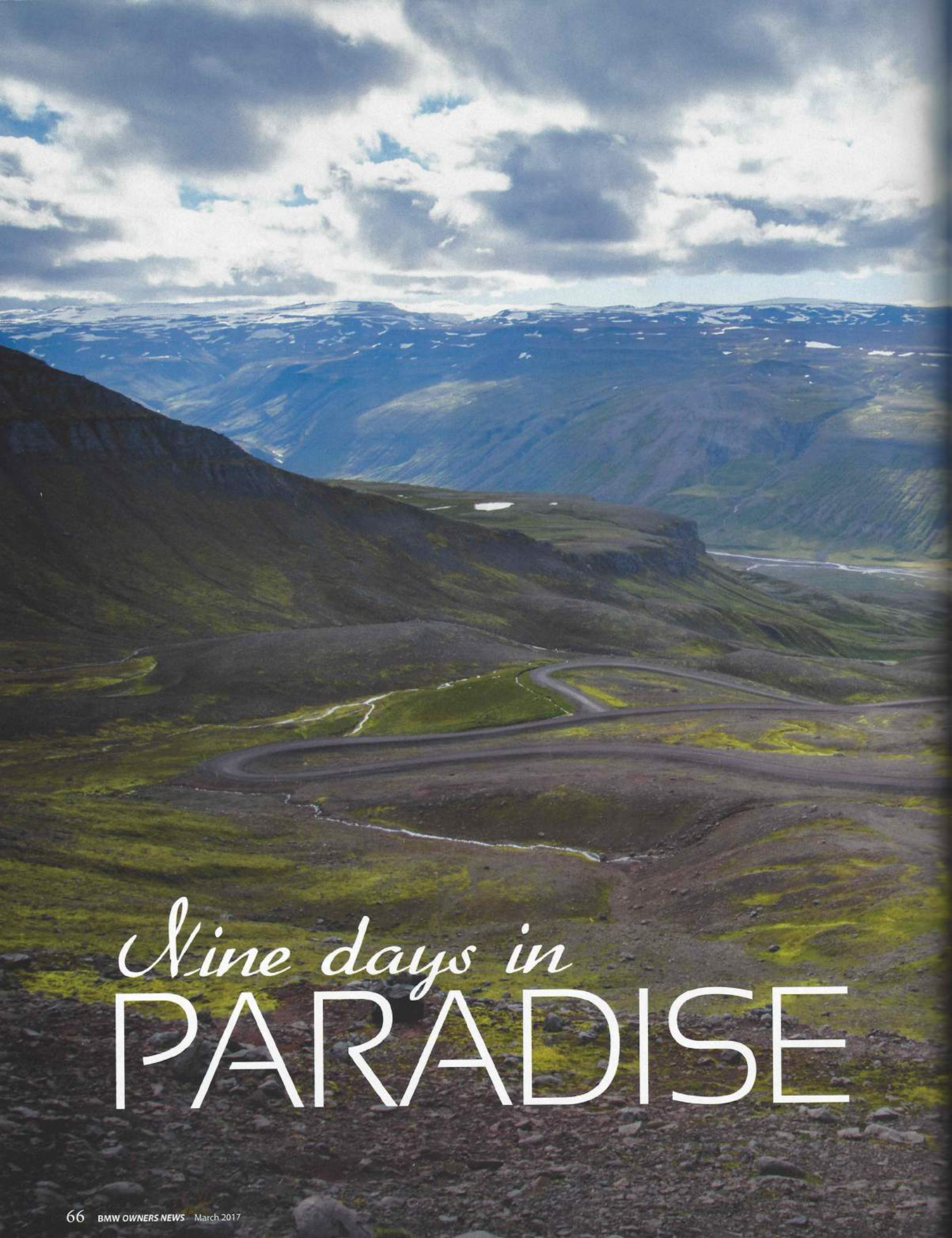


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Nine days in
PARADISE



By Geoffrey Smith #194955

The aggravating part of having a bucket list is that it never seems to get any shorter. For a while, I made some gains and actually thought that I might get to the end of it, but an article or YouTube video about some exotic riding location will always make me break out the list to add a ride. I have given up trying to control it!

Such was the case for Iceland. I planned on going by myself in the late spring, hopefully before too many tourists descended on the island, but after watching some videos on YouTube, it was apparent that it made much more sense to ride some of the roads with at least one other rider. Lifting my R 1200 GS Adventure by myself out of a riverbed killed the solitary instinct. When John Jesson sent an email inviting me to join Ayres Adventure's inaugural tour of Iceland, I knew that this was meant to be.

Since I keep my bike in Germany, it was an easy ride to the top of Denmark to hop the ferry to Iceland. A two-day stop in the

Faroe Islands proved a very worthwhile add-on. Eighteen hours after leaving the Faroe Islands, Iceland appeared out of the mist hovering over a calm sea. The ferry arrived on the east coast, and I was to meet the group in Reykjavik, about a nine-hour ride west. Being from Los Angeles, my immediate thought was traffic, morning rush hour, evening rush hour, tour buses, trucks and endless cars. In those nine hours, once out of the towns, I doubt I saw 30 cars. This solitary ride on the northern portion of the Ring Road set the tone for the next nine days of my amazing journey.

Reykjavik is in a boom phase.

Construction cranes are everywhere, and modern buildings rise alongside the older, traditional structures. The people are warm and friendly. I didn't meet a local who didn't speak perfect English, which was a major plus as the Icelandic language is a definite challenge. Our hotel was a new, small establishment with a staff who made us all feel welcome. The food at the restaurant for our kickoff dinner was superb. For some reason, I expected herring prepared 30 different ways, but I never saw it, and that evening meal set the standard for the rest of the trip.

One minute you are in Reykjavik and its suburbs and then almost instantaneously



you are out in this vast, cold and barren, mountainous landscape. In Reykjavik, some of the roads are two or three lanes in each direction, but with the city behind us, the Ring Road is two lanes and that's pretty much as wide as it gets 99 percent of the time. On the first day, we headed for Tingvellir, the national park where two tectonic plates met, decided they weren't compatible, and now eye each other suspiciously across a trench 50 feet wide. Mother Nature puts on a quite a display of her power for all to see. After that, it was off the main road into the back country on asphalt barely two lanes wide, filled with twisties. What a great start to the day!

The asphalt ended, and the road became hard-packed dirt and then gravel about a foot deep. Fun and games as we plowed through it, my bike (and everyone else's)

wanting to drift to the opposite side of the road while I wanted it to stay in the right lane. Slither right, slither left, just stay upright! I was on the pegs for about 45 minutes, a good warm-up for the days ahead.

Each day brought more incredible visuals, as the treeless mountains continually altered their look due to the ever-changing light and shadows. The sky in Iceland is so blue, the clouds so large and white, the sea such a deep blue-gray and the cultivated green fields so acid green that the contrasts are sometimes overwhelming. The ever-present mountains were not mountains with a gradual ascent skyward; they rose from the flat plain almost straight up, the layers of volcanic strata clearly visible yet softened by the moss that clung to the cliffs. There were endless fjords with sometimes just a few homes at the very end and other

times only a small, solitary church facing the elements. The changing lava fields were at times a plain of jagged black rock or a sea of soft, undulating mounds slowly being covered by some sort of green growth.

On Day Three we rode across the heart of Iceland from north to south. A single-lane dirt road with a myriad of surfaces kept us on the pegs. Huge glaciers in the distance provided an amazing sight. I think I saw one or two four-wheel drive vehicles as we made our way south. It was just Iceland and us! Sun one minute, threatening gray clouds the next, and temperatures all over the place.

Day Four is permanently etched in my mind. The day that John Jesson described as "potentially challenging" arrived. The road was designated F-26, but by the end of the day I referred to it as the FU-26 because



it did all it could to beat me. The first hour was fine, asphalt and then a good, hard-packed dirt road with occasional patches of gravel.

Then the first river appeared.

I estimated it at about 45 feet wide and a foot or more deep. The water just looked cold—very, very cold. Three of my companions went before me; one went down about a quarter of the way in, and he was much more experienced off-road than I. I was not feeling inspired or confident, but as there was really no other option, I went for it. Only when I looked at the Go-Pro footage later could I see that the riverbed was composed of baseball-size rocks covered with some sort of growth. The handlebars were all over the place and so was my language. I don't know what I did right, or for that matter, wrong, but I made it across.

After that, my attitude went from "What am I doing here?" to "Bring it on!" which is exactly what FU-26 did. Eight or more streams/rivers awaited us. The road went from dirt to rock to sand to mud and back again as we climbed into the highlands of Iceland. The vistas were jaw-droppingly beautiful, truly epic in their scope. Looking

at the landscape, I could have been on the moon for all I knew, and I could see the road stretch out for miles and miles ahead of me as we rode into the hills.

When the clouds descended and the mist came in, visibility went down to about 20

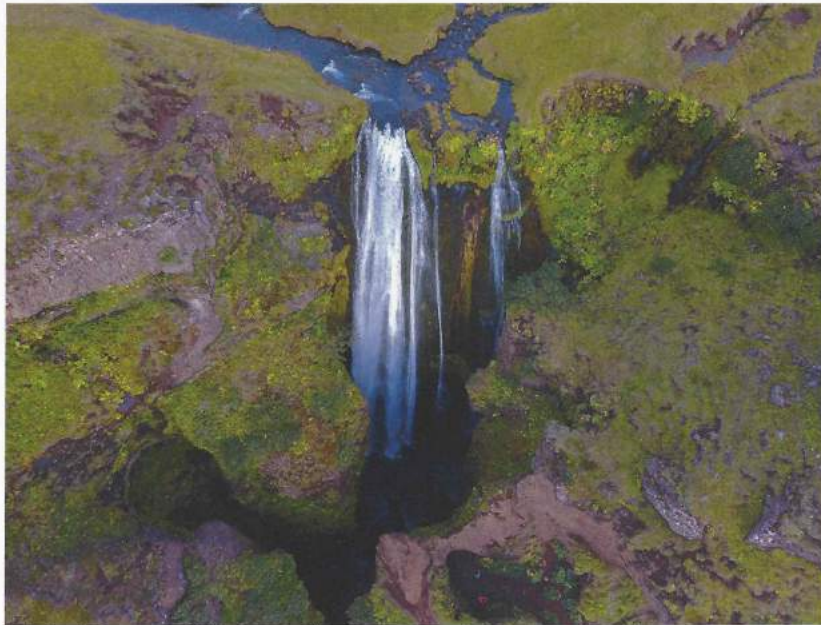
until heavy, wet snow began falling—so heavy and so wet that it stuck to my visor.

The bike slid around under me as it tried to find traction going uphill, the back wheel acting as if it was on a trampoline. When I could get the snow off my visor, I could

occasionally see one or two bikes ahead of me. The temperature hovered around the freezing mark. I gave up on the hot shower dream and totally focused on navigating that goat path.

After eight hours of being mostly on the pegs, my calves burned. The road started to descend. A long, steep hill lay before me, the mud of the road surface glistening in the rain. I could either ride down the hill or slide down the hill. I prayed for the former but was realistic about the latter. My predicament became more

apparent as I went around a corner and found a rider down with what turned out to be two broken ribs and a broken collarbone. Along with two other riders, I helped get the bike off him and into the follow van. I slithered on at a snail's pace through the rutted landscape until I saw an asphalt road in the distance. It's amazing what a piece of tarmac can do to lift one's spirits.



Seljalandsfoss waterfalls captured by drone.

feet. I told myself I didn't really need to see where I was going, as I could follow the tire tracks from the bikes in front of me. Then the rain started, washing away the tire tracks and fogging my glasses. It was about 38 degrees, and I had no idea where I was. I started to wonder when it would end. I kept going, dreaming of a hot shower. I was doing okay ("fine" was on the back burner)





Crossing the Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon.

I was a quarter-mile from the road when FU-26 got in her last licks. Over I went in the soft, thick mud. The right sides of the bike and myself were coated in the stuff. I returned to a state of humility and respect for FU-26. I did finally get my long, hot shower, and our rest day in Husavik was most welcomed. I reflected on the challenging (and slightly terrifying at times) day of riding I had survived.

On Day Six, we had the choice of going to the northernmost tip of Iceland (and thereby almost to the Arctic Circle) or going to see Dettifoss (the largest waterfall in Europe). Since I have seen some pretty incredible waterfalls in my life, I opted for the former, picturing soaring cliffs, crashing waves, a lone lighthouse sending out her beacon of hope to stranded mariners. What I got was flat land, hard-packed dirt roads, and what must have been a fully automated lighthouse, as one couldn't even get to it!

More miles of dirt roads and several fjords later, we started to climb a hill with what seemed like a 20 percent grade and switch-backs. The bike came alive, I came alive, and we climbed up and up until I could see the crest of the mountain ahead of me. I reached the top and had one of those big moments. The panorama in front of me ranks right up there in the top five amazing places I have seen. The endless North Atlantic on my left, a black sand beach stretching for miles into the distance, snow-capped mountains in the distance and this immense, magnificent valley with a meandering river running through it dared me not to be in awe. It was what used to be called a Kodak moment—but on steroids. The regret of not seeing the waterfall faded away, the lesson of snap judgment learned.

We made our way clockwise around the island the next few days. Waterfalls just as amazing replaced the one I missed. A wonderful aspect of Iceland is that you're

allowed to enjoy nature as it is and at your own risk. No signs warning you to watch your step or to resist trespassing. No safety rails—just you and Mother Nature. A bay filled with huge chunks of ice broken off from the glacier provided a surreal boat ride; we stood next to mammoth pieces of ice that had made their way from the bay to the ocean, and all in view of the soaring cliffs.

An incredible final farewell dinner back in Reykjavik complemented all the great dinners we had on the trip. I had no reason to think of Iceland as a culinary standout, but I was wrong. We had incredible, imaginatively prepared food each night and stayed in excellent hotels, even in the more remote towns. The riding, with that sense of being removed from the safety and trappings of city or suburban living, was what made this journey phenomenal. ☺