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& 4 WHEEL DRIVE

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Story and photographs: Linda van Wijk

You've got 33-inch tyres? That is the absolute minimum for driving on glaciers in Iceland,' said convoy leader Hjalti Magnusson, a worried tone in his voice.

Back in mainland Europe our bright red Jeep with its Mercedes 300D engine and chunky big-tyred wheels is an impressive sight – but it looks rather less imposing tucked in among the Icelandic four-wheel

drives with their huge 44-inch balloon tyres.

You don't just go and drive across glaciers in Iceland. It really is far too dangerous. But more and more people are doing it, thanks to the efforts of a company called Icebreaker, aptly-named organisers of this most extraordinary of off-road adventures.

Five vehicles made up our little convoy, two Toyota Hilux pick-ups, a Nissan Patrol, a Suzuki Vitara – on 36-inch tyres – and our Jeep. On our way to the foot of the

Langjökull glacier we pause at Thingvellir where we look in awe down a ten-metre-wide crack in the earth's surface.

Alte Ingimarsson is a geologist, who explains that Iceland lies right on the seabed split between Europe and America, an island that rose up out of the sea after volcanic eruptions, bringing the tectonic split above the waterline.

'There is still a lot of volcanic activity on the island. The last eruption was in

fantasy

How we crossed the treacherous Icelandic glacier of Langjokull with a 40-year-old Jeep – and only fell in once



Cracks

Just 40 miles out of Reykjavik we turn off the tarmac and head for the blue ice of the glacier. But before driving up into the snow the Icelanders climb into winter sports suits and drop their tyre pressures to 0.2bar, which leaves the tyres virtually flat.

Hjalti explains that the beginning and end of the glacier are the most difficult sections to drive because the snow is wet, the ice melts and breaks and there are treacherous cracks in the glacier.

The top of the glacier is 1200 metres high. Halfway up I leap out to take a picture – only to feel the ground disappear beneath my feet. I end up lying three metres down in a crack in the glacier, with just a small strip of blue sky visible overhead and my left foot stuck under a pile of snow. I start to free my leg but the movement sends me another metre down. I realise that there's nothing solid beneath me, just snow.

Then I see faces staring down at me. 'Don't move,' shouts Hjalti, but I've already figured that one out for myself. They lower a rope which I tie around my waist, and five rescuers pull me out. Later on I realise just how lucky I've been, because looking out of the car window I see cracks that appear to be completely bottomless. The ice here is

hundreds of metres thick, says Hjalti: 'A car can easily disappear in a wider crack. That's why you should never try this alone.'

Whiteout

At the top of the glacier its extent becomes crystal clear – it's white all around us, horizon to horizon. There's a range of snow-covered mountains in the distance, but their peaks appear lower than the snow roof we're driving on.

Up front there is snow as far as we can see, meeting white clouds at the horizon so that you can't tell where the snow ends and the clouds begin.

At the front of the convoy there are no tracks to follow, so you experience a strange sensation of driving into nothingness. You can drive an exact latitude on the global positioning satellite receiver (GPS) as there's nothing in the way, it's just a question of keeping the direction arrow on the line.

It's by no means a smooth surface, there are bumps and holes that restrict progress to around 20mph, but the ride is comfortable and we feel as if we're just floating over the snow. The heaving motion reminds me of driving in the sands of the Sahara.

'Sometimes it's so misty you can't even see your own tyres,' says Stina, riding in the

November last year. Earthquakes happen here all the time.'

The result is a rough island that is covered in volcanoes, geothermal fields, glaciers and waterfalls. It has just one properly surfaced tarmac road, and that circles the island. For eight months of the year the entire interior is covered in snow and is therefore totally uninhabited, for off-roaders only, conditions ranging from bad tracks to very bad tracks with lots of river crossings.



big Patrol. 'Once we drove for quite a long while before we realised we were actually stuck, because the tyres were still turning, dug into the snow, and there was nothing outside to indicate that we weren't moving.'

To my surprise I see a small green painted wooden pole in the snow. 'Stop,' says Stina. 'This is our GPS waypoint. I have to type in a new one.'

Conquest

Hjalte explains that he extended his Hilux so that he can sleep in it during snowstorms. The car has two huge fuel tanks, 110 litres each, and for communications Hjalte carries a GPS receiver, GSM telephone and shortwave radio. Most Icelandic off-roaders pack big American petrol engines.

Our jeep is a bit different, not very fast, the diesel engine has to work hard on inclines and because of the leaf springs and smaller tyres it's a lot bumpier than the Patrol and Hilux, but it's also lighter and doesn't sink into the snow as much as the bigger vehicles.

Two thirds of the way across fog blurs our vision, and Hjalte talks of turning back. We persuade the team to continue because we're so excited at the idea of completing the glacier crossing in our own car. We drive on through heavy mist, but when the snow gets wetter we know we're approaching the end of the glacier.

Back on dry land we need to pump our tyres back up before driving over the jagged lava rocks. The Icelanders have compressors on board, powerful enough to pump up an enormous flotation tyre in three seconds.

It's three in the morning when we reach the campsite at Hveravellir, but because it doesn't get dark during the summer it's easy to lose track of time. Tired and chilled to



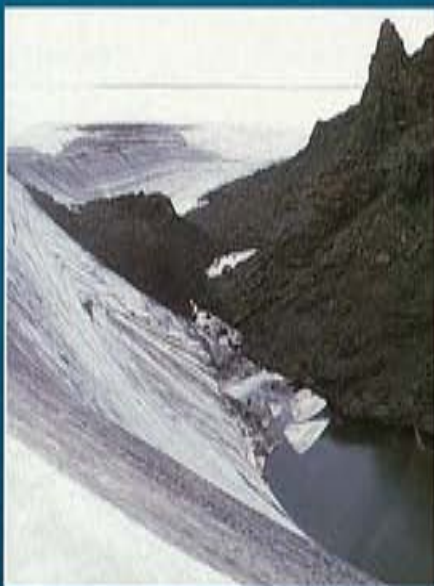
the bone – particularly after my fall into that glacial crack – the first action on reaching the site is to jump into a natural hot spring, this is a great way to relax and get yourself warmed up again.

I ask Hjalte if he doesn't crave some sleep after such a long and arduous day. 'No,' comes the grinned reply. 'We sleep during the winter, when it's too dark to drive.'

Getting there

Iceland is expensive, and car hire pretty prohibitive. It is possible to ship your own car, but it's a six-day sea crossing on an Eimskip ship from Immingham to Reykjavik, so it makes sense to send the car on ahead and fly out in time to meet it. The return ticket for a tourist vehicle of not more than six metres is a hefty £763, plus around £60 for the relevant customs paperwork.

Diesel cars are subject to an additional tax that amounts to about £90 for a two-week visit, but diesel fuel in Iceland is only a third of the price of petrol. There is no tax on



petrol-engined cars. Fly out from London by Icelandair and return tickets will cost around £360 each in the high season.

To drive the Langjökull glacier you'll need to speak in advance to Icebreakers, who like to make up a party of three or four cars. Their guidance and experience comes for around £170.

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