



Environment and Food Agency



JÖKULSÁRGLJÚFUR NATIONAL PARK



Dear Visitor

The park is open to all, but please stay on marked footpaths. Off-road driving is prohibited. Cycling is permitted on roads and gravel paths in Ásbyrgi and at Hljóðaklettar. Horse riding is permitted on marked riding paths. Camping is only allowed at designated campsites. It is forbidden to loosen or remove rocks, break off branches, dig up plants or disturb the wildlife. Open fires are not permitted. All rubbish should be removed or put into disposal bins and visitors are encouraged to sort the rubbish they leave behind. Please be considerate to other visitors by keeping the campsite tidy and by avoiding noise between 23:00 and 07:00.

Enjoy your stay.

Jökulsárgljúfur National Park
671 Kópasker
Website: www.ust.is

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The National Park and Conservation

The Jökulsárgljúfur National Park was created in 1973. Located on the west bank of the glacial river Jökulsá á Fjöllum, the National Park extends 30 km northwards from the Dettifoss waterfall to trunk road no. 85, covering 120 sq. kilometres. The Jökulsárgljúfur National Park is publicly owned. It was created to protect the canyon formed by the immense Jökulsá á Fjöllum glacial river and to help safeguard the surrounding area, its wildlife and history. The National Park is under the authority of the Environment and Food Agency. In 1996 the area around Dettifoss, Selfoss and Hafragilsfoss on the east bank of the river was declared a national monument. The area is privately owned but is supervised by the Environment and Food Agency.

Topography

Jökulsá á Fjöllum rises beneath the Vatnajökull icecap and enters the sea at Öxarfjörður bay. From its source the river flows across a high plateau dotted with isolated palagonite peaks and scarred with lava flows. At the edge of the highlands the land drops and the river becomes more turbulent and forms several huge waterfalls, tumbling into the canyon which bears its name. The Jökulsárgljúfur canyon is one of the largest and most impressive river canyons in Iceland. It is 25 km long, 1/2 km wide and in many places more than 100 metres deep.

The upper part of the canyon, from Dettifoss to Syðra-Þórunnarfjall, is the deepest and most spectacular section, up to 120 metres in depth. Dettifoss is often considered the most powerful waterfall in Europe and is 45 metres high and 100 metres wide. Just downstream is the 27 metre high Hafragilsfoss, named after the Hafragil gorge which enters the canyon from the west. Upstream from Dettifoss is Selfoss, only 10 metres high but much wider than the other waterfalls. This series of cataracts forms a spectacle unrivalled in Europe. At Hafragil the river has



cut through a crater row named Randarhólar so that a cross section of the feeder dyke is exposed to the cliff wall; many emerging springs cascade into the river here.

The central part of the canyon is more like a valley than a canyon. Forvöð, on the east side, and Hólmatungur, on the west side, are areas with luxuriant vegetation and many spring-fed streams and rivers, of which Hólmá, Stallá and Melbugsa are the biggest. Vígabjarg is an impressive rock. The nearby Vígabjargssfoss was once among the most spectacular waterfalls on the river but it virtually disappeared around 1950 when the river changed its course. Slightly upstream is the Réttarfoss waterfall. By Svínadalur the valley widens into a broad flood plain of immense variety, characterised by erosion basins. Farthest north is the valley of Vesturdalur, with its sheer walls and grassy meadows. The area is dotted with small lakes and has a rich vegetation. Here the river is flanked by a series of cliffs and rock pillars, the core of an old row of craters, with all loose materials having been eroded by Jökulsá. The northernmost part of the series is Hljóðaklettar, a maze of castle-like cliffs with many caves of varying sizes. South of there, Karl and Kerling, a pair of petrified trolls, stand on a gravel bank by the river.



The Rauðhólar formations are an extension of those of Hljóðaklettar to the north, and there visitors can see the remains of the old crater row. Across the river lies the forest of Hallhöðaskógur, noted for its vegetation. Slightly further downstream the river enters a canyon again and continues to the farm of Ás, a distance of 9 km. This stretch of the canyon is narrower and not as deep as the upper canyon; many terraces and hollows along the river display a rich vegetation, especially those on the east side, at Landsbjörg. On the west bank there is Ásheiði, an area overgrown with scrub and indented in the north by Ásbyrgi, a huge depression ringed by cliff walls. It is some 3.5 km long, a little over 1 km wide and about 100 metres deep at the southern end. At Kvíar, dry river channels connecting Ásbyrgi with the

canyon are clearly visible. The farm of Ás is located east of Ásbyrgi; the nearby Ástjörn is an attractive small lake in a rock hollow from where a gully runs to the river canyon near Áshöfði.

Geology

Jökulsárgljúfur is located in the palagonite belt of northern Iceland, in one of the most volcanically active areas in the country. The surrounding area is geologically recent, with the oldest surface strata dating from the last interglacial, grey basalt lavas, which flowed from shield volcanoes such as Grjótháls. Isolated palagonite mountains, such as Eilífur (689 metres), in the southwest corner of the National Park, were formed by subglacial eruptions during the last Ice Age. At the end of the last Ice Age Öxarfjörður bay was probably a good deal longer than it is now, with Jökulsá flowing into it through a valley still blocked by ice in the upper part. A lava advance from a large-scale eruption in Þeistareykjabunga to the west dammed up the lower part of the valley, diverting the river eastwards.

Several thousand years later, eruptions took place in the valley bottom where Rauðhólar and Hljóðaklettar are now, and Randarhólar erupted roughly at the same time. Lava, coming from both crater rows, partly filled up the river canyon as it was then. Traces of these lava fields are visible today, however, as vertical cliff formations and rock pillars, often made up of columnar basalt and showing peculiar erosion effects, so called honeycomb weathering.

The wholesale removal of bedrock was probably caused by catastrophic floods that left imprints along the river all the way south to their source in Vatnajökull. Some of the floods went due north and created the depression now known as Ásbyrgi. Subsequent floods of lesser magnitude, occurring in historical times, have left their marks on the lowlands downstream from the canyon.



A wide range of plants grow in the shelter afforded by the rocks and cliffs in the National Park and approximately 230 species of vascular plants have been recorded. Brushwood and heath are characteristic of the lower section of the canyon. The largest woodlands are those of Ásbyrgi and Áshöfði, but there are other beautiful wooded areas. The main species are birch (*Betula pubescens*), and willow (*Salix phylicifolia*, *S. lanata*) and they become unusually high by Icelandic standards. Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) is common in cliffs and scree slopes, especially in Ásbyrgi. Between 1947 and 1977 several species of non-native conifers were planted in Ásbyrgi. They were planted in clusters or scattered amongst birch trees and some of these have grown to a considerable height. The forest in Ásbyrgi belongs to the Icelandic Forestry Commission and the forest is farmed.



The heathlands are covered with common species of heather as well as willows and dwarf birch (*Betula nana*). Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) and juniper (*Juniperus communis*) often grow on hummocks thus giving the heathland a greener colour in winter. The beaked sedge (*Carex rostrata*) is the dominant species in wet bogs and often forms reed beds around water. Sheltered hollows and slopes display a great variety of flowering plants, with wood cranesbill (*Geranium sylvaticum*) and meadow buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*) being most noticeable. Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*) grows in clusters around springs. Ferns and clubmosses are not widespread, with the exception of the brittle bladder fern (*Cystopteris fragilis*). Two species mark the boundary of the

East Iceland flora: harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), present in Vesturdalur, and a species of lady's mantle (*Alchemilla faeroensis*) in Ásbyrgi. In the late summer the woods are often full of mushrooms, especially the edible *Boletus scaber*, and among other species to be found is the poisonous fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*).

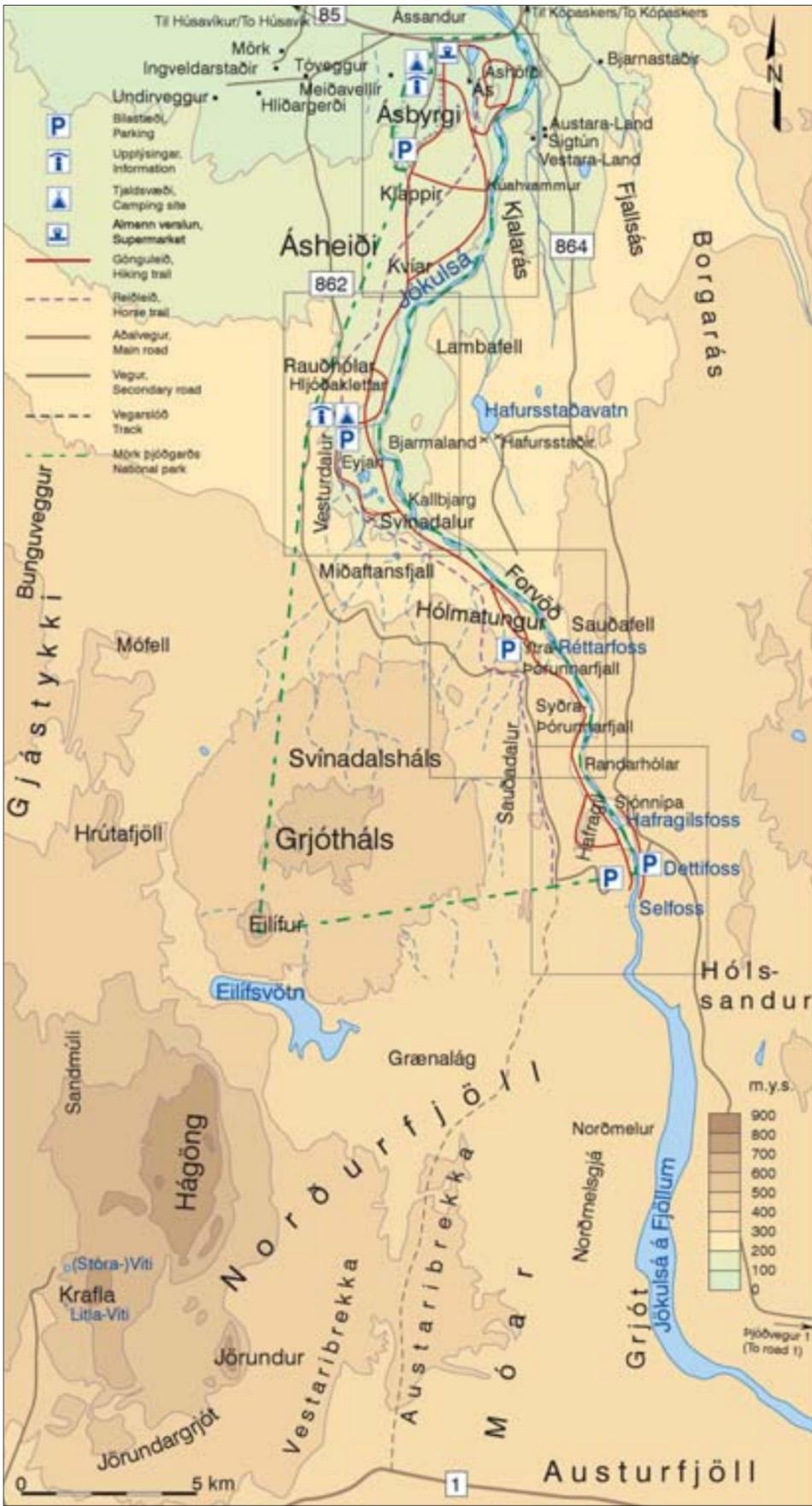
In the upper section of the canyon there are eroded gravel beds and sand carved lava formations. The earth is arid because the average precipitation is only around 400 mm a year.

Fauna

Jökulsárgljúfur provides a range of habitats for birds. In the woods and scrubs Redwings (*Turdus iliacus*) and Redpolls (*Carduelis flammea*) are common. Wrens (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) are common on scree slopes and in well vegetated areas and Snipes (*Gallinago gallinago*) are abundant in the heathlands. Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis apricaria*), Meadow Pipits (*Anthus pratensis*) and Ptarmigans (*Lagopus mutus*) are found on moorlands.

Snow Buntings (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) and Wheatears (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) live in elevated rocky areas. The Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*), Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) and Raven (*Corvus*

corvax) nest on cliffs and rock pillars. The wetland areas are home to Redshank (*Tringa totanus*), Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*), Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*), Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*), Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) and various species of gull are seen in the northern part of the area and the sands by the sea are the only breeding ground in northern Iceland of the Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*). Around 1970 the Fulmar (*Fulmaris glacialis*) began to colonise the cliffs in Ásbyrgi and there is now a substantial Fulmar population in the area. Arctic Foxes (*Alopex lagopus*) are scarce. Mink (*Mustela vison*) began to appear around 1960 and prefer the wetland areas.



History

In past centuries Ás in Kelduhverfi was one of the largest estates in Iceland. It reached from the sea to Dettifoss and west to the district boundary at Bunguveggur. Living at Ás had many advantages such as timber and harvestable meadows in the lowlands. But Jökulsá floods during the 17th and 18th centuries destroyed much of these lowland meadows and the farm never recovered. There was a church at Ás until 1816 and the outlines of the graveyard can still be seen.

Long part of Ás, the farm of Svinadalur appears to have been a "sel" or summer dairy station at one time. Throughout the 19th century and up until 1946 it was an independent farm, but it is now deserted. The remains of structures from various periods are still visible.

Ásbyrgi (Byrgi), another tenancy belonging to Ás, has always been farmed. The poet Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) owned the Ás holdings for a period and wrote some of his greatest poems there. The Icelandic Forestry Commission acquired Ásbyrgi in 1928 and shortly afterwards the innermost section of the canyon was fenced off.

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	 Bílastaður, Parking
	 Útsýrisstaður, Viewpoint
	 Vað, Ford
	 Upplýsingar, Information
	 Tjaldsvæði, Camping site
	 Stuðningsband, Support rope
	 Bensinstöð, Petrol station
	 Verslun, Tourist shop
	 Gönguleið, Hiking trail
	 Reiðleið, Horse trail
	 Vegur, Road
	 Vegarskið, Track

A view of the canyon from the top of Eyjan, the "Island", in Vesturdalur.

There is a large campsite in Ásbyrgi with facilities for tent-trailers and camper-vans. A natural campsite is located in Vesturdalur and is mainly suited for tents. The campsites are open from 1st June to 15th September and during that time service is provided. At Dettifoss, on the west side of the canyon, there is a small campsite for hikers travelling between Jökulsárgljúfur National Park and lake Mývatn.

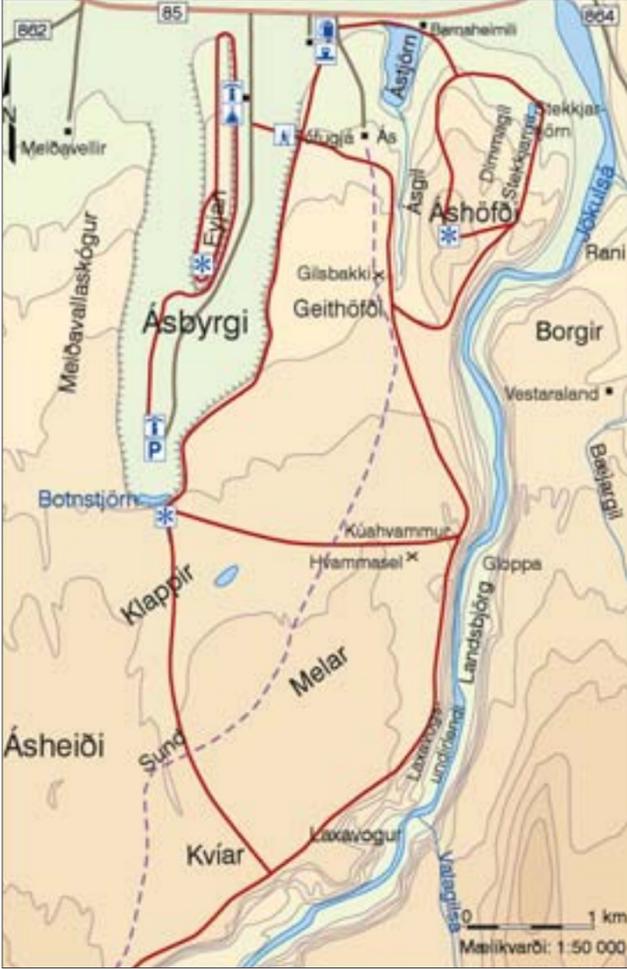
The National Park Manager and park rangers assist visitors and give information about the park, hiking trails, wildlife and history. They organise guided walks and have a special programme for children.

There is a shop and snack bar in Ásbyrgi. The nearest swimming pool is 7 km to the east at Lundur and there are several other places to stay in the surrounding area.

Visiting in winter
The National Park is open throughout the year but the roads become impassable soon after the first snowfall and remain so well into May and June. The use of motor vehicles is only permitted on roads. Please contact the National Park Manager if you plan to visit the park outside the summer service season.

Hiking trails

The only way to fully experience Jökulsárgljúfur National Park is by foot and the park is an ideal hiking area. There are marked trails alongside the edge of the canyon from Ásbyrgi up to Selfoss. Many hikers venture even further, ending at lake Mývatn. Below is a short description of the main marked hiking trails within the park:



Ásbyrgi

There are several easy and interesting routes in the bottom of Ásbyrgi starting at the car park. Visitors can get a booklet containing a description of these routes from the park rangers.

Áshöfði circuit

This route can begin either at the shop at the entrance to Ásbyrgi or at the main campsite. The whole circuit is 11 km and takes about 3 hours. The path takes you first to Tófugjá and up onto the edge of the cliffs surrounding Ásbyrgi. There is a fixed rope to help you at this point. From there the trail heads east to the Jökulsárgljúfur canyon and around the wooded mull Áshöfði, from where there is a spectacular view. Further east is a series of small gorges and ponds and to the west lies the small lake Ástjörn. A children's summer camp has been operated here since 1946. If you start the hike at the shop the circuit is 6 km long and only takes 1-2 hours. The walk begins alongside Ástjörn and then follows the trail around the mull.

Eyjan in Ásbyrgi

The trail upon Eyjan or the "Island" in Ásbyrgi starts at the campsite and heads south. The view from the top over Ásbyrgi and the sands to the north is superb. The hike to the end of Eyjan and back is 5 km and takes 1-2 hours.

Ásbyrgi - the rim of Ásbyrgi - Klappir - Jökulsá - Ásbyrgi
You can start this walk either at the campsite in Ásbyrgi or the shop. It is easier, however, to get to the rim of the gorge by starting from the shop as you avoid the rope-climb up Tófugjá. The trail takes you along the eastern rim of Ásbyrgi as far south as Klappir where the water has carved some amazing shapes into the rock. The view over Ásbyrgi is simply

brehtaking. From Klappir you head east over the moor to Jökulsá and then along the canyon, passing Gilsbakki and Ás until you return to the starting point. This route is 12 km long and takes 3-4 hours.

Hljóðaklettar circuit

Hljóðaklettar (echo rocks) are the remains of ancient volcanoes which have been heavily eroded by the Jökulsá, leaving only the volcanic plugs behind. The trail starts at the car park at Hljóðaklettar and it takes about 1 hour to walk the 2.4 km. Visitors can get a booklet containing a description of this trail from the park rangers.

Hljóðaklettar - Rauðhólar

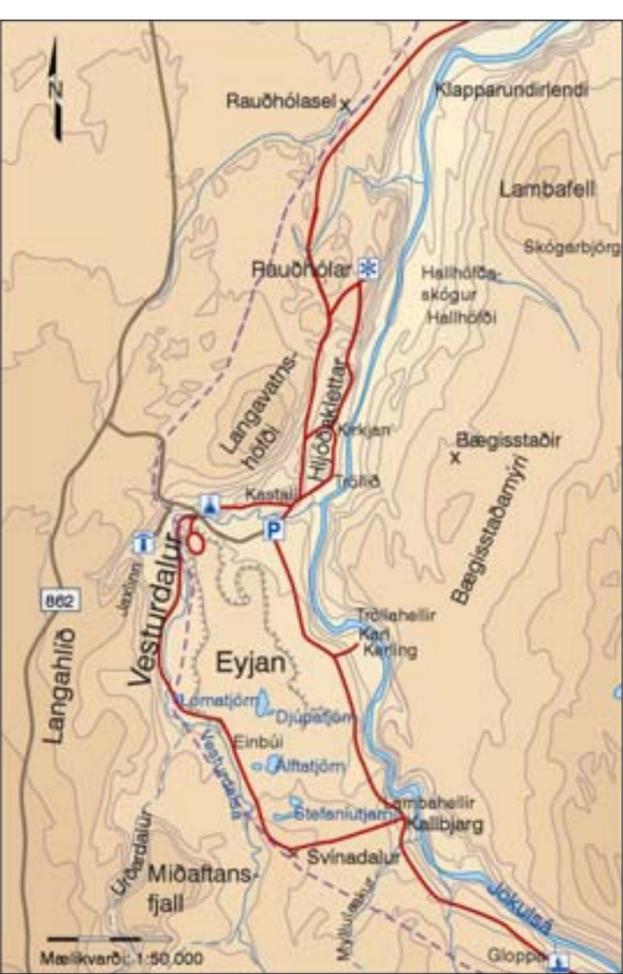
The trail starts at the car park at Hljóðaklettar and it takes about 2 hours to walk the 5 km. The first part of the route follows the main path, but by the cave of Kirkjan (the Church) the trail branches from the main path and rises along a gentle wooded slope leading to Rauðhólar. During this fascinating walk you can experience a great variety of geological phenomena and the views to the canyon in the north and Hljóðaklettar in the south are exceptional.

Karl og Kerling

Karl and Kerling are two rock pillars, believed to be a pair of petrified trolls, standing on a gravel bank by the river. Walking to them will involve a 30-40 minute round trip from the Hljóðaklettar car park.

Eyjan in Vesturdalur

From the campsite in Vesturdalur a short trail leads around the northernmost point of Eyjan, the "Island", in Vesturdalur. Along the way you pass moss covered rocks and small pools. This easy walk is ideal for an evening stroll.



Vesturdalur - Svinadalur - Kallbjörg -

Karl and Kerling - Vesturdalur

This route is 7 km long and takes 2-3 hours. It begins at the campsite in Vesturdalur and follows the Vesturdalsá River south as far as Einbúi, a monolith at the head of the valley. On the way you pass small sedge-fringed pools and there are numerous fascinating patterns in the rocks. After passing by Einbúi you ascend the southernmost part of Eyjan in Vesturdalur and continue to the site of the Svinadalur farm. From here the route continues east to Kallbjörg by Jökulsá. In the last century there was a pulley over the river which was used to transport essentials from one side to the other. Leaving Kallbjörg the path heads north past Lambahellir and the two rock trolls Karl and Kerling. On the opposite bank is Tröllahellir, the largest cave in the canyon. The path ends at the Hljóðaklettar car park, from where it is a short stroll to the campsite.

Hólmatungur circuit

This 3.5 km circuit around Hólmatungur begins at the car park. The route takes you north alongside the river Hólmá, with its countless islets and angelica-lined banks, all the way to the Hólmárfossar cascades. The return route heads south alongside the Jökulsá to its confluence with Melbugská River. This river falls tumbles over a ledge, to form the waterfall of Urriðafoss, before meeting the Jökulsá. To get here you have to take a short (0.5 km) diversion to Katlar, where the Jökulsá channel narrows severely. The trail ends at the car park. This walk, including the loop to Katlar, takes 1-2 hours. A short distance from the car park is Mt. Ytra - Þórunnarfjall, with a scenic view over Hólmatungur and Forvöð.

The Hafragil lowland

The area in and surrounding Hafragil contains the most difficult hiking trails in the National Park and caution should be exercised. You approach this area from the south via Sanddalur where there is a fixed rope to help you down a rocky section. Next you have to descend a steep and rocky slope and then the walk continues past the majestic waterfall of

Hafragilsfoss and through a rocky landslide along a small cove under a vertical rock face. The route back up takes you into the Hafragil gorge, following sheep tracks up the slope will then take you out of it. Visitors hiking between Dettifoss and Hólmatungur can bypass this area by following the western edge of Hafragil instead. The circuit to the Hafragil lowland starts at the car park by the turnoff to Hafragilsfoss. It is 6 km long and takes about 3 hours.

Dettifoss - Selfoss

The walk to Dettifoss takes approximately 15 minutes from the car park. From Dettifoss there is a marked trail to Selfoss and from there back to the car park. The circuit to Dettifoss and Selfoss is about 2.5 km and takes 1 hour.

Ásbyrgi - Dettifoss

The walk from Ásbyrgi to Dettifoss takes about two days, with an overnight stop at the campsite in Vesturdalur. There are two routes from Ásbyrgi to Vesturdalur. The first follows the edge of the Ásbyrgi gorge, via Klappir and Kvíar, a total of 12 km. The other route follows the Jökulsá and is 13.6 km. From Vesturdalur it is a further 8 km to Hólmatungur and another 10 km to Dettifoss (11.5 km avoiding the area below Hafragil). With the exception of Tófugjá and Hafragil the route is generally easy. North of Hólmatungur you have to wade the spring-fed Stallá River. It is shallow and cold but an invigorating experience and makes the trip even more memorable!

A view of the canyon from the top of Eyjan, the "Island", in Vesturdalur.

