Walking trails in Mýrar

Welcome to Mýrar

The Mýrar region of Austur-Skaftafellssýsla lies between Suðursveit to the west and Nes to the east. Mýrar is one of the old rural districts that united in 1998 to form Sveitarfélagið Hornafjörður (the Municipality of Hornafjörður). The area is a rare treasure for anyone with an interest in glaciers, glacial land formations, geology, birdwatching, nature and outdoor life. There is a wealth of historical sites and relics from bygone ages. Access to the glaciers is in few places easier and nowhere else in Iceland have people lived in such close proximity to and their lives been so inextricably linked with the glaciers as in the narrow strip of land under the southern margins of Vatnajökull. Discounting the highlands at the edge of the ice cap, the landscape of Mýrar is broad, open and quite flat – the name means "bogs" or "marshes". The farmsites reflect the people's continual struggle with the glacial waters: nearly all are set on low hills standing up above the lowlands. The region offers a wide variety of walking routes in a range of landscapes, from seashore to mountain. The flatness of the countryside means that the tracks leading off the main highway are well suited to cycling and we recommend this as a means of exploring the region.

Route descriptions

1. Hjallanes

Start: Skálafell farmyard Distance: 7 km, about 2-3 hrs

Route: Start east along the hay meadows. At the bottom of the meadow there is a "witch's grave" (völvuleiði). A little to the east you can see an old stone table of rock and turf, once used for washing wool. Keep on past the Kistugil ravine and up the terraced hillside of Hjallanes to the top of Kistugil. Then turn east to the edge of the Skálafellsjökull glacier, which at one time merged with Heinabergsjökull, with Hafrafell standing up in the middle. This part of the route is marked with posts and information boards are planned. There is a rich and varied bird life. Carry on under the tongue of the glacier for about a kilometre right down to where the river Kolgríma emerges. Here you can see clearly how the glacier has ground and scraped the rock and the direction it has moved. Do not go too close to the glacier: there is ice under the glacial debris some way out from the edge of the glacier which can create deep and dangerous holes when it melts. Farther down Kolgrima there is a quarry for porphyritic basalt, used in building the sea walls at the mouth of Hornafjörður. Follow down along Kolgríma across the grassy slopes under the terraces and back to the farm.



Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

2. Skálafell – Káravatn

Start: Skálafell farmyard Distance: 9 km Climb: 440 m Route: Quite easy route, though with a fair climb. Go east along the hay meadows and up to Hjallanes (see route 1). From here, continue on up the slopes of Skálafellshnúta with the Svartagil ravine on your left, and on to lake Káravatn (see Places of interest on the Suðursveit map). From here, return by the same route or by route 2 on the Suðursveit

3. Skálafell – Skálafellssel

Start: Skálafell farmyard Distance: 4 km, about 1 hr Climb: none Route: Follow the track west along the hillside and over the grassy ridge of Háaleiti to the ruins of the abandoned farm at Skálafellssel. Return either by the same route or continue as for route 1 on the Suðursveit map to the generating station on Smyrlabjargará and then down the river to route 4 at Gleypuhraun.



The stone arch on Gleypuhraun Courtesy of the Hornafjörður

4. Gleypuhraun - Smyrlabjargará generating plant Start: Highway 1, just west of Skálafell Distance: 2 km Climb: none Route: A nice, easy walk, suitable for all. Gleypuhraun is an attractive rocky knoll in an area of reed pools south of the farm at Skálafell. Go west along the track by the power lines. A short walk brings you to a large stone arch, wide enough for four people to ride through abreast. The rocky lavas to the east of the arch are called Kambahraun. North of the arch are the remains of an old sheep pen called Gleypa where ewes were once herded for milking. If you want to continue, follow along the river Smyrlabjargará to the generating plant (see route 1 on the Suðursveit map) and from there by route 3 back to Skálafell.



First shoots of new birchwoods Photograph: Sigurlaug Gissurardóttir

5. Austurland – short route Start: Highway 1, just east of Kolgríma river Distance: 2.5 km, about

This route can be taken in either direction.

1 hr Climb: slight **Route:** Follow the path marked by posts along the Austurland lavafield. Along the way you can see relics of bygone farming methods, e.g. an old drystone sheep pen and a cave that was used as a sheephouse. Past the cave, go up the rocks to the beautiful, hidden lake of Hellisvatn. Then follow down along the banks of Kolgríma to your starting point.

6. Austurland – long route

Start: Highway 1, just east of Kolgrima river Distance: 8 km, about 3-4 hrs Climb: slight Route: Follow route 5 east under the rocks of the Austurland lavafield, with its attractive geological formations and remains of old farm buildings. Turn left up onto the grassy ridge of Ásar, with Hánípa, the eastmost crag of Austurland, to your right. This is the boundary between Suðursveit and Mýrar. Just north of Hánípa is the old Heinabergsvötn bridge. Then turn west to Kolgrima and then back down the river to your starting point. The route is partly marked by posts.

7. Heinabergslón – Heinabergsvötn bridge

Start: Heinabergslón Distance: 8 km, 2-3 hrs Climb: none Route: Turn off Highway 1 west of Flatey and drive up the track to the floating on it. Set off southwest around the lake to the point where Kolgrima flows out of it. Follow down along the high banks of the river until you come to the Austurland lavafield, then east to the Heinabergsvötn bridge. You can branch off this route and join route 6, ending at the Kolgríma bridge. Or you can start your walk from the Heinabergsvötn

8. Heinabergslón – Sáta - Bólstaðir – Heinar

Start: Heinabergslón or Heinar Distance: 5 km Climb: easy Route: Drive up to the car park at Heinabergslón as for route 7. Set off more or less due north to Sáta, a ice-smoothed shelf of rock that until around 1880 lay under the glacier that then cut off the Heinabergsdalur valley. From the top of Sáta there is a good view over the lake and the glacial debris and up into the valley. From here head east along the slopes to the Bolstaðafoss waterfall. If you want you can continue along the mountainside to the western tongue of the Fláajökull glacier (route 8a), where you can see an impressive line of crags with distinct volcanic dykes and, on the other side of the river, the hill Miðfell with its varied formations of columnar basalt. You are advised not to wade the river: retrace your steps to the waterfall. Now head south to Heinar, which are some beautiful crags of basalt columns lying horizontally and difficult to see from a distance. Return southwest over the river muds and gravels to your starting point at the lake. The rocks in the mudflats show an attractive variety of colours from the lichens growing on them, known as heilaslettur and grautarkleimur (brain spatters and porridge



splashes).



Whale bone on the shore Photograph: Sigurlaug Gissurardóttir

9. Heinabergsdalur – Heinabergsvörp

Start: Heinabergslón Distance: 12-20 km, a good day's walk

Route: By car as for routes 7 and 8 to the Heinabergslón car park. From here there are two possible routes to up to Heinabergsvörp, the ridge that forms a natural dam across the valley and from which there is a stunning view over Vatndalslón. One follows the track up the west side of Heinabergsdalur to the middle of the valley, and then along sheep tracks up to the ridge. A prettier, but harder, route is to go up to Sáta (see route 8), then down into the valley and wading the river, which is easy to cross lower down the valley. Then follow the track as described above. On the way there are beautiful waterfalls, ravines and volcanic intrusions, and flood deposits that reveal the former surface level of the lake. You can often see reindeer in this area.



The old farm at Heinaberg Courtesy of the Hornafjörður Cultural

10. Old Heinaberg – New Heinaberg

Start: West side of Heinabergsnes Distance: 2-6 km Climb: none **Route:** Drive east along the track by the power lines north of the Flatey land reclamation meadows as far as Heinabergsnes, a belt of rocks to the west of the river Hólmsá. This is the original site of the Heinaberg farm, the remains of which can still be seen. In 1890 the farm was moved up under the hill Heinabergsfell until it was abandoned in 1934. You can continue along the rocks all the way east to Hólmsá; here you get a graphic view of the huge quantities of sand and gravel carried down by the streams of Heinabergsvötn over the centuries and deposited on the lowlands. Return by the same route, or, if you want to go further, turn northwest along the track across Hellranes to the new farmsite under Heinabergsfell (route 10a). Try to imagine the lives of the people in days gone by who had to move their farms from one piece of raised ground to another to avoid the encroachment of the glacial streams.

11. Heinabergsás – Heinabergsfell

Start: Parking place at Heinabergsás Distance: 4 km Climb: 100 m Route: Turn off Highway 1 west of Flatey and leave your car at the parking place at Heinabergsás. The ridge is full of beautiful rock formations which are particularly striking in places where the water has cascaded er the rocks, sweeping away all the vegetation. Go up to the top and head north over the muds and gravel and up the rocky terraces at the western end of Heinabergsfell. From the hilltop there is a fine view to the ice of Heinabergsjökull and the surrounding mountains, as well as south over this hard region of sands and water. Before descending at the eastern end of the hill it is worth doing a detour northeast, where you can see several roches moutonées and, on the other side of the river, the hill Miðfell with its variety of basalt columns. Go down to the ruins of the "New Heinaberg" farm, abandoned in 1934, and from there west under the rocks to your starting point, or follow route 10a south to Old Heinaberg. From the western end of Heinabergsfell you can also go on to Heinar (11a) and from there to the waterfall at Bólstaðir (see route



Erratic block on glacier plucked rocks Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

12. Eskey

Start: Picnic site west of Hólmsá Distance: 1.5 km, a good hour's

Route: Go through the gate up onto *Eskey*, the low hill that once stood as an island above the marshes. From the top there is a fine view, with information boards describing the geology of the area, the glaciers and glacial outbursts. Nearby stand the remains of the old farm. Head south over the "island" and down the gap that was once the approach to the farm. Then turn west under the south face of the rocks; up under the crest of the rocks you can see a raven's nest. At the southwest corner go back up onto the "island" where there are ruins of an old sheep pen and farm buildings. This is an area where polar bears have come to land, as the low hill Bjarndýrshóll (Bear Hill) across the river suggests. The route is marked with posts.

13. Bakki - Keldholt

Start: Mjöðm Distance: 6 km Climb: none

Route: Mjöðm is a rocky knoll by the track leading south to the sea (see route 14). From here, make you way to the abandoned farm of Bakki, and from there out to the marshes and islands and then east alon the margins. Turn north up past the low, flat-topped knolls of Keldholt and from there back to Mjöðm. This is a unique area of wetlands with a rich bird life.



Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir Heinabergslón meltwater lake

14. Skinneyjarvík Start: Highway 1 at Hellisholt Distance: as you please

Route: Take the track south to the sea along the east side of Hólmsá. On the way you cross a rocky hill named Skinney (Skin Island) that was once a major farm. The mouth of the river moved in autumn 2002 and the high rock on the shore now to the west of the river is called Skinneyjarhöfði; there was a commercial fishing station here until as late as 1960. Take an easy stroll along the shore and enjoy its richness and variety of nature; you have every chance of seeing an inquisitive seal popp-

ing its head out of the water to take a look at you. Do not go too close to

the banks of Hólmsá: the soil is loose and undercut by the current.

15. *Melatangi* – Hvanney lighthouse

Start: Melatangi Distance: 7 km Climb: none Route: Start as for route 14, but keep on along the spit right to the end. Do not stray off the track. At Melatangi there are relics from the war years - buildings, a jetty and an airstrip. There are also the wrecks of several ships that have gone down while navigating the tricky entry to the fjord. Continue east on foot to the Hvanneyjarklettar rocks and the lighthouse and observe the strong currents in the sea approaches. From here you can see the port of Höfn from a new perspective. Take special

care when climbing the rocks: they can be wet and slippery.



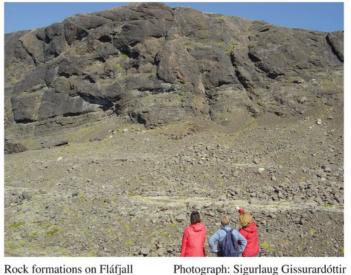
Fláajökull north of Jökulfell Photograph: Sigurlaug Gissurardóttir



16. Hólmur – *Fláajökull*

Start: Hólmur Distance: 6 km, light walking on even ground

Route: From the farmyard at Hólmur, take the old track leading north towards the glacier. Keeping to the west of the rocky knoll called Gervisholt, follow along the little stream to Hólmssandur, where there used to be large land reclamation meadows. Keep on the track as far as the fence and from there north with the stream on your right to its source at the northern end of the fence. From here there is a path marked with cairns leading to the Öldur nature trail (route 20). Follow the trail to the lake at the head of Fláajökull. Here you can choose whether to turn east towards Fláfjall (route 21) or west along the nature trail over the high moraines to rejoin the path by which you came and so back to Hólmur. This route offers a rich bird life and a chance to see the ever-changing state of the glacier at different times.



Photograph: Sigurlaug Gissurardóttir

17. Brunnhóll - Fláajökull

Start: The main road at the Brunnhólsá river Distance: 6 km, easy

walking Climb: none Route: Follow the track that leads across the Arbær and Einholt land reclamation meadows. Just before the Hólagörn steam you can make a detour to Pingskálahólar (route 18). Otherwise, keep on to the gate in the fence. Cross the heath along the banks of Hleypilækur, over the Öldur moraines, to the meltwater lake at the head of Fláajökull. The route offers a rich bird life. To shorten the route you can drive up as far as sand cultivation meadows.

18. Brunnhóll - Þingskálahólar (Thingskálahólar)

Start: The main road at the Brunnhólsá river Distance: 3 km Climb: negligible Route: Follow the track across the Árbær and Einholt land reclamation meadows. Just before the Hólagörn steam turn west to the line of rocks called Pingskálahólar, from where there is a good view over the local lowlands. You can also drive up to the sand cultivation meadows and start your walk from there. Various local placenames such as Pingbrekka (Assembly Slope), Drekkingarhylur (Drowning Pool) and Gálgaklettur

19. Öldur – Baulutjörn

Start: At the start of the glacier moraines Distance: 8 km

(Gallows Rock) point to this once having been an assembly site.

Climb: none Route: Take the track that leads in towards Fláajökull as far as the start of the moraines (Öldur). Leave your car and follow the clearly marked path across the moraines to the stream Hleypilækur. Continue across the heathland to the land reclamation meadows and on down the east bank of Hleypilækur and then Djúpá, coming out on the main road just east of Baulutjörn. In spring and summer the heaths are alive with birds. There can be wet patches along much of the route and you have to pick you way across Holtakíl, the little brook that runs out of

20. Fláajökull – nature trail on the story of the glacier

Start: Fláajökull car park Distance: About one hour Climb: none Route: Take the track up to Fláajökull and leave your car at the car boards along the way telling you about the advance and retreat of the glacier. Follow the path to the flood wall from 1937 and from there west to the river *Hólmsá*. Here you can see the channel that was dug by hand in that year to redirect the waters, now much widened. Keep on to the remains of the huts built for the workmen at the time. From here, head east over the glacial moraines, where you can see the old channel and a peculiar erratic block, then on to the end of the impressive flood wall built in 2002. Finally turn west across the high moraines back to your starting point. From the top of the moraines there is a fine view over the recently formed lake at the head of the glacier. You can clearly see in the moraines how far south the glacier extended at its maximum around 1880 at the end of the "little ice-age".



Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

21. Glacial moraines – Fláfjall – Fláajökull Start: As for route 20, or at the eastern end of the flood wall

Distance: 3-5 km Climb: none Route: Take the track up to Fláajökull and then east to the end of the

flood wall built in 2002. Start your walk across the glacial moraines in the direction of Fláfjall and in under the mountain right up to the tongue of the glacier. The lower slopes of Fláfjall here are marked with striking rock formations, recently exposed by the retreating ice, plucked and smoothed by the glacier and bare of all vegetation. There are textbook examples of glaciological features such as glacial drift, drumlins and moraines, and of the distinctive development of vegetation along the margins of the ice. Do not go onto the wet areas at the edge of the glacier. The route is marked with cairns and information signs are plan-

22. Glacial moraines – Sinuhjallar

Start: Car park at the eastern end of the flood barrier Distance: 3 km

Climb: 180 m Route: Follow route 21 across the glacial moraines in the direction of Fláfjall. Where the path divides, keep on east under Hnausar, the grassy slopes at the bottom of Fláfjall. Go a short way along the east side of Fláfjall and then up the Sinuhjallar terraces, from where there is a spectacular view over Fláajökull, the meltwater lake at its end, and the whole of Hornafjörður. The east face of Fláfjall is marked by gullies and cavities cut by water which turn into surging torrents in wet weather. The route is very rocky but not hard, except the part up Sinuhjallar, which is fairly challenging.



Basalt columns on Miðfell Photograph: Sigurlaug Gissurardóttir

23. *Haukafell* – nature trail

Start: Campsite service centre Distance: 2.5 km Climb: 80 m. Route: Cross the campsite and go up to the ruins of the old farm. Then turn east through the wood and along the river to the waterfall on Hálsdalsá, which is a good bathing place on hot days. Climb the slope by the falls and go on along the crest of the rocks, from where there is a fine view. Continue northwest over the Kúamýri bog and then back south again, then west onto the point of rocks at the Kolgrafardalsá river. from here make you way back to the service centre. You can make various short detours, or take a shorter route. The route is fairly easy but some of the slopes can be challenging for those not used to hill walking. It is marked by posts and there are information boards along the way.

24. Haukafell

Start: Campsite service centre Distance: 3 km Climb: 110 m Route: Start as for route 23. At the top of Fossbrekka, the slope by the falls, turn north off route 23 and on to the rounded knoll known as Djúpadalshnaus, then west to rejoin route 23 west of the Kúamýri marsh. This is a rather tougher route than 23 but gives a better view over the Mýrar lowlands and up the Kolgrafadalur valley. The route is marked with posts and there are information boards along the way.



Places of interest in Mýrar and the east of Suðursveit

Baulutjörn (route 19)

Pond north of the farm Tjörn, just west of Hornafjörður. It is a designated site of special natural interest for its unusually rich nature and bird life. It is said that the pond contains a "nicker" or water monster, and thundering sounds, like the roaring of a bull, can often be heard coming from it, especially before bad weather. The story goes that one day the men of Holt had slaughtered a bull. In those times, blood was taken warm from slaughtered animals, heated over a fire without boiling, and mixed with raisins, sugar, cinnamon and other goodies to make a blood pudding. This was considered a rare delicacy. The men were called in for their treat with the bull still only half skinned. They went off but left behind a boy, who saw a sparrow fly down and go into the body of the bull where the men had cut off its head. At this point the carcass began to move and the boy fled in terror from the killing field back to the farm to tell the news. When the men came out they saw the bull, its skin hanging half off, run off and plunge into the pool.



Borgarklettur

Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

Borgarklettur

Borgarklettur is a rocky outcrop that stands prominently up over the otherwise flat, marshy landscape, just northeast of the farm Borg At the top on its eastern side there is an ancient ring-shaped structure known as Goðaborg ("Bastion of the Gods"), which tradition says was an ancient site of sacrifice. In 1999 the place was investigated and various objects came to light that pointed to this once having been a place of execution. Borgarklettur exudes a powerful air of mystery and is the subject of various folktales. There is said to be a chest of gold hidden among the rocks, only if anyone goes searching for it the farm of Borg will burn. The grass at the top may not be cut nor the stones disturbed in any way. However, there is a story that one of the horses from Borg did get up onto the rocks one day, where he grazed to his heart's content and stood there a good while looking around before picking his way back down again. Amazingly, the farm and farmer suffered no harm from the horse's



Brunnhóll Church Courtesy of Unnar Kristjánsdóttir

Brunnhóll church (routes 17)

Through the centuries Mýrar has always been a single parish. Until 1824 the Church of St Mary stood at Einholt, closer to the sea than the present site - hence the name, Einholt Parish. Due to increased susceptibility to flooding, the church was then moved Holt. Around 1840 plans were mooted to move the church again because the graveyard was full and there was no room for enlargement. It was finally demolished in 1899 and a new church was built at the present site. The church was designed by Móritz Steinsen and is a listed building. Work on its restoration beg-

Fláajökull (routes 8a, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21)

Fláajökull is one of the outlet glaciers reaching south from the Vatnajökull ice cap. These glaciers tend to move at about a metre a day and they play a central role in the shaping of the landscape. In front of many of the glaciers there are high terminal moraines. At one time it seemed as if the entire Mýrar region would have to be abandoned before the onslaught of glaciers and the streams emanating from them. As you wander about the moraines, try to put yourself in the shoes of the people who in 1937 battled with no more than their hands and their horses to curb the glacial waters. Recent research indicates that the glaciers of Mýrar reached their maximum extent late in the 18th century and then again late in the 19th. In the warmer period since then the glaciers have retreated. In the last hundred years Fláajökull has receded over two kilometres, uncovering around 20 km2 of the valley. Vatnajökull, with all its stupendous outlet glaciers, is now a major tourist attraction and the threat that once hung over the district has now turned into an opportunity for new industries and services.

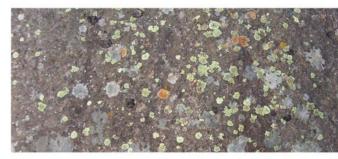


Photograph: Súsanna Torfadóttir At play at Haukafell

Haukafell (routes 23, 24)

The farm of Haukafell is mentioned in records going back to 1658 but was abandoned in 1937. The buildings originally stood under the west side of the ridge but were moved over to the east in 1880 because of the inexorable advance of the Fláajökull glacier. There are stories about a 7 year old boy who amused himself by throwing pebbles from the meadow directly onto the ice.

In 1985 the Forestry Association of Austur-Skaftafellssýsla started planting saplings at Haukafell. The trees are now becoming established and there is rich berry picking to be had (blueberries, crowberries). This is a fine outdoor area, with a good campsite and washing facilities.



Brain spatters and porridge splashes Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

Heilaslettur and grautarkleimur (route 8)

"Brain spatters" and "porridge splashes" are local terms for patches of lichen growing on rocks. A folktale tells of an old man and woman who wanted to take the Virgin Mary the leftovers of their pudding. They build a ladder up to heaven, but when they had come some way they started to feel dizzy and fell off back down to earth, smashing their skulls, and gobs of brain and porridge spattered all over the world. Where the gouts of brain fell onto rocks they formed white patches, and from the bits of porridge came yellow ones, and both can still be seen today as patches

Heinabergsjökull - Heinabergsfell - Vatnsdalur

Heinabergsfell is a low hill standing a little in front of the mouth of the Heinabergsdalur valley. The farm was occupied until 1934. The name comes from a type of stone - heini or heiðni - found in some rocky outcrops west of the farm that produced high-quality whetstones for sharpening scythes and other tools. Around 1900 there was a local trade in this stone.

Extending up from the top of Heinabergsdalur is another valley called Vatnsdalur. Here there is a hot spring and a meltwater lake which formerly drained over the ridge called Heinabergsvörp. When the glaciers started to retreat after 1880 the glacial load decreased. Eventually theice at the snout the glacier became so thin that the water was able to lif-

Accommodation in Hólmur

Hólmur-781-Hornafjörður



titup and the lake emptied. This was called the Vatnsdalur outburst and usually occurred once a year. The surge of water was immense and submerged nearly all the low-lying areas of the district. As the glacier has retreated, the force of these outbursts has lessened and the water now discharges through the river Kolgríma.



Heinabergsvötn bridge Photograph: Rannveig Ólafsdóttir

Heinabergsvötn bridge (routes 6, 7)

The heavy streams flowing down from the Heinabergsjökull glacier, collectively known as Heinabergsvötn, were formerly a major obstacle to travellers. In the 1940s a bridge was built across the streams, but soon after it was finished the glacier had shrunk so much that its water started to flow into Kolgríma, and has done so ever since. The Heinabergsvötn bridge was considered a major piece of engineering in its time but now stands as a silent witness to man's often futile struggle against the



Looking down over Vatnsdalur Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

Hólmsá – flood defences (routes 14, 20)

For centuries the farmlands of Mýrar lay at the mercy of the river Hólmsá and there are many stories of farms being abandoned or moved due to the onslaught of the waters as they surged unchecked over the meadows and pastures of the western part of the district. The history of flood defences in Mýrar goes back to 1937. In that year the farmers of Mýrar dug a new channel for the river and blocked off its old course with a flood wall at the point where the river turns east. All the material was transported by wheelbarrow and horse cart. Towards the end of the operation the current was so strong that it swept away all the material as soon as it was dumped into the river. So the people resorted to creating a kind of frame out of horse carriages and filling it with rocks. For the loss of a few carts they managed to close the channel. Since then much time and work has gone into trying to regulate the flow of the glacial streams. Today there are altogether 13 flood walls, totalling more than seven kilometres. The history of the Mýrar flood defences and the local people's battle against the rivers reflects the endless struggle the people of Iceland have had to wage in order to survive.

Kistugil (routes 1, 2)

About 200 metres north of the farm at Skálafell there is an impress ive ravine called Kistugil, with a variety of rock formations and a rich fauna. On warm summer days it is a popular place for picnics and play. Until around 1900 the glacier extended to the edge of the mountain and the stream was so powerful it could only be crossed on horseback.

"Kista" is a chest or casket, and the story goes that Kári Sölmundarson, the only survivor of the burning of Njál in Njál's saga, buried a chest of silver somewhere in the ravine. Around 1870 the two sons the farmer of Skálafell are said to have noticed a ring from this chest and started to dig. But they happened to look back towards the farm and the buildings seemed to be on fire. Frightened, they stopped digging, and since then it has been considered bad luck to search for treasure in



Höfn seen from Melatangi Photograph: Hjördís Skírnisdóttir

Klumbeyjarskarð - Þjófaskarð (Thjófaskarð)

In times gone by there were two deep channels in the main body of Hornafjörður, and two trading posts, one on each channel. One became the town we now call Höfn, with its fine harbour. The other, Klumbeyjarskarð, lay to the west, under the rocks at Bólshamrar. The name came from a ship called Klumbey that put in there. The rock to which it tied up is called Festarsteinn (Chain Rock) and there is a well called Kaupmannsbrunnur (Merchant's Well) that supplied the trading post with drinking water. Nearby lies Þjófaskarð (Thieves Rift), so called because of a notorious gang of sheep thieves who were captured while hiding out on Skógey, the largest island in the fjord, and taken there and hanged. On one occasion these men kidnapped a girl from Krákshús in Holt (route 19); when she was rescued she had given birth to one boy and was pregnant with another. However, from one of these boys came one of the most distinguished families of the neighbourhood.

Land reclamation (routes 16, 17, 18, 19)

Between 1960 and 1970 a major campaign of land improvement was carried out throughout Austur-Skaftafellssýsla to reclaim the wide expanses of sands and gravels stripped of their soil by the outwash streams. This project brought the people together in co-operative ventures, raising sand barriers around new hay meadows of up to 250-350 acres. This in turn led to increased mechanisation of farming methods, with people pooling resources to buy new machines. As a result farm output and productivity improved substantially.

Melatangi (route 15)

Melatangi, at the end of the long spit reaching east across the mouth of Hornafjörður, has a long and remarkable history. For many years it served as a ferry point for farmers from Suðursveit and Mýrar on their way to the trading post at Höfn. People, livestock, and later even cars were ferried across the mouth of the fjord. Buried in the sand are the remains of the paddle steamer Njörður, brought to Hornafjörður by the merchant Otto Watne in June 1896 and used for local trading. During the War the British army had an installation here, including an airstrip which served as the local airport up till 1965 when the airfield at Árnanes came into use. It is a short walk along the sea wall to the Hvanney lighthouse at the very end of the spit. Over the years a fair number of ships have run aground negotiating the tricky entrance to the fjord and there are several wrecks in the sand, memorials to man's adversity in the face of the stern forces of nature. The men of Mýrar used Melatangi to fish for flatfish, mainly plaice and dabs, as well as eels.



Bluish willow (Salix callicarpæa) Photograph: Rannveig Einarsdóttir

Skinney – Eskey – Selbakki (routes 12, 14)

Skinney is a rocky grass-covered hill just under a kilometre from the sea north of Skinneyjarhöfði. It is said that this was once a rich farm, with eighteen doors and all amenities. One story says that the mistress of Skinney rode one day to the trading post at Djúpivogur. Having looked over what was on offer, she turned up her nose and remarked there wasn't much they hadn't already got in the pantry at home at Skinney. Because of sand drift and flooding, the farm was later moved to Eskey on the main road west of Hólmsá. The main grazing lands at Eskey were on the flat country west of the knoll called Selbakki and separated from the farm by a small stream. As time went by this stream was swollen by one of the branches of Heinabergsvötn and became difficult to cross. As a result the farm buildings were moved again, this time to Selbakki. The farm was finally abandoned in 1925.

ELCOME TO SKAFTAFELL NATIONAL PARK



Skinneyjarhöfði (route 14)

Right up until 1960 the men of Mýrar used Skinneyjarhöfði (Cape Skinney) as a fishing station. Fishing from a coast without harbours as here required great determination and resourcefulness and it needed only minor shift in the weather or sea conditions for things to go badly wrong. The terrible events of the Feast of the Holy Cross, 1843, are witness to the hard struggle faced by Icelanders of former times in order

At the start of the day the weather was exceptionally mild and calm and many of the sailors left their waterproofs behind on the beach. Of eight boats drawn up on the sand, seven put out to sea. But the leader of the eighth told his men to pull their boat back up again as he feared it was going to blow in from the north, as happened. All seven boats got into severe difficulties and were swept either out to sea or west along the coast as far as Ingólfshöfði. Altogether 14 men were lost in the violent storm and of those that survived many were permanently crippled by their ordeal. At this time the total population of Mýrar was about 170. The disaster left ten women widowed with fatherless children. To prevent all these families landing on the parish, the local commune saw all these widows for labour so that they could keep their farms going.

Sævarhólar

The abandoned farm of Sævarhólar lies on the coast to the west of the district, a little east of the mouth of the Kolgrima river. An old story tells of a couple who lived there with their five year old son. One morning the wife went out to light the fire in the outside kitchen and found the place occupied by a mother bear with her two new-born cubs. The woman was startled but she and her husband decided to give the bear some milk, and after this she felt that the bear looked at her with friendly eyes. The boy implored to be allowed to stay with the bear, and it never harmed him in any way. The bear got a bucketful of milk each day and the farmer slaughtered a few young sheep to give her to eat. As time went by, the bear took to going down to the sea and usually came back with a seal which it left at the farm door. This went on for half a month. But then the bear gave signs of wanting to leave, and as she made ready to go it seemed to the couple that she looked especially kindly toward

Some winters later, ice lay fast up against the land. The boy went out onto the ice to catch a seal he had seen just offshore. But the floe the boy was standing on broke away and started drifting out to sea. Then he noticed a large bear swimming towards him through the water. The bear came up to the floe and motioned to the boy to climb onto its back. Seeing no other hope of escape, the boy did so. The bear then swam off with him in the direction of land and delivered him up, safe and dry, and then turned back to sea. The following night the farmer had a dream in which the bear came to him and said that it had finally been able to repay them for the food and shelter they had given her years before by saving their son in his hour of need.



Witches and witch's graves (routes 1, 2)

"Witch" is perhaps a misleading translation for völva: these were seeresses or prophetesses who could see unknown or future events, and they figure prominently in Viking mythology. There are several "witch's graves" (völvuleiði) around Iceland, but most have in common the belief that those who look after them and treat them well will prosper, but those who damage or neglect them will suffer harm or misfortune. There are two known "witch's graves" in this area. One is at Skálafell. This grave was always well tended and the farm has enjoyed prosperity as far back as stories go. The other is at the foot of the hay meadow at Einholt (route 17, Brunnhóll church). The people of Einholt saw it in their interests to treat their grave well as it sometimes seemed as if the witch was repaying them for their efforts. On one occasion a large trunk of driftwood was washed ashore just as they were about to build a new living room at the farm and the timber was enough to panel the insides. The previous spring the grave had suffered particularly badly from sand drift but the people had rebuilt and restored it.



Photograph: Helga Davids **Þingskálahólar** (Thingskálahólar) (routes 17, 18)

Þingskálahólar is a grass-covered ridge of rocks and lava north of the land reclamation meadows at Einbúaland. As the name - "Assembly-Lodge-Hills" – suggests, the place is believed once to have been a local assembly site, though no archaeological work has been carried out and there are no written sources for assemblies here. There are more placenames in the area that point to public meetings and the administration of justice. The south side of the biggest hill is called Pingbrekka (Assembly Slope). Erosion at the western end of the slope has uncovered an irregular mound of rocks, very like a rough grave. There are also places called Gálgaklettur (Gallows Rock) and Drekkingarhylur (Drowning Pool). In 1920 some bones were found in a little cranny in the rocks of a man who had been buried there.

Walking trails in Mýrar is the third map in a series entitled "Við rætur Vatnajökuls" (The Roots of Vatnajökull), after the 1993 volume of Árbók Ferðafélag Íslands (Journal of the Touring Club of Iceland). This volume contains detailed information on the places and natural history of the county of Austur-Skaftafellssýsla. The aim is to produce a walking map for each particular country district or "sveit" as part of a wideranging project to make the region more accessible and better known to visitors in the spirit of sustainable development. We hope the maps will prove useful to both local people and visitors who wish to enjoy outdoor

life in a magnificent and beautiful environment. Landowners bid walkers welcome but remind them that travel on tracks or paths, whether by car or on foot, is entirely at their own responsibility. The law on nature conservation permits the public the right to walk on uncultivated land and to camp without special permission, but we request that you show landowners all due consideration, keep to the designated footpaths and respect their rights as regards livestock and

The Country Code

Avoid damage to the soil and rock formations.

1. Leave your stopping points in the condition you found them.

2. Do not leave litter. Take it home with you. Keep the water clean and pure. Avoid damage to plant and animal life.

Take care with fires Keep to designated walking routes where requested.

Keep dogs on a lead.

crops. Please keep dogs on the lead.

Respect the wishes and directions of landowners. 10. Treat our environment and heritage as objects of pleasure and pride.

Constant care, vigilance and good conduct are essential if we want to keep the country unspoilt and beautiful.

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sýsla), 2007. With thanks to: the people and landowners of Mýrar, ex-patriot residents of Mýrar, the owners and residents of Skálafell, and the owners of the photographs.

(Campaign for the Marking of Walking Route in Austur-Skaftafells-







