

Iceland trip, July 2014

In July this year, Reg Czudek and I competed in the Laugavegur Ultramarathon, a 55km race across the Southern Highlands of Iceland. This is an annual event which follows the course of a popular trekking route – normally completed in 4 days, travelling between a series of Icelandic mountain huts. Why Iceland? Well, for me, it was a place I'd always wanted to go to – indeed I still had an old guidebook and 2 maps from a planned mountain biking trip over 20 years ago that never quite got off the ground. Also, I wanted to do a challenging event in the year of my 50th birthday – whilst I still could! So, after months of planning and plenty of long Lakes fell runs, suddenly it was Thursday 10th July and time to get up early for my £99 Easy jet flight to Reykjavik. No dramas on the journey to Manchester airport, I arrived 2 hours early for the flight and joined the check in queue. That went fine but then I noticed a very long line stretching the length of Terminal 1 and well out into the car park area – this was to get through the security checks...2 days earlier the rules had changed and now you had to show all items with batteries in etc



The next 2 days involved picking up the race info pack, doing a bit of sight seeing and preparing for the race – the race bus was leaving at 4 30 am on the Saturday morning.

Reg and I met up nervously and clambered aboard. The journey was to take 4 hours. The first 2 were on normal roads and then the convoy of 4 full length coaches (with extra high suspension and extremely large wheels – a bit “monster truck” like) slowly lurched along narrow volcanic sand tracks and crossed through several streams and minor rivers...”There is far more water than usual today because of the recent bad weather, make sure you are wearing your full winter mountain running gear” we were warned. No chance of sleep on this bus ride! Not that I wanted to with some awesome, outlandish scenery to see. The

race organiser informed us that NASA had brought astronauts here for training as the volcanic, lunar style landscape is very “moonlike”.

After a buffet style breakfast stop that worked surprisingly well, we arrived in Landmannalaugar at the starting point. It was raining, quite cold and the track appeared to go rapidly upwards and then disappear into the mist and mountains... our exciting adventure suddenly became very real!! Reg and I were in different start

groups (based on your own estimated finish time). There were 3 groups with about 150 runners in each. At 9:05 I set off in Group 2. There are 4 checkpoints you have to reach within a certain time. The first stage is mostly uphill and the weather had thankfully improved slightly so you could see the impressive landscape...



WOW! WOW! WOW!

I am not very poetic so let's just say a mile or so in the scenery became amazing. Sometimes like being in the Lakes, sometimes similar to Scotland, but at other times like how I imagine it to be on the moon or even another planet. The variety of terrain to look at just kept you going. So although we were almost constantly climbing, the first hour whizzed by. Then we got to the snow...

You could hardly see the person in front of you but thankfully the trail was mostly clearly marked with wooden posts. I passed a sobering memorial to an Israeli hiker who had died from exposure - less than a quarter of a mile from the safety of the mountain hut at Hrafninnusker. The snow was mostly firm underfoot but there were crevasses and boiling volcanic pools emitting volcanic gases, at times just feet from the track. A surreal experience. Then we came to a part where the snow was melting...one foot went ankle deep into icy water, the next nearly up to your waist. Reg said later he met a female competitor who had to retire after losing her balance and falling right over here. For me, that was the scariest part of the whole race. The water was so cold it hurt a lot and I was thankful to clamber onto firmer ground after

what was actually only about a 50m section – luckily. My feet and lower legs were like blocks of ice but they warmed up over the next few minutes. “Just keep moving”, I told myself.

I reached the first checkpoint a few minutes later and drank Powerade and ate banana pieces before continuing. The course maintained a high level – but went relentlessly up and down over a mixture of rock, snow and volcanic sand – until about the 18km point. I still felt good, being careful not to run too fast. I was also stopping briefly to take photos, sometimes asking fellow runners or hikers to take one of me. This all helped me conserve energy – I knew it would be a long day!

Suddenly we reached the Jokultungur descent, where we finished the high mountain section and entered a “Lord of the Rings” type of landscape.



I was elated by the change, knowing the hardest part was now completed. I sped down to the valley below – a 1200ft typical fell race style descent – where I overtook maybe 20 runners. This part was great, until I realised at the bottom I still wasn't at the halfway point yet. Anyway, although a few people overhauled me, I maintained a good pace to checkpoint 2, by a large lake at Alftavatn. I was well ahead of schedule for my estimated target time of 7:29 and the outstanding scenery was inspiring me to run well. No injuries or particular problems yet.

I knew that from the 2nd to the 3rd checkpoint at Emstrua was largely flat, undulating at times, but it was to be broken up by reaching the “special needs” drop zone and my bag. This I did after wading across one of the deepest rivers. I ate some pringles, drank Lucozade and decided against changing my drenched socks. What was the point with another 2 more rivers to cross? I set off again. As expected I began to struggle a bit on these flatter sections. I was running slower now and was losing places. Nevertheless, I reached checkpoint 3 feeling confident and happy that I would now definitely finish. This time there were pieces of chocolate bars available too – snickers and bounty types. I stretched my muscles and prepared for the next part.



This was interesting, involving a clamber down to a deep gorge (with a rope to help) and then after more minor hills we came to the final deep river crossing over the Thronga. I had been a bit concerned about this final obstacle – but as it happened a rope stretched across meant you just had to take your time and keep your balance.



(Like most competitors I didn't bother with the "plastic waders" shown in the photo).

Now, I was at Checkpoint 4. Just 5km to go!!!

Under normal circumstances this would have been very easy – a mostly downhill track through natural Icelandic forest – with loads of support from Icelandic day trippers (the finish at Pormosk is the most accessible part of the whole route). Indeed, just after the River Thronga crossing we climbed the last hill – with great views of the Eyjaffjallajokull volcano that caused so much trouble for air travel in 2010.

It's there in the background (sorry about the quality – taken on my cheap phone as my camera decided not to work!)

Luckily the volcano decided to behave today! However, by now my legs had seized up and my left knee was sore. So I was hobbling rather than running... But soon I turned a corner and there was the finish! A fairly low key affair - this race still has a "local" feel to it despite attracting runners from 27 different countries. Not really anything like the razzamatazz of Ironman France – the last time I did a race abroad. The finishers medal is rather understated too – I was hoping for a really big one to display on the wall at home!! But seriously, this was a fantastic race – very friendly with a bit of everything. I reckon quite a few Toddies would enjoy it.

After finishing, there were hot showers, a decent meal and a natural hot tub laid on. Then it was back on the bus for 3 hours to Reykjavik. This was via a different route that went across the Southern flatlands in Iceland (apparently this part was all under

the sea until the last mini Ice Age). Quite unlike the volcanic, mountainous landscape of the rest of Iceland.

I wondered about Reg. He had been really unlucky – he ran out of time on the way to Checkpoint 3. He was “retired” from the race after over 7 hours of running and bundled into a land rover. With less than 17km to go to the finish – he would have undoubtedly made it had he been allowed to continue. Reg was very philosophical about it – he said he understood that the organisers had to have a cut off for safety reasons – competitors and marshals alike. Typical of this race they provided all those who didn’t reach the finish with a free meal and drinks at a café on the way back to Reykjavik. Reg and I met up again the next day for beer and to watch the World Cup Final on a big screen in Reykjavik town square!

Iceland is thought of as an “expensive” country but Reg and I found it to be okay. Indeed similar to Switzerland that I’ve just come back from. The next day we had a few beers (only about London prices - £5 a pint) and then went on the Golden Circle Tour – we saw a fantastic waterfall even if the main geyser at Strokur was being temperamental. The Blue Lagoon was amazing too!

I really enjoyed this trip. I am considering going back next year. This time I was there for 6 days but you can get a flight from Thursday to return on the Sunday. Reg was a great companion and I believe he is thinking of going back too. Iceland is well worth a visit and this race is unique.



Simon G.