

# PLATEAU

Words & Photo: Neil Irwin // Location: Iceland

**T**he Icelandic plateau was exactly that: not just geographically, but also mentally and physically. Nothing changed for days. Andy, Ben, and I spent that time in a trance, mostly keeping ourselves to ourselves, following each other one by one. Heads down, faces turned away from the savage wind's onslaught, trudging ever onwards through shifting sand, ash, and stone. False summit after false summit beckoned, gnawing at our resolve. It was a beautiful, yet mind-numbing landscape: we might have been the only people in this desolate place with any understanding of how it was made, yet even to us it felt infinite, sloughing on and on, every step onerous. It was not the most exciting 200km of our traverse of Iceland, north to south, but was an experience we all had to endure to reach our destination. It was certainly not one I was mentally prepared for.

The ever-shifting ground – sometimes firm, sometimes not – was tedious, even annoying. This monochrome sludge, as we came to call it, was a combination of ash, silt, sand, and stone. When moist or wet from snowmelt, it would easily turn into quicksand, devouring us to our shins and sapping precious energy from our calorie-deprived bodies. We had to completely avoid some sections, as traversing them would have been so time and energy consuming. Besides, no-one likes getting wet feet.

The unpredictable nature of the weather saw us encounter all four seasons within moments of each other. Sometimes they even combined. Clouds would rush by with snow, sleet, and hail fronts intertwined, bitterly cold and wet, and before we knew it we'd be caught out and engulfed. We'd rush to put on jackets only to find, minutes later, the clouds parting to reveal glorious sunshine, and these delays became in themselves laborious – having to continually mount and dismount our hefty packs. The days merged, blurring into one endless cycle of capricious weather, yet on we pushed.

Human necessities presented their own challenges. Here we were, in a country with plentiful reserves of water in myriad forms – snow, rain, rivers, waterfalls – but finding drinking water on this barren, wind-torn plateau of sand and ash was gruelling, often hopeless. In certain areas there simply wasn't any at all. Our last resort was to melt the rapidly vanishing snow. I dread to think what we would have done had we decided to attempt this journey later in the season.

Weather and geography combined to paint a tedious, monochrome world. There were no animals, no vegetation. If this felt like an alien landscape, here we were the interlopers, the unwelcome strangers. We did not belong here, yet we had chosen to be. Just ourselves, our lonely footprints, and our quiet thoughts. We often considered the challenges that still lay ahead, then dreamt instead of the foods we were sorely missing. Nine protracted, arduous days – by no means the longest trek in the world – but hunger had a way of turning our minds to all those things we just couldn't have. It became a driver too, urging us onwards, strengthening our determination through this arduous place.

@neil\_irwin



A SINGLE MOMENT