

Moon Rivers

Iceland's out-of-this-world glacier canoeing • *By Larry Rice*



EXTRATERRESTRIAL WATERS: The first descent of the Þjórsá River in Iceland's Sprengisandur region

FIRST DESCENTS of unknown rivers are always unpredictable, but in August 1994, when Martin Brown's crew made its first reconnaissance of the rivers of the Sprengisandur — the huge glaciers north of Reykjavík, Iceland — things were positively... weird. "It was completely alien," says Brown, who has run more than his share of exotic rivers. "It was the closest I've ever come to extraterrestrial canoeing."

"I'm not easily impressed when scouting new rivers," he says, "but this blew me away. From the air, the first river looked like braids of mud flowing across the surface of the moon. The other sliced through a bizarre outwash plain like something out of *Road Warrior*." After paddling on five continents I thought nothing could rival Africa's Zambezi or Canada's fabled Nahanni. But Brown, the 44-year-old owner of Sunrise County Canoe Expeditions, offered a trip so unusual that I would have taken out a second mortgage before missing it. Fortunately, getting to Iceland from the East Coast is as easy as flying to Los Angeles.

Brown had been hearing tales of Iceland's un navigated glacial rivers for years, but gleaning accurate information about the area proved to be problematic. "Icelanders are very comfortable around water," Brown says, "but they'd just as soon go sky diving as river-running."

Then in 1993 Atli Gudmundsson, an ex-diplomat from Reykjavík, came to learn canoeing from Brown on northern Maine's St. Croix River. They planned an Iceland exploration for the following year. What they found has become one of the world's premier whitewater canoeing adventures.

River Warriors

Brown and his assistant, Mike Patterson, joined Gudmundsson on a scouting trip of the Sprengisandur. (The name means, literally, "exploding horses", according to legend, outlaws who roamed the arctic desert here would ride their horses until they suddenly burst.) The three used light aircraft to find put-ins as far upstream as possible on the Þjórsá and the Tungnaá rivers at the limit of their navigability. After flying and driving

1,500 miles in 56 hours, they found what they were looking for. One day later, I was part of the first group of paddlers to appreciate their discovery.

Originating from under Vatnajökull, Europe's largest glacier, the 18 runnable miles of the Tungnaá River varied from a maze of interconnecting channels only inches deep to well-defined Class I rapids that skirted naked mountain slopes. We glided past calderas and snowcapped peaks, and stopped to investigate secluded waterfalls and luminous blue, dripping-wet ice caves. Tents were pitched amid expansive moraines, always within view of the looming glacial cap. It was a visually stunning scene but a lifeless one. The landscape was virtually devoid of vegetation and wildlife. Three days after embarking, we reached the take-out, a volcanic crater lake a mile across, surrounded by rugged moonscape covered in black cinder and ash.

Our next objective was Iceland's longest river, the Þjórsá, a day's drive west.

As with the Tungnaá, the headwaters of the Þjórsá had never been canoed. A few miles away, the hulking white mass of Hofsjökull Glacier provided stark contrast to the black lava badlands in the foreground. In the unpolluted, haze-free air, the monochromatic colors were so intense they seemed almost unreal; shimmering mirages danced before our eyes.

After we'd paddled only four miles an obstacle appeared that both our maps and the aerial reconnaissance had missed: a two-mile stretch of unrunnable, boulder-laced rapids and back-to-back thundering waterfalls. What lay beyond, hidden by more winding gorges, was anyone's guess. After a quick vote, we decided to portage everything around the rapids.

It was a good move. We were greeted by Class I and II rapids that plunged through a rough-walled miniature canyon. Perfect polygonal basalt columns lined the chasm's walls, as if hewn by trolls. As the day wore on, the river grew deeper and wider, sprawling across a broad, dusky valley flanked by Hofsjökull Glacier. Our all-terrain shuttle buggy, dubbed the Lunar Bus, materialized atop a distant, desolate knoll waiting to return us to Reykjavík — and, seemingly, Earth. ●

Notes

ICELANDAIR (800-223-5500) has a six-hour nonstop flight to Keflavik Airport, 30 miles southwest of Reykjavik, from New York's JFK, Boston's Logan, and Baltimore/Washington International airports. Passport required.

SUNRISE COUNTY CANOE EXPEDITIONS (800-748-3730) is the one outfitter offering guided canoe trips in Iceland. Tours run from August 2 to 11 and 15 to 24; the all-inclusive price is about \$2,000. Air fares booked through SOCE cost \$742 round trip.