

Hiking the World

Itchy Feet

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Nature is not a place to visit.
It is home.
— Gary Snyder

To
the Wanderer
in You

Preface

“Monique, you are ready for the real work. You love nature, you are strong, go for it”, Dave, one of my Camino buddies, had encouraged me when we were walking to Santiago de Compostela in 2007. He was convinced that I had the strength and perseverance for multiple-day trekking with a full pack. I on the other hand was not immediately convinced. Tent, sleeping bag, sleeping mat, cooking equipment, food, water, clothes... Creating the list in my mind, it looked like a huge amount of stuff, and an impressive weight to carry on my back.

Of course the seed had been planted, and I just needed a little more encouragement, which was given by other hikers and travelers I met during my travels.

In the summer of 2008 the seed started to grow, and so did the list of equipment. The more I studied the options, the more I decided I needed. And all of it happened to be available in a variety of sizes, kinds, brands, and weights. I spent hours researching on the internet and visiting outdoor shops. Every day I learned new things and bit by bit my equipment came together.

From that moment on whenever I was looking into a new travel destination, I first checked the hiking options. A new world opened to me; a world I would love to share with you.

In this book I invite you to join me on my hiking adventures in Greenland, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand and on the Camino Portuguese in Portugal and Spain.

Enjoy the journey,
Monique Teggelove

The Netherlands, June 2021

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Alone at the Kjolur trek

Don't be scared to walk alone.
Don't be scared to like it.
— John Mayer



When I started considering Iceland as a travel destination, I met a hiking enthusiast in the USA, who happily shared his Iceland wish list. He even happened to have the Lonely Planet for Iceland in his backpack, and kindly let me borrow it for a week.

Slightly overwhelmed by this 'coincidence' I agreed to take the guidebook. Flipping through the pages, taking in the photos and the information, my wanderlust and my wish to visit Iceland immediately grew. And so it happened that I

started preparing for my Iceland journey while attending a communication workshop in the USA.

It is late June 2008, just after the mid-Summer night celebrations, when I land at Keflavik airport. In the days following my arrival I put the finishing touches on the preparations for my first solo trek.

Waiting at the Reykjavik bus station, there is a crowd of travelers, and looking at their packs I assume that they too are setting out on a hiking trip. I am feeling slightly worried that it might get a bit busy on the Kjolur trek.

The worries are short-lived. When the bus arrives, I happen to be the only hiker hopping on. The others are clearly going elsewhere. My worries of it being too crowded are instantly replaced by a sense of panic. Honestly? Can I be the only one going on this trek?

Well, I happen to be. There are no other hikers with the same destination. Nobody to cling to. I will have to manage on my own. The bus driver is extremely helpful. Together we study the map to see, where he can best drop me off, as there is no dedicated bus stop for this trail.



After a scenic drive of several hours, including stops at blowing geysers and impressive waterfalls, we stop in a grey desert of lava, only crossed by a couple of gravel roads. The bus driver gives me a scrutinizing look, checks if I have all my belongings and looks a bit doubtful when getting back on the bus. He seems to feel a bit uncomfortable leaving me here alone. Once more he points out the direction I should take, and asks me if I am 100% sure.

Yes, I am! My inner calm has returned. All is well. With a great deal of joy I look around, taking in the surroundings. The bus is driving out of sight, raising clouds of dust. Gravel, lava, a bit of moss here and there, mountaintops in the far distance and not a single person within eyesight. It feels delightfully free. I put on my hat, scarf and gloves and take up the challenge. It may be Summer, but a fresh wind is blowing and the mountains are snow-capped.

The leg of eight kilometres to the first cabin is marked by headwind and little sand storms. A grain of sand has sought shelter under my right eyelid, and is no more willing to leave. With my eyes squinted I make my way against the wind. Upon arrival at the Hvitárnes cabin, I am surprised to be welcomed by an Austrian couple. They are doing a road trip and enjoying a break. I am warmly welcomed to join them for a beer and a tasty lunch. Slowly I recover my physical strength. The memories and annoyances of the headwind and the irritated eye are fading away, and so does my previous intention to stay overnight in this hut. If it can this easily be reached by car, it does not yet entirely meet my expectations of back country hiking with full equipment. I sent off the friendly Austrian couple, who urged me to visit them, if ever I happen to be in the area, clear the cabin and lock it. Turning around I find myself face to face with a somewhat grumpy looking Icelander, who turns out to be the manager of the cabins along this trail. He gives me some tips and advice to find the next cabin.

“Not very far, two and a half-hour walk”, is his short answer, when I ask him about the hiking distance.

Feeling up to the next leg I throw my pack on my back. My search for and investment in good lightweight equipment has paid off. My pack weighs less than eleven kilos. Without water, but that is widely available in rural Iceland, and in drinkable quality. A one litre supply does the job.

Wind, wind and more wind. After only a kilometre I am faced with a waterhole. There is no chance at all to get through it while keeping my feet dry. I take my shoes and socks off and turn-up my trousers. On sandals I walk into the muddy water; at least the temperature is okay. On the other side I give my feet and sandals a wash in a little pool. Boots back on and I hit the road again. Well, road, it is more like a worn out horse track, magically disappearing when the earth changes to lava rock. Even though my tracking qualities will highly improve in the days to come, I am at a loss today. There is no Stoneman - a common trail marker in Iceland - to be seen, nor any other sign of a trail. The map and the sound of a rapid moving river become my guide.

As soon as I arrive at the river, I spot a trail marker on the opposite riverbank. Big rocks seem to serve as stepping stones to make it to the other side. I search no further. This looks like the perfect place to cross without having to take off my shoes. I estimate not needing my hiking poles and leave them clipped on my backpack. Piece of cake. Or not..? Halfway across the river I find myself in an unstable splits. My feet are placed on two different rocks and one of my feet is slipping away, millimetre by millimetre. Even though my other foot is firmly placed, my weight is in between my two legs. The slightest attempt to raise one of my legs, will inevitably result in me falling headfirst in the ice cold fast running river. Not tempting at all. Oh my...

I have forgotten the basic rules for river crossings. Had I unclipped my backpack, I could have thrown it off if I hit the water, to create freedom to move. Had I used my hiking poles, I would have had two more supports to recover my balance. Had I been hiking with a buddy, I would have had help. If, if, if... My first real river crossing is one big pile-up of blunders and beginners' mistakes. Mistakes better not to make; even less so when being on your own.

While my mind races, my eyes are searching the surroundings and my brain is working at full speed. I have only one chance to make it to the other side unhurt, and dry. Surrendering to faith I let myself fall forward, hoping and trusting that my hands will land on the rock in front of me, which hopefully will be solidly placed and able to carry my weight. Miraculously it works. My heart leaps with joy, but I am not there yet. Carefully I pull my slipping right foot to the other rock, managing my balance with my hands. I move my left foot to the next stone, left hand to the left, right one to the left, next foot. One stone at a time, I move closer to the riverbank and arrive dry and in one piece. I cannot stop laughing from relief and nerves breaking free. Next time I will use my hiking poles, and unclip my backpack. Phew, luckily they do not know this back home.

Not much later I am entering another field of lava stones and rocks. This time I look far ahead in search of stonemen to stay on track. At one of those moments of looking in the far distance the wind grabs my backpack and throws me onto the sharp lava rocks. This sure is my lucky day. The damage is limited to some scratches and bruises. It's a good lesson though.

Whenever setting out on solo treks, I better be ultra-alert, all the time. Enough lessons for the first day, I believe.



By the time I finally see the bridge, that should lead to the cabin, I feel it's getting late, and I am sure that I have been on the way a fair bit longer than the expected two and a half hours.

The metal bridge towers high above the water. There not being any protection against the wind, I am having second thoughts. There also not being an alternative to get to the other side, I drag myself up the steep stairs. I feel thoroughly grateful for the fencing on both sides, which protects me from being blown off.

When I reach the hut, which is well-hidden in a valley, I am both tired and in good spirits. I decide not to try my luck on pitching my tent. I am sure my tent is strong enough to withstand the wind but I am less confident that I will manage to pitch it under these circumstances. In the comfortable hut I carefully select a bed. I have found peace with the idea that there are no other hikers, and enjoy not having to share the facilities. I spread the content of my backpack over beds and chairs, light the fire and am

bewondered about the fully equipped kitchen with stove and gas cylinders.

Staying overnight in a cabin in Iceland is far from cheap, but it needs to be said that it is value for money. I happily put my cabin fee in the letter box and add my name to the guestbook.

The bathroom is overlooking the lake and the mountains. And with no-one around I leave the door open to take in the view. There is even cell phone coverage in this luxury accommodation. Add a pot of tea, a tasty freeze-dried meal and a good book, and I simply feel like the interim Queen of this little Icelandic Kingdom. I look back on a day with geysers, waterfalls, glaciers, river crossings, lessons, and lots of wind.

Leaving in the morning, I have had a good night's rest, a decent breakfast and a couple of mugs of tea. That's what I call a magnificent start to the day.

The wind is blowing continuously. The grain of sand is still firmly settled in my right eye. I have both a running nose and a weeping eye.



It does not take me long before I let go of the word wind. There's no reason to fool myself any longer: this is a decent gale. Crossing the bridge back to the other riverbank is again a nice challenge.

Clouds of sand are flying around. I see a lot of horse footprints on the path, and the occasional human footprint gives me confidence that I am on the right track. The guestbook in the cabin showed that there have been several people over the past couple of days and I am again surprised to have the trail all by myself. I guess I could say this truly is a solo trek; a baptism of fire.

A large group of horsemen and horsewomen with an even greater number of Icelandic horses is coming my way. It is a beautiful sight. Every single person looks at me; some with an encouraging look, others as if they feel sorry for me. Well, I guess I am not looking breathtakingly beautiful: blown about, with a face full of black smudge from the sand and lava flying around and red swollen eyes to top it off. Even though not a single word is spoken, it is nice to see human beings.

It is only fifteen kilometres between the two cabins, over mainly flat surface, but it takes me a total of five hours. As long as I have head wind, the plodding is slow, yet stable and doable. Sidewind is a different kettle of fish; a huge challenge to stay on track and on my feet.



The mountains draw near. The grey lava makes way for moss, little flowers and low bushes. I succeed in today's challenges and reach the cabin without incidents. It is a small, yet comfortable one, with lots of charm. The oldest hut on the trail. Water runs from a hose at the stream a little further on and the toilet is placed at about 50 metres from the cabin, on the other side of the stream.

If there had been other hikers around, they would have enjoyed my far from gracious arrival. Only three steps separate me from the front door and the lull that lays behind it. The safe haven is luring and I already picture myself inside. Turning my face towards the door and lifting one leg I am carried away by the wind. Before smashing into the ground I manage to grab a metal handle next to the

door and charmingly dangle for a moment, till I find the strength to pull myself up using both hands and everything suitable to hold onto. Upon reaching the final step, there are just a few challenges left: unlocking and opening the door, getting myself in and closing the door behind me.



The experience leaves a clear impression, and I instantly decide to limit my tours outside the hut to the bare minimum. If I have a hard time staying on my feet while carrying my backpack, I will be a feather in the wind without these eleven kilos. On the few outings I undertake in the late afternoon, my feet hardly ever touch the soil where I had expected them to.

I am surprised to read an entry from yesterday evening in the guestbook. The guy is hiking in the opposite direction and we did not cross paths. We must have taken different ways around the mountain.

I light the fire, prepare tea, grab my book and surrender to just being, enjoying and not having to do anything. The view from the cosy small windows is wonderful. The wind howls

and the arrival of others takes me by surprise. A young couple from Paris steps in for a break during a nice walk. They have come here with the tail wind. They have only just left when the gale picks up again and it starts raining; it is going to be a wet and windy journey back for them. The hut is shaking to its foundations, yet I feel safe and protected; warm and dry.

In the middle of the night the gas cylinder feeding the heater runs out. I decide not to change it, but to leave the full one for future visitors. After all it may take a couple of days, before anyone stops by to change the empty one. Slowly yet steadily the room temperature drops, till it is only 5 degrees Celsius. I am shivering with cold and longing for warmer times to come.



My nightly prayers have been answered: the wind has subsided and the rain has stopped. I can now reach the water source and toilet without being blown off my feet. The water is freezing cold though; a clear invitation to limit exposure to brushing my teeth and the bare essential body

washing. After having filled my tummy and cleaned the hut, I hit the trail again. In about twelve kilometres civilization awaits and I will have achieved my first solo trek. A strange yet satisfying feeling.

Upon arrival in Hreravellir I again decide to give my tent another day's grace and opt for a night in a cabin. The hut is situated near a hot spring. Steam blows from the soil and it smells like sulphur. The thermal pool is beckoning. After three days of gale and cold, my muscles more than deserve a healing bath.

No less than two Dutch tour groups settle at the campground near the hut that evening. After the days of solitude, I need to readapt to all the talking and decide to keep quiet that evening.

Getting out the next morning, people ask me with curiosity which group I am part of and are surprised to learn I am not part of a group, but am traveling solo.

I hop on the bus back to Reykjavik, back to the bustle of civilization; but only for a few days, to prepare for my next trek.

The magnificent display of colours at Landmannaulagar

To walk in nature is to witness a thousand miracles.
— Mary Davis



Still amazed that I had the Kjolur trek all to myself, I start preparing for a four-day trek from Landmannaulagar to Thorsmork; known as the Laugavegur trail. The beautiful and well-assorted organic store in Reykjavik is my go-to place to stock up. Maps and trail info is studied, and I set out exploring options and departure times for busses. Check, check, double check, I am all set for my next adventure.