

ICELAND

Great rides

WHERE Iceland's interior

START Reykjavik **FINISH** Landmannalaugar

DISTANCE 200km **WORDS** Carlton Reid

PICTURES Carlton and Josh Reid



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

It's difficult to get some teenagers out of bed. **Carlton Reid's** 15-year-old son Josh went with him on an off-road exploration of Iceland

I have three teenage kids. Two of them are twin girls, aged thirteen. Ellie watches *Top Gear* on the sly – damn you, BBC iPlayer! – and is already fantasising about owning a pink Mini Cooper. (In yer dreams, sweetheart.) Hanna is too wrapped up in playing academy-level football to be bothered with the antics of souped-up petrolheads. Josh, aged 15, is closest to driving licence age but has shown no signs of hankering after a car. Instead, he rides. He rides to guitar practice; he rides 'cross in winter and time trials in the summer; he rides out with the local club on Saturdays. Endearingly, he's forever badgering me for bike kit.

Such is his love for cycling he even, willingly, goes on cycle touring holidays with his dad. He may be monosyllabic and moody when he's allowed to fester in his tech-heavy bedroom, but out on the bike, in the back of beyond, he's a different kid, happier. He talks to me, he

IN THE PHOTOS

1) 6am on the Fjallabaksleid sydri track. The camera is on a tripod, shooting on a timer. Breaking camp before dawn is now a memory

2) Chasm near Thingvillir. Because Iceland is a young, tectonically-active island, its geology is often visible

enthusies about stuff (mostly bikes, but sometimes other things too), he's bright and funny, like I know he is with his mates.

Pretty soon, he'll be bike exploring by himself, or teaming up with others, so I wanted to do a blow-out overseas bike trip with him, one so tough he'll never forget it. Family bike tours to the Netherlands no longer cut the mustard. We took mountain bikes to the interior of Iceland.

THE ICELANDIC WILDERNESS

It's pretty easy to pedal around the tarmac perimeter of Iceland. Too easy. I wanted Josh to be challenged. We cycled on corrugated dirt roads, at the base of glaciers, and pushed and pedalled over steep, slippery inclines, over Laufafell making for the hot springs at the Landmannalaugar mountain hut.



“He may be monosyllabic and moody in his tech-heavy bedroom, but out on the bike he’s a different kid”

The three gravel roads to Landmannalaugar are only open for three months of the year, in the Icelandic summer. We chose the lumpiest, least-travelled of the three roads. Pedalling through a sub-Arctic volcanic-ash wilderness is not easy. I knew that already because I had done this same trip a decade and a half ago. Rashly, I had taken my then girlfriend on her first ever bicycle tour. Rather a baptism of fire for her, but she survived. We married, and Josh arrived soon after.

When I say survived, I mean it. The interior of Iceland is unforgiving, with raging glacial rivers to cross and weather that can be as fierce as it is volatile. Jude cried a lot on that trip. Before we went on our Dad-and-his-lad jaunt, I had repeatedly warned Josh that it wasn't going to be a picnic in the park. Even your mum found it hard going, I said, and he knows she's as tough as they come.

I warned him about the horizontal rain; I warned him about the long hours of daylight, the incessant freezing wind blocking progress. He seemed non-plussed. Yeah, >



FIRST WHEELED CROSSING OF ICELAND

> Dressed in suit and tie, Horace Dall was the first person to get a wheeled vehicle from one side of Iceland to the other, via Iceland’s famously bleak Sprengisandur wilderness. A car did the trip a month later.

Dall’s crossing was undertaken in 1933, using not a touring iron of the day but a Raleigh three-speed roadster, complete with chaincase. ‘The first day gave a taste of the rough stuff – rocks, gullies, sand and swamps,’ wrote Dall, ‘and I quickly realised that my hopes of making thirty per cent use of the bicycle were to be disappointed.’

In the 1990s, journalist Ben Searle tracked down a witness who had seen Dall. Now a farmer, but then a nine year old, he said: ‘[Dall] emerged from the wilderness well dressed with polished shoes and a tie – as if going to a job interview... The neighbourhood still spoke of him many years later.’

Pictures and handwritten captions of Dall’s trip are online: <http://tinyurl.com/HoraceDall>

IN THE PHOTOS

- 3) Gunnarstein rock, near Keldur. Sunny skies are not characteristic of Iceland
- 4) Wild camping means carrying everything
- 5) The original Geysir, at Strokkur
- 6) The interior has a spare, prehistoric beauty at times

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> yeah, whatever, Dad. I was worried he wasn't taking me seriously, that he'd hate me when we got stuck in yet another wet, wind-blasted hollow, up to our axles in lava dust.

LIKE CYCLING ON THE MOON

As it was, we had a week of warmish weather, what passes for a heatwave in Iceland, and my apocalyptic warnings seemed rather over-egged. Mind you, even with light winds, sunshine and very little rain, the interior of Iceland was still challenging. For me, that is. I had the Bob trailer and was carrying all the heaviest equipment, and that's why I was so slow at getting up the steep bits. It had nothing to do with the fact Josh was now a stronger cyclist than me.

At least I had lots of opportunities to enjoy the views as I pushed the laden MTB up the hills. When it's not raining (it rains lots, usually) Iceland certainly has lots of views, many of them other-worldly. In the 1960s NASA shipped the astronaut corps to Iceland. Prior to the Apollo moon landings, NASA's would-be spacemen simulated collecting rock samples here: it was the best place on earth to mimic the geography, and geology, of the lunar landscape.

Landmannalaugar is at the head of a valley that is striped with multicoloured rock strata, and dotted with steaming sulphurous vents; unmistakable evidence that Iceland is volcanic, and bubbling with geothermal activity every which way you turn. In the right light, this can be incredibly scenic.

Most of the photographs of Josh from the trip are >

IN THE PHOTOS
7) Frostastathavatn Lake, near Landmannalaugar
8) Carlton and Josh rode hired mountain bikes and took their own trailer
9) Land of the midnight sun



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“I warned him about the horizontal rain, the long hours of daylight, the freezing wind. He seemed non-plussed. Yeah, yeah, whatever, Dad”



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› grabbed ones, shot on the hoof before he soured at having yet another picture taken. On one morning, we were up very early and the light was so upliftingly glorious I told Josh it would be the one and only time on the trip I would set up the camera on a tripod and we would pose while riding together. Without too much fuss, he agreed.

The resulting photograph is now my favourite shot of the trip (and one of my favourite Reid family shots of all time). It had taken me a wee while to get the tripod solid in the right place and to frame the perfect shot but, because it was the only time on the trip I had taken this much care over a single shot, Josh waited patiently, no teen moaning.

(What you don't see in the shot, of course, is me setting the timer and then legging it to the supine bike before pulling it up, jumping on and riding with Josh at just the right speed – ‘catch up, Josh, we're not together’ – as though we're not being shot multiple times by a Canon off in the distance.)

PICTURE PERFECT

Pleasingly, the series of remote fired shots were crisp and sharp, no need for a re-run. This was good. Josh's grumpiness can't have been far away, especially as he hadn't had the 12 hours of sleep that teens seem to need. In fact, neither of us had had much sleep. Our tent had blown down during the night and, rather than re-pitch, I'd decided to break camp and set off before dawn.

The tent blowing down incident wasn't the fault of Nemo, the US manufacturer of the tent. We had pitched ›

“In the 1960s, NASA shipped the astronaut corps to Iceland. It was the best place on earth to mimic the lunar landscape”



DO IT YOURSELF

›› We flew with Icelandair, the national carrier: icelandair.co.uk. Rather than take bikes we hired Trek mountain bikes from Örninn, Reykjavik's oldest and biggest bike shop once there. It's even possible to rent luggage trailers, although we brought our own Bob Yak.

IN THE PHOTOS

- 10) The 4x4 track is steep in parts – here, it's over 33%
- 11) Church and turf farmhouse at Keldur
- 12) Thingvillir
- 13) Josh tries volcanic mud



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Next to a hot stream in order to bathe in comfort and the only ground available was gravelly, too loose for tent pegs to hold. I weighed down the guy strings with mini boulders and assumed, wrongly, that this tactic would keep the tent intact until morning. On a normal night it would have done, as there wasn't a breath of wind when we went to sleep.

In the early hours, our tent was hit by alternating slabs of wind, gusts funnelled down the small valley we were in. The tent's outer was tied to rocks and wasn't going to be blown away but the flapping was way too loud and dramatic to sleep through. We dug out the head torches and packed away as quickly as we could, Josh sitting on items likely to be blown away. It was almost daybreak when we left our idyllic wild campsite (idyllic until the storm had hit, that is) and quite light: there are very few hours of darkness during an Icelandic summer's night.

This day would be the toughest of the whole trip, with very steep ascents, so steep that Josh had to ditch his bike and help me push mine. The photographer's light made up for it. It was achingly beautiful at the top of the Fjallabaksleid Sydri track and the view – with us in it – cried out to be frozen with megapixels.

The shot shows us both smiling, not fake-for-the-camera smiles, but real, happy smiles. Bringing up teens seems, at times, to be wall-to-wall angst, but I'll always remember that Iceland trip for the genuine happiness evident in the remotely-taken photo. I've got a 10x8 of the shot by my desk. When Josh is throwing a wobbly, giving us testosterone-fuelled grief, I turn to the photo and remind myself he's not always like this. On a bike, he's happy. Like father, like son. ☺

IN THE PHOTOS

- 14) No campsite required
- 15) Thingvallavatn Lake, Thingvellir
- 16) Fat tyres are required for volcanic sand tracks
- 17) Thingvellir National Park



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FACT FILE
ICELAND'S INTERIOR

Where: Our destination was the natural hot springs at Landmannalaugar via touristy sites such as the Gullfoss waterfall and Geysir water-spout.

When to go: June–September. It's too cold and dark otherwise.

Distance: 200km

Terrain: All roads away from the perimeter road are gravel and are often corrugated.

Conditions: Gravel roads are bumpy, so suspension is very useful. If it's not raining, it'll be windy. We were lucky with the weather.

Getting there/back: We cycled to Landmannalaugar on the Laufafell 4x4 track. It's also possible to take the gravel road used by the bus, but this is flat and unspectacular. Instead of riding back, we boarded the bus.

I'm glad I had...
Windsurf booties for fording rivers

I wish I'd had...
Something to secure tent pegs in gravel.

Further info: good cycle touring info on Iceland – <http://members.ziggo.nl/erens/icecycle.htm>

Road conditions: vegagerdin.is/english/road-conditions-and-weather/

Equipment: Nemo Alti Storm tent, nemoequipment.com; Lake MX100 MTB boots, lakecycling.co.uk; SealSkinz waterproof socks, gloves and hats, sealskinz.com; Aquapac iPhone and SLR waterproof bags, aquapac.net; 250,000-scale map, available from Ferdakort ferdakort.is; Travel Lunch freeze-dried food, travellunch.de/en; Primus OmniLite Ti stove, primus.eu

