. “You know the pond in the centre of the city? I wanted to see how long it would take the police to tell me to go away.” He took a puff on his pipe. “Nine minutes exactly.”



Even in winter, Icelandic riders have fun on their bikes, not just disturbing the city peace, but riding almost anywhere they want on the frozen landscape, and racing on the lakes. But that was not for us, not in early summer. Almost all the lowland and coastal roads were open now and we'd ridden out of Reykjavik, the capital, to do a 3300km lap of Iceland over two weeks.

That first day was a shock when Iceland threw its worst at us. The sun showers that teased us, leaving the city rapidly into bitter cold, thick fog and icy rain driven sideways by howling winds. We could barely see, were blown across our lane and crawled along the highway at as little as 40km/h in white-knuckle fear. Junior, the jovial American who would celebrate his 80th birthday on the trip, had lashed out on a \$10 set of rain gear, which was shredded in the storm.

We stopped to visit Iceland's major power station, an amazing geothermal

plant that gets all its energy from the volcanic activity deep underground and helps make Iceland's power about the cheapest and cleanest in the world. But we enjoyed it more for the shelter and couldn't see anything outside for the fog.

The weather soon lifted and we'd see nothing remotely like it for the rest of the fortnight, which was to be defined by mild conditions, 50/50 sun and overcast, and very little rain. Perfect for touring on a bike.

We quickly got an idea of the scale and natural beauty of Iceland. Riding east along the southern coast, we left behind the heavily-populated corner of Iceland. About two-thirds of the meagre population of 320,000 lives in or near Reykjavik, which doesn't leave many to populate the rest, and the long plains were pretty empty. Escarpments rose into the clouds on our left and we rode past long waterfalls cascading from them. ►

### COMPLETE PACKAGE

Ferris Wheels provides a nearly-complete package in the price. All meals, accommodation and your bike are laid on in the deal, plus a few other things. The tour also includes a local bloke who drives the backup-cum-luggage van. Pretty much all you have to look after are your flights, travel insurance, drinks and any extras you want to add yourself.

Mike has been escorting motorcycle tours for almost 20 years now, and Denise for about 10. Iceland is their newest destination, adding to their rather-exotic line-up of the Himalaya, Nepal and Bhutan, Morocco, the Dalmatians, Turkey and the Andes. They're not only experts, but great company and perfect hosts.

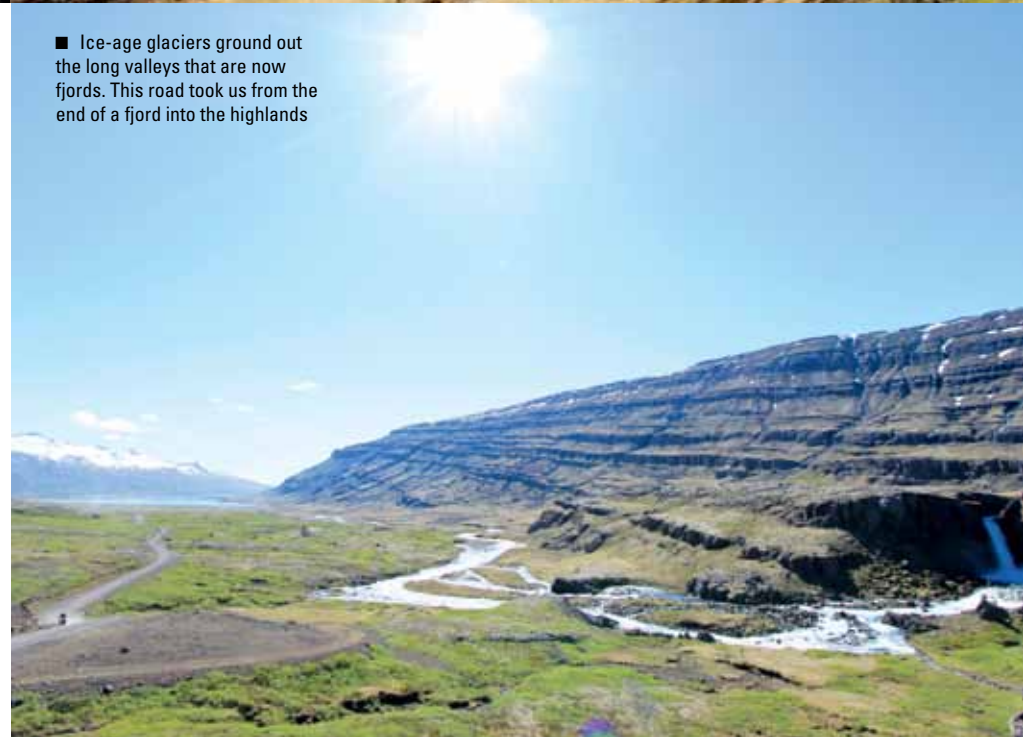
See [ferriswheels.com.au](http://ferriswheels.com.au) or call 02 9970 6370.



■ Iceland has virtually no trees, adding to the barren feel of the entire island



■ Ice-age glaciers ground out the long valleys that are now fjords. This road took us from the end of a fjord into the highlands







■ That's Ruth having the first ride of her life on the back of Denise's bike. What a debut, eh?

### BUT IS IT ICY?!

Every Iceland tour Ferris Wheels runs is likely to be different. The weather will play the main role.

This year, Europe's winter hung in there like a drunk having one for the road. Snow piled metres high in places where spring flowers should have been blooming and as summer arrived, many of Iceland's inland roads were still closed. For the inaugural Ferris Wheels tour, this meant we bypassed a couple of roads but it didn't impinge heavily on our itinerary.

The upside was we enjoyed the spectacle of snow and ice capping many

of the highland areas we rode through, providing sensational contrasts with the lush greenness of the coastal plains. Meltwater cascaded down every gully and the major waterfalls were pumping. Yet there was no ice on roads nor freezing temperatures.

The temperature ranged from 4°C to 15 throughout our tour, though it was typically 8–12 most days. When the sun's out, you'll work up a sweat and get sunburnt — we saw a few two-legged Icelandic lobsters regretting their overenthusiastic early-summer tanning regime — but be prepared to cop icy gales if the weather turns.



↑ Hjörta, the Icelandic biker who carried our baggage and filled our heads with all sorts of local lore



↑ Gull beer and puffin dinner. It was funny for some but there were a few accusing looks and strategically-positioned, if slightly stuffy, judges!

## “For kilometres, we crossed the washed-out remains of a landscape that'd been scoured away when a huge ice dam collapsed during a 1996 eruption”

Our first overnight stay out here was almost at the foot of Skógafoss, a huge waterfall, but it was just a taste of what was ahead.

The south is home to many major volcanoes and the vast glaciers that cover them. None of the volcanoes are erupting at the moment, but it's only a matter of time; Iceland averages an eruption every five years, though, of course, only a tiny proportion are devastating. We rode around the foot of the largest glacier of them all, Vatnajökull, and got a true appreciation of the immense power of Earth. For kilometres, we crossed the washed-out remains of a landscape that'd

■ Is this a road you want to follow or what?!



been scoured away when a huge ice dam collapsed during a 1996 eruption.

An unimaginable amount of water tore down from the mountains at the time: 50,000 cubic metres a second! That was 2½ times more than the maximum predicted. Icebergs the size of buildings, weighing up to 2000 tons, swept through there. A 376m bridge was ripped away, leaving nothing but twisted steel I-beams flattened by the deluge.

We felt the temperature drop by several degrees because of the glacier's presence. It was cooler again when we stopped at a lagoon full of little icebergs that'd broken away from the glacier. Blue, white and even black and brown from ash and dirt, they bashed into each other near the mouth of the lagoon as the current pushed them towards the ocean. A seal swam among them, looking for fish.

As if Iceland's geological splendour isn't amazing enough, the wildlife is special, too. Just up the road we saw our first reindeer, and we'd already stopped at a puffin nesting ground and been delighted by the odd-looking little birds. They have no urgent fear of humans and you can get surprisingly close. No one

■ James rides through a lava field full of jagged rocks formed as the flows cooled and solidified



can quite agree on what expression it is they have on their faces.

Cute as they are, puffins also make it onto the menu in Iceland, and they're not alone. One of the most unusual tastes we tried was shark done the traditional way, as Hjörta explained: Slabs of shark meat are buried for months, a process that allows the ammonia in the flesh to come

out, killing bacteria as it does so. The next stage of the process is hanging it in the cool air for months more. Finally, you cut it into little cubes to eat with an equal-size serve of black bread. It's strong, not unlike blue cheese, and what you might call an acquired taste.

As the world rounds on Japan for its scientific (yeah, right!) whaling practices, ►





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the Nordic countries take a more honest approach to the unprotected, non-endangered Minke whale, making no bones about the fact that they aim for a sustainable catch that they eat. It is delicious. A little oily for some, perhaps, but tender and tasty.

As for puffin, though, let's just say once was enough. And twice would have really drawn the ire of Denise.

I tried puffin at a remote hotel renowned for its hot springs. It was also home to a half-tame arctic fox, a young female with kittens under one of the buildings. She had her brown summer coat on and came in for breakfast and dinner. I took a risk and fed her a bit of meat from my fingers, feeling the touch of teeth as she took it — enough to remind me not to get so cocky.

Back on the road, the heart-stopping views kept coming. We rounded a coastal corner one day and my jaw dropped. Miles ahead, the road was a thin line cutting across a massive scree slope that fell into the sea a hundred metres below. Further on, snow-covered mountains rose high. It was one of many views that halted us in our tracks to have a longer look.

When we got to the West Fjords, the ragged north-western part of Iceland that's almost separate from the rest, the waterways cut deep gouges into the high hills on either side and the white snow on black-rock mountains provided a magical backdrop. On overcast days, the greyness of it enclosed the scenes, while the blue skies and seas of a sunny day brightened everything.

Often you'd see a bright dot of colour — the red, blue or green roof of a house or church. The historic town of Húsavík is all blues, yellows, greens, reds and the deep brown of timber, highlighting the desire of Icelandic people everywhere to brighten their environment. Húsavík boasts whale-watching fleets, too, and a number of our group took advantage of them.

Mid-trip, we had a rest day in the second-largest city in Iceland, Akureyri, which features a great little bike museum. It has all sorts of gems, including one of the earliest Honda 750 Fours in existence, and it gives you a good insight into the surprisingly-strong motorcycle history of the island. Towards the end of the tour, we had our best insight into the Viking history of the place, as well as its geology, when we visited Thingvellir. ►



■ Historic Húsavík in all its colourful glory



■ Suzanne poses for David above the largest waterfall in Europe, Dettifoss



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■ Geometrical geology created by glaciers in the Ice Age and reinforced in reflection



■ Tony scoots across the highlands, where the last of the ice and snow was melting away in front of our eyes



## ROADS AND RIDING

The roads in Iceland are generally good, though there are exceptions. Most of the route we rode with Ferris Wheels was sealed but we still travelled on plenty of gravel roads, especially up over the mountains in the north and west.

Only a few roads challenged riders who weren't overly confident on the gravel, and there were often alternatives if desired.

The GS BMWs — G-, F- and R-Series — were ideal for the trip's variety of conditions. We had a handful of Tigers, too, but future tours will be all BMWs once the fleet is complete.

I had a G650GS Sertão and, while there were roads were a K1300S would've been huge amounts of fun, the 650 single was well suited to Iceland. The general speed limit is 90km/h, which was fine on the Sertão, and the dirt-road stretches were a cinch on it.

Thingvellir was home to Iceland's parliament from 930AD, making it among the oldest democracies, and it lasted in one form or another for almost 900 years. The location became the centre of Icelandic society and law, home for lawmaking, dispute resolution, executions and more. Coincidentally, the assembly gathered on the rift between the North American and European tectonic plates, and you can stand there with a foot on each continent and look down the line of the split. You can't help feeling awed by being here.

Our two weeks lapping Iceland was almost over by then, yet we were still to see amazing natural phenomena like water pouring out of rocks and water spouts out of inland hot springs. We'd been down a

volcanic cave — the very one used in the filming of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* — and stood at the top of the largest waterfall in Europe, where they filmed the opening scene of *Prometheus*. Actually, Iceland's very popular as a movie set; look it up some time.

We made the telly there on our last day when a news crew met us. Apparently our Ferris Wheels tour was the largest single group of foreign riders to visit. We sure won't be the last big group. Mike and Denise have hit on a unique and entrancing destination, one that's as unexpected as it is fantastic. We all had a ball on the tour — you could see it in the eyes of everyone from teenage Nate to octogenarian Junior.

If there's one image in my mind that

keeps coming back and making me smile, it's riding across a grand landscape formed by fire and covered in ice, steam rising from the ground in the distance and a couple of tiny motorcycles gliding through the craggy surrounds of a solidified lava flow. I filled my lungs with the sweet air, clicked the Sertão into top, and wondered if motorcycle touring could ever get any better. **ARR**