Have a safe journey
Preface

Iceland offers the traveller an adventure in a beautiful and rugged landscape.

However, experience shows that the forces of Icelandic nature can be harsh and inhospitable, and travellers are well-advised to exercise caution and respect for the country’s natural environment. Unfortunately, there have been far too many accidents in the past few years involving foreign tourists travelling around the country. These accidents range from minor to fatal. The most common type of accident is that of hikers losing their footing on uneven terrain. The most serious injuries, however, are caused by road traffic accidents where travellers drive too fast in unfamiliar conditions and do not wear seat belts.

Preparation

Icelandic nature can be wild and dangerous, especially for those unfamiliar with it and unused to travelling in uninhabited areas and rough country. Travellers should prepare well for each trip and know its trail and route conditions. This is the best way to prevent accidents and ensure a pleasant and safe journey.

- Choose clothing and footwear with care.
- Read about conditions in the area you will be traversing and talk to people with local knowledge, such as rangers.
- Let somebody know about your planned trip.
- Check weather and road conditions – information available from the Public Roads Administration, tel. 1777 or at www.road.is
- Check the weather forecast – information available from the Icelandic Meteorological Office, tel. 902-0600, the Teletext or at www.vedur.is

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Weather

Icelandic weather is very volatile. Fair weather can change into a raging storm at a moment’s notice. Keep this in mind at all times, especially when travelling in the highlands.

- For every 100m in altitude gained, you can expect the mean temperature to drop by 0.6°C and precipitation to increase.
- The temperature can drop below the freezing point even during summer, especially at night.
- At mountain tops, wind force can multiply.

Winter

Iceland looks very different in the wintertime, and is enjoyable to explore in that season. However, the vagaries of the Icelandic weather can play a decisive role regarding your trip.

- The frequency at which roads are cleared of snow varies, depending on their defined service level. It is important to check road and weather conditions before setting off by phoning 1777 and 902-0600, checking the Teletext or visiting www.road.is and www.vedur.is.
- When travelling in a vehicle, it is important not to abandon it if something comes up or the weather conditions are difficult.
- Winter tyres are essential for driving in the wintertime.
- Always bring warm clothing, blankets, a shovel and a first aid kit in the vehicle.

Signposts

There are very few warning notices posted in the Icelandic wilderness, even at popular stopovers.

- Tourists travel at their own risk.
- You often have to rely on your own good sense and judgment when assessing the situation and making decisions.

Telephone connections

The mobile phone connection is fairly reliable in towns, but outside them it can be very unstable. Therefore, do not rely on a mobile phone as a safety measure.

- The long-range NMT network covers most parts of the highlands but not all parts. The signals are often strongest on top of hillocks and mountains.
- Travellers intending to explore out-of-the-way areas are encouraged to use the Travellers' Reporting Service of the Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (ICE-SAR), tel. 570-5900.
- The Emergency Number in Iceland is 112.
Driving

Road conditions in Iceland vary substantially. Highway 1 is mostly paved, but other country roads are often very narrow, steep and washboarded gravel tracks with potholes and sharp corners. Those unfamiliar with such conditions often find it difficult to drive on Icelandic roads, especially gravel roads. Drivers are advised to choose a vehicle which they are used to driving and can handle easily. Many travellers who are not used to driving jeeps find them difficult to handle on Icelandic gravel roads.

- Slow down when you meet other vehicles, especially when driving on a gravel road.
- Where the road changes from a paved road to a gravel road, you need to slow down considerably. Many serious accidents occur every year at such places, especially among drivers who are unfamiliar with such road conditions, lose control of their vehicle and drive off the road.

- The speed limit in urban areas is normally 50 km per hour. Outside towns, it is 90 km per hour on paved roads and 80 km per hour on gravel roads. Always adjust your speed to the driving conditions.
- Domestic animals are often close to, or even on, country roads. Drivers who hit animals may be required to pay for the damage.
- The use of hands-free kits is compulsory for mobile phone use whilst driving.
- Driving while intoxicated from drug or alcohol use is prohibited.
- Headlamps are required to be lit 24 hours a day while the vehicle is in operation.
- The use of front and back seat belts is compulsory - they save lives.
Highland roads

Highland roads in Iceland are usually narrow gravel roads, and most rivers are unbridged. On maps, they are indicated with an F before the road number, with most of these roads intended for jeeps only.

- Highland roads are open only during the summertime, weather and other circumstances permitting. Information about opening dates can be obtained by phoning 1777 or at www.road.is.

- Driving outside marked trails is prohibited and is subject to nature conservation law.

- Crossing rivers should be attempted only in four-wheel-drive vehicles, such as jeeps. Ensure that the four-wheel drive has been engaged before driving into the water. Drive very slowly but steadily in first gear and use the low range if available.

- Keep in mind that fords over glacial rivers keep changing. On warm summer days, the flow increases as the day progresses. Heavy rain often causes rivers to swell, sometimes making them uncrossable even for large and well-equipped vehicles. Glacial rivers usually have less water in the mornings.

- Deaths have been caused by underestimating the water volume in rivers. Before crossing a glacial river, it is necessary to examine its velocity, depth and bottom by wading into it. If you find that you would be unwilling to wade across the river on foot, you should not attempt to drive across it. Seek advice from experienced drivers and watch how and where they cross.

- There is only one petrol station in the highlands (at Hveravellir) that sells petrol and diesel. Keep this in mind when driving in the highlands.

- It is important to know the vehicle’s insurance coverage before going on a trip in the highlands. For example, rented vehicles are not insured for damage that occurs while crossing rivers or lakes, and the chassis is not insured. Also, you need extra insurance for travelling in the highlands.

- Accommodation is limited in the highlands, and you need to make reservations with sufficient notice if you don’t want to sleep in the vehicle or in a tent.

- Rangers operate at most major tourist centres in the highlands. Their job is to receive travellers and provide information. Travellers should obey rangers’ instructions.

Geothermal areas

Geyser and hot springs are found in many parts of Iceland. The water or mud discharging to the Earth’s surface can be above the boiling point.

- Always follow instructions around geysers. Do not use your fingers to check the temperature of water, steam or mud.

- Be careful where you step. The ground around geysers is often covered with a thin crust which can break through if stepped on, sometimes causing burn injuries. Therefore, always keep to footpaths where they are to be found.
Hiking and mountaineering

Choose your route carefully and inform someone about your planned trip. Marked trails are the safest option for hikers.

- It is necessary to know how to use a compass, a map and a GPS unit for longer hikes.
- Proceed with caution along cliffs, rock faces and riverbanks.
- Icelandic rock is often loose. On hillsides, there is often risk of rockfalls and avalanches.

Glacier trips

Nobody should set off on a trip onto a glacier without mountaineering experience and the necessary equipment. Organised tours with experienced mountain guides are the safest option.

- Ice on glacier tongues can be extremely slippery. Walking on glacier tongues is dangerous without crampons and other glacier-climbing gear. The ice caves and vertical glacier walls of glacier tongues are unsteady, and blocks of ice can fall without warning. Therefore, it is inadvisable to enter ice caves or to stand near steep walls of ice.
- When walking on snow-covered glaciers, it is necessary to use a rope and other safety equipment, as crevasses lurk under the cover of snow in many places. The crevasses can be very deep and wide.

Cycling and horseback riding tours

- On snowmobile tours, always follow the guide’s instructions and follow his tracks. Helmets are obligatory.
- Iceland does not offer much in the way of cycling facilities, and has few designated cycling paths. Therefore, use reflectors and other markings to make sure that you are clearly visible when cycling on the country’s roads, always wear a helmet and beware of stones thrown up by passing traffic.
- Horseback riders should always use bridleways where they exist and exercise special care and consideration when passing walkers or moving vehicles. A helmet is an important safety accessory, and you should always use one when on horseback. Drivers must also show consideration to horseback riders by slowing down and using extra caution where bridleways cross the road.
Destinations ahead (b) with distances outside capital area

Difficult road. Negotiable only by jeeps, i.e. vehicles which are higher than ordinary private cars and have 4-wheel drive.

End of tarred road

Newly-laid road surface

Accident risk area

Single-width surface

Single-width bridge

Roadworks

Uneven road

Speed reduction bump

Dangerous bend to right

Dangerous bend to left

Dangerous bend first to right

Dangerous bend first to left

from the right

from the left

Two-way traffic

Loose stones

Road narrows on both sides

Road narrows on both sides

Risk of falling rocks or avalanche from left

Slippery road

Other danger

Destinations ahead (b) with distances outside capital area

Destinations ahead (b) and map (b) outside capital area

Vetrarvegur

Route direction without road number

Höfn 244
Breiðdalsvik 83
Hallormsstaður 26

Akureyri 273
Pörshöfn 165

Egilsstaðir 701
Isafjörður 533
Akureyri 426
Borgarnes 107

Vetarvegur

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Service signs
Accidents happen when you least expect them
Be careful at all times