Less than twenty years ago, the land surrounding Skjálfand National Park was considered the outback of Iceland, the most isolated coastal region in the country. This southeast portion of Iceland was cut off from the populated west by a huge and unpredictable glacial river and flood plain, caused by Skeidararjökull glacier. The formidable Vatnajökull glacial ice cap, by far the largest in all of Europe, created another virtually uncrossable barrier. It is no wonder that this portion of the country was among the last to become inhabited.

Before the completion of the kilometer-long Skeidara Bridge in 1974, Skjálfand National Park was rarely visited by tourists. Motorists had to make a huge arc, driving from Reykjavik around three-fourths of the country to approach the area from the east. Today, with this last leg of the Ring Route complete, the trip is only 284 miles.

Skjálfand National Park is nestled between three young glaciers, Skeidararjökull, Morsárjökull and Skjálfandajökull, which are thought to have been formed about 2,500 years ago. In 1967, it became Iceland’s second national park (Thingvellir being the first). In 1984, it was expanded to 618-square miles. The hiking paths do not extend into the newly acquired region, but visitors are not deprived. Well-marked trails lead you to especially scenic spots, and offer a look at a diverse array of geology, flora and birdlife.
Hiking in the Park

Hikes in the park range from simple one-hour walks to more strenuous full-day treks. Maps of the area can be purchased at bookstores in Reykjavik or any Icelandic tourist center. The trails are clearly marked and can be navigated without a topographical map. Trail-blazing, however, is strictly forbidden because of the fragility of the land. Don’t expect the well-groomed paths and guard rails so prominent in American parks. You can wear sneakers, but hiking boots are recommended.

The simplest hike in Skjálfand National Park is a circle route to Svartifoss, “the Black Waterfall.” Water cascades down an exquisite horseshoe-shaped cliff made up of huge hexagonal black basalt columns. The route takes about an hour to navigate from start to finish.

Another hour from Svartifoss, and you can reach Ólafsvik lookout in the east. From here, you will see Skjálfandfelljökull glacier below you, the 6152-foot Hrútshell peak dominating the background and the ragged peaks of Kristinartindar to the north. If you time your hike correctly, you'll enjoy watching the warm angled light of sunset illuminate the scene before you. The western trail from Svartifoss offers a vastly different experience. It takes over eight hours
and climbs almost 2000 feet to a ridge at the base of Kristinartindar. At the first major lookout you look down into the vast Morsá River and sand valley, which originates at Morsárjökull glacier, visible to the north. Beyond this spectacular valley are the colorful Skálafell mountains and Skeidararárjökull.

To see the Morsá river valley up close, you can take a six-hour trail from camp that traces the edge of Skálafellsheidi (the east side of Morsá) all the way to a glacial lagoon at the tip of Morsárjökull. Another simple trail to traverse will take you to the foot of Skálafell glacier. Here you can climb on the edge of the glacier, for an up-close look at this geological marvel. The path, however, is not usually traversable in the spring, when the glacial river obliterates the trail.

About 30 miles from Skálafell National Park is another glacial experience you won’t want to miss—the ever-changing glacial lagoon, Jökulsárlón. Filling this lagoon are sculptured icebergs, some stratified with black volcanic ash, others crystal blue. They are formed when the lake water lifts the tongue of the glacier, breaking off huge chunks of ice.

**Bonuses Enroute**

Once you’ve set your mind to visit Skálafell National Park, you’ll be happy to learn about a few “bonuses” along the 284-mile route to and from Reykjavík. When you pass the small town of Vik, for example, be sure to stop and walk down to the ocean. You’ll be treated to black sand beach with huge “needle” rock outcroppings.
not far from shore, and bird cliffs that are at times filled with thousands of nesting fulmars and puffins. Between Vik and Skálfadal National Park you will find Núpsstadur, a handsome farm that houses a 17th Century chapel protected by the National Museum. Skógafoss is also an exceptional stopping point. It is quite exhilarating to walk up to the base of this 200-foot waterfall, and well worth getting soaked from the spray of the water.

When visiting Skálfadal National Park, you should plan on spending at least the greater part of one day hiking, although three days are needed to exhaust all the trails. Campgrounds are open in the summer, but available by permission during most times of the year. Nearby youth hostels are only open in the summer, and some nearby farm-stays are available. Hotels can be found 16 miles east in Höfn.

Almost every visitor to Skálfadal arrives during the height of the tourist season, in July and August. Even then, at its most crowded period, the park seems empty by U.S. standards. Autumn, however, is my favorite time of year to visit the park, when the park is literally empty. It is a shame that the fall is ignored by tourists, because it is at this time that the park is at its most beautiful. The abundance of birch trees is crimson red, and the plant life on the higher tundra-like areas ranges from yellow to orange to red.

Regardless of when you visit Iceland, Skálfadal National Park should be an important part of your itinerary.

J.B. Bidner is a freelance travel writer and photographer.

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