

## **Laugevagurinn 2004** **from Andy Shaw**

In 1997 I visited Iceland for the first time. Whilst there I walked from Landmannalaugur to Þorsmork, a distance of about 55km. The route climbs gradually from the hot springs and multi-coloured mountains of Landmannalaugur before descending past lakes, across a desert and finally to the wooded valley around Þorsmork. Unless you stop at the mountain huts along the way the only option is camping and all food for the walk must be carried, there is nothing along the way. The walk is normally completed in three to four days and with scenery so spectacular there is no desire to hurry. Several years later whilst in Iceland again I learnt that there is an annual race over the course in mid July - the Laugevagurinn. One day, I decided, I would return and give it a go.

2003 was to have been the year but a number of injuries over the winter and spring meant that it wasn't to be so 2004 it was. A 9.00 a.m. start meant either a bus ride from Reykjavik at 4.30 a.m. or the option of spending the night in a hut about 40 minutes from the start and getting up at a more sensible hour. I chose the latter. After a pasta meal, look around and a photo or two of the nearby volcano Hekla it was off to bed.

The next morning was still and clear and at 7.00 a.m. quite cool. It soon became clear that the 40 minutes ride to the start was a bit optimistic. Our bus was fine on surfaced roads but on the un-surfaced ones that cover most of the interior of the country it was not really up to it. Progress was very slow and we eventually arrived in Landmannalaugur with about 15 minutes to spare. A quick change of clothes, visit to the toilet and a bit of food and drink and I was just about ready. We joined the others who had set off from Reykjavik that morning on the start line and after a short wait were off.

Within a few metres we were single file over a narrow bridge then climbing up around the lava. There were a number of people in front of me but at this stage it was impossible to overtake. As the path levelled off and the going became easier I got past most of the others and settled into second place about 100m behind the leader. He had set a tremendous pace over the good ground; surely he couldn't keep it up. He couldn't, on the short descents or over more difficult ground he slowed allowing me to catch him. Over the next few minutes we were close together as I would get away in places and when the path improved he would catch me.

The route continues to climb up towards the first checkpoint and drinks station at Hrafninnusker at a height of just over 1100m. This is the highest part of the course and there was still some snow and ice left, the snow bridges making crossing the deep gullies easier. By now I had a good lead and was going well up the final climb to the summit just before the checkpoint. Here the path is black sand studded with mounds of lava and glistening black chunks of obsidian. As I reached the summit I saw the hut below and the first checkpoint. There were some people there but none of the expected drinks. I carried on down the steep descent, trying to make the most of my advantage.

The following section consists of a number of short climbs and descents as the route crossed numerous small streams. Whilst this section has a net descent of some 500m I was certainly starting to feel the climbs. The weather was now quite warm and my supply of water was beginning to get low. The freshwater streams are all drinkable and I used these to wash down the odd jelly baby. Several kilometres after the checkpoint the route climbs onto the Jökultungur ridge. I took a look back: no one in sight but I didn't stop long to look. The view from the ridge down to the next checkpoint at Álftavatn is for many the highlight of the route. I have a couple of pictures from the last time I was here on the walls at home but no pictures or words can describe the view over the ridge, you simply have to see it for yourself.

The path now dropped steeply into the valley bottom and I made good time, receiving words of encouragement from those walking along the route. Along the valley bottom the going was good with a few small streams to cross. Part way along the path I passed a small green painted sign informing me that it was 2.3km to Álftavatn. Why had someone decided that at that particular point it was necessary to inform those passing of this fact? It was the only such sign I saw on the whole run.

Shortly after this I noticed a man approaching on the path carrying an aluminium ladder. He swung the ladder to one side to allow me past and wished me luck. I knew I had done about 20 pretty tough kilometres up to that point but I hadn't yet lost it completely. The nearest vehicle access was 2.3 km away, the sign had just told me, so this man must have carried it at least that far, why? Just what in a flat valley bottom was he going to lean it against? I carried on rather bemused to say the least.

At the drinks station at Álftavatn I took half a banana, a cup of water and another of the electrolyte drink, which the staff also filled my bottle with. Now I have long held the belief that nothing we eat or drink should be blue, not even blueberries are really blue, (remember I was brought up in an era before blue Smarties) but I was thirsty and it tasted OK.

It was just after here that I made my biggest navigational mistake of the race. The marker posts followed a down a stream but the path climbed up onto a ridge. I started to follow the markers but soon realised that the stream bed wasn't the correct way. Cursing myself for being so stupid I climbed up to the path and continued, pushing myself a little harder to try and make up some time. The halfway point was reached just after this and a large group of people were gathered. It was here that I would pick up the remainder of my jelly babies that I had left in Reykjavik to be brought here. However there was no sign of them or the drink station I was hoping for. I had beaten the bus to this point. I did receive plenty of encouragement from the crowd there – "Come on my son", someone had read the England t-shirt I was wearing under my Holmfirth vest.

The next, and longest section of the race is a flat run through a desert of black sand punctuated by occasional streams of glacial melt water. The majority of these were bridged, though a knee-deep wade through one was refreshing to say the least. After what seemed an eternity trudging through the dry sand I took one last look back before the path turned. I couldn't see anyone but the next runner was wearing a black top, how could I hope to see him against the sand ?

The next checkpoint was at the hut at Botnar where more drinks were expected. Again there was no one there and I carried on past the tiny oasis of grass where I had pitched my tent 7 years earlier. I was very thirsty now, there had been no streams that were drinkable over the last 16km section and my bottle was nearly empty. A short undulating section passed several streams where I was able to get some water. I made another slight mistake as I continued along a ridge for too long, leaving the path at the base of a low crag. Again I cursed as I looked for a safe place to regain the path, more time lost. I continued to weave my way around chunks of lava and behind one was greeted by a woman with chocolate covered raisins and a malt drink that seems to be sold almost everywhere in Iceland - heaven. The final climb was a short and steep one 5km from the end. I could see someone on the top, how I wished I were already there instead of toiling up at the bottom. On the top of the ridge the land started to change. Gone were the barren volcanic landscapes and there was some vegetation in the form of dwarf birch. No more than a fraction of an inch high at this point but a definite sign that the end was not too far away. The final major obstacle is the river Prongá. Here there were people to help you and a rope strung across to hold onto. It's little more than knee deep but quite wide, fast flowing and very cold. At the other side I was told there were just 3km to go. The path now made its way between birch trees, gently undulating, though any incline reduced me to a walk. I tried to think what the course record was. I had been running for 4.26 with 3km to go and was convinced that the course record was 4.31. There was no way I could cover that last 3km in five minutes, no-one could, never mind. I tried my best to keep running as much as possible but I was hungry, dehydrated and tired. Words of encouragement from the many people over the final section spurred me on, I had to try and look as if I was a runner at least. Finally round one last corner there was the finish, off the path and a final sprint over the grass and I could stop. I clocked 4.40.52; I was soon reminded that the record was 4.39.21. If only. Still, I had won and it was too late to regret what might or could have been but for a couple of minor errors. The bus with my clothes had yet to arrive so I was given a sweatshirt and soup, toasted sandwich and coke from the café. The second runner arrived 13 minutes later; it was his best time on his eighth attempt at the race. In time the bus arrived along with the finish banner and the barbecue. Iceland may not cater well for vegetarians but for us meat eaters the lamb is superb. As the later runners arrived so did the rain and the presentation was held indoors.

Of the 93 finishers 10 were from the UK, of these, Louise Burt the ladies' winner from Fife AC ran 6.03.09 the second fastest time ever. At about 8pm the busses set off on the return journey to Reykjavik. It was then that you could begin to appreciate just why there were problems getting drinks etc. to some of the checkpoints. This was only the second time that I had ever witnessed a round of applause for a bus driver (for safely negotiating a particularly tricky river crossing), the first a few months ago at home when the driver kicked (literally) a drunk off the bus.

For the record these are the GB runners who completed the race this year, full results on [www.marathon.is](http://www.marathon.is) (there is an English version):

1	Andy Shaw	4.40.52
11	Armin Wellig	5.47.59
13	Bruce Hall	5.55.18
14	John Donnelly	5.58.34
18	Louise Burt	6.03.09
27	Paul Scullion	6.25.16
48	Garry Smith	7.01.42
56	Paul Eastwood	7.20.24
74	Brian Layton	7.49.45
89	Brenda Collingborn	8.49.50

And the ladder ? To bridge a stream apparently.