



Skaftafell



Welcome to Skaftafell

For centuries, Skaftafell has been a welcoming refuge for visitors in the Öraefi district. Despite being isolated by unbridged rivers until 1974, it has long been a staging post where travellers can enjoy the hospitality and helpfulness of the locals.

In the early 1960's, with a considerable assistance from the WWF, the Icelandic government bought the Skaftafell farm estate and established a national park in 1967. Ever since, visitor numbers in Skaftafell have risen and services increased.

Skaftafell Visitor Centre is open all year round (exceptions may apply during Christmas – visit park website for details). Adjacent to the visitor centre are a campground and a cafeteria both of which are open all year round. In summer, scheduled ranger programs are also on offer, discussing everything from the birds and the bees to the pressing issue of climate change.

Visitors can enjoy and experience Skaftafell in various ways. The majority chooses hiking, utilizing a network of trails, which vary in length and difficulty level. Others study plants, take photographs, or just bask in the sun, listening to the birds. Most important is that everyone can enjoy the park and themselves, in harmony with nature and other visitors.

Enjoy your stay!



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Landscape and geomorphology

The scenery around Skaftafell is full of stark contrasts. The numerous glacial tongues are flanked by jagged mountains, with the glacier-topped peak of Hvannadalshnjúkur rising highest. Evidence of the erosive forces exerted by glacial ice and rivers are abundant. From the time of the first sagas, this ice has variously advanced or retreated, reaching farthest around 1890, since when it has retreated.

Glacial rivers have flowed back and forth over the lowlands, depositing the material that forms the wide sands of Skeiðarársandur. The Ring Road (1) did not become a complete circle around Iceland until 1974, when the last of the rivers barring transportation, the Skeiðará, was finally bridged.

The Skaftafell vicinity has experienced considerable volcanic activity. The 1362 Öræfajökull eruption produced the most ash of any Icelandic volcano since the settlement and another, smaller Öræfajökull eruption occurred in 1727. As shown once again in 2011, the subglacial volcano Grímsvötn is the country's most active volcano. It is also known for the huge *jökulhlaups* or glacial outburst floods that originate from it.



Birch – Betula pubescens

Plants and wildlife

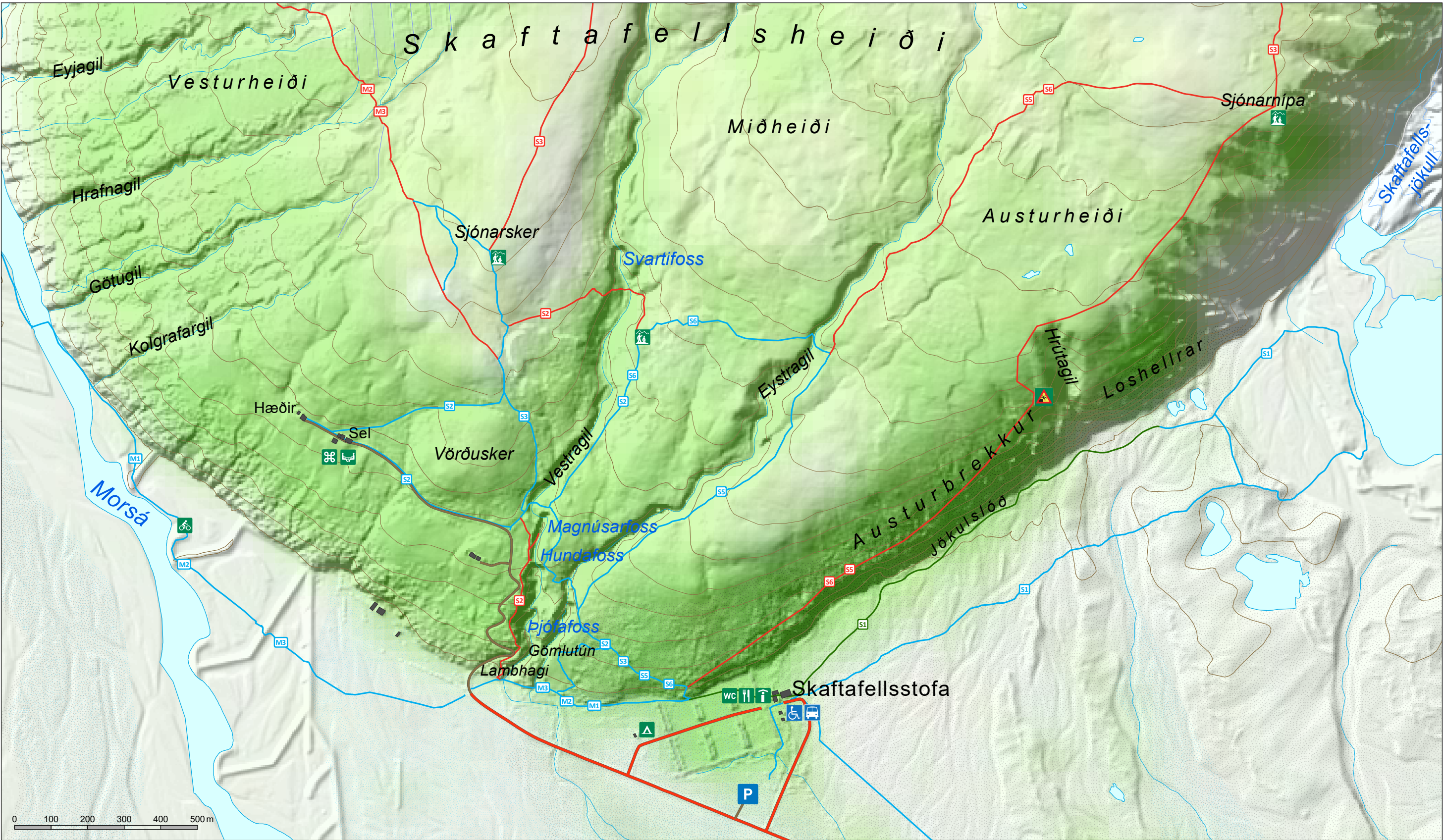
Compared to many south coast areas, Skaftafell has a mild, pleasant climate, often benefiting from the towering shelter of Öræfajökull. Birch trees and occasional rowans cover the rich undergrowth of the lower slopes and the birch trees in Bæjarstaðarskógur grow higher than most other native birch. Several flowering plants distinctive to East Iceland are common here: the harebell, yellow saxifrage, and pyramidal saxifrage.

Since sheep grazing stopped at Skaftafell, the vegetation has undergone great changes and is quickly making inroads on the glacial deposits in front of Skaftafellsjökull and in Morsárdalur valley. Species such as garden angelica, wild angelica, sea pea and arctic river beauty, are hardly ever found on grazing land, but have now become common. Birch and willows are also starting to colonise land.

Down in the Skaftafell woods, the redwing, redpoll, and wren are common, while the snipe, ptarmigan, golden plover and meadow pipit, appear more frequently higher up the slopes. Other birds seen frequently include the raven, merlin, wheatear, and snow bunting. Although the sole wild mammals are the Arctic fox, mink and field mouse, the local insect fauna is considered diverse compared to most of Iceland.



Arctic fox – Vulpes lagopus



History of habitation

Soon after Iceland was settled, Skaftafell became a major farm, and area meetings (þing) were held on its land. The disastrous Öræfajökull eruption of 1362 wiped out the entire local community and the district has been named Öraefi, the “wasteland”, ever since. Skaftafell and many other farms were soon re-established, but at that time the climate was also starting to cool down, making it increasingly difficult to live from farming. The frequent Grímsvötn eruptions triggered jökulhlaups which flooded over hayfields, covering them with ash and sand. In 1988, traditional farming was discontinued at Skaftafell.

In earlier times, however, the farmers had supplemented sheep farming by trips to the coast, where they hunted seals and collected eggs. Stranded ships provided excellent

material for making various items, and some of the Skaftafell farmers became well known for their crafting talents.

In earlier centuries, the farmstead stood just below the slopes, where some of the ruins still remain visible at Gömlutún. Skeiðará river began flowing closer to the farm and destroyed the fields, until in the early 19th century when the farm was moved onto the mountain slopes and divided into three households. One of them, Sel, was abandoned in 1946 but has since been restored by the National Museum and made accessible for visitors.

Wren – Troglodytes troglodytes



Camping and park regulations

- We do not remove or reposition rocks, plants, or anything else belonging to nature.
- We do not build cairns (rock piles) or disrupt cultural remains.
- We avoid disturbing wildlife.
- Drones are generally prohibited in Skaftafell. For more information, visit www.vjp.is/en, speak with park rangers, or inquire visitor centre.
- Hikers should stay on the marked paths.
- Dogs must be on a leash. Dogs and other pets must always be under full control of their owners.
- Show courtesy and respect to other guests at all times. Consumption of alcohol must be moderate. Quiet hours at park campgrounds are from 23:00 to 07:00.
- Keep the campground and its surroundings clean, putting waste into the appropriate containers, sorted wherever requested.
- Be careful not to cause any risk of fire or damage to vegetation through the careless use of barbecues or other cooking appliances, or to damage plants by pouring hot or dirty water on them.
- Open fires are prohibited in the Skaftafell area.

In emergency call 112

Hiking trails

There are many hiking trails in the area (see map), both marked and unmarked, long and short. The trails are graded and colour-coded for difficulty:

- **BLUE: Easy**

For the most part good trails with a smooth surface, without any significant obstructions or difficulties.
- **RED: Challenging**

Routes and trails which may include lengthy rough, difficult sections, and obstructions such as unbridged brooks or small rivers, loose gravel, steep sections, and so forth.
- **BLACK: Difficult**

Routes and trails involving obstacles and difficulties, such as sizeable unbridged rivers, steep slopes and cliff barriers, which may prove hazardous to the inexperienced or in poor conditions.
- **GREEN: For those with limited mobility**

These trails are over 75 cm in width and have paving, wooden platforms or compacted gravel, so that there is no loose gravel lying on the surface.

Skaftafell Trails

- **S1 Geology trail to Skaftafellsjökull outlet glacier** ↔ 4.1 km. Visitor Centre – Skaftafellsjökull – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: glacial features such as end moraines and kettle holes, rock formations, vegetation. The Visitor Centre has a special booklet on the geology of this trail.
- **S2 Svartifoss – Sjónársker – Sel loop.** ↔ 5.8 km. Visitor Centre – Svartifoss – Sjónársker – Sel – Lambhagi – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: vegetation, waterfalls, columnar basalt, excellent view from Sjónársker (sjón means view), cultural relics.
- **S3 Skaftafellsheiði loop** ↔ 16.6 km. Visitor Centre – Sjónársker – Skerhóli – Gempludalur – Gláma – Sjóarnnipa – Austurbrekkur – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: varied landscape, vegetation, view.
- **S4 Kristínartindar 1.4 km + S3.** Gempludalur – Kristínartindar – Gláma.
Points of interest: varied landscape, vegetation, broad view.
- **S5 Sjóarnnipa** ↔ 6.5 km. Visitor Centre – along Eystragil – Sjóarnnipa – Austurbrekkur – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: good view over the glacier tongue (sjón means view), diverse vegetation, birds.
- **S6 Svartifoss/Sjóarnnipa** ↔ 7.1 km. Visitor Centre – Svartifoss – Sjóarnnipa – Austurbrekkur – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: waterfalls, vegetation, birds, view over the outlet glacier.
- **M1 Bæjarstaðarskógur loop** ↔ 15.3 km. Visitor Centre – former river bed of Skeiðará – Bæjarstaðarskógur – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: dry river bed of Skeiðará, plant succession on gravel flats, proliferating lupins, Bæjarstaðarskógur woods.
- **M2 Morsárjökull 19.5 km.** Visitor Centre – Vesturheiði – Morsárjökull – Götugil – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: landscape in front of outlet glacier, glacial lake, rockfall debris on the glacier.
- **M3 Kjós 30 km.** Visitor Centre – Vesturheiði – Kjós – Bæjarstaðarskógur – Götugil – Visitor Centre.
Points of interest: colourful rhyolite screes, basalt columns, volcanic dykes.