

Iceland 2 by Simon G.

I returned to Iceland again this month for my second time running the Laugavegur Ultramarathon. I described the race in detail last year but in a nutshell it's a long trail/fell race with a bit of everything under foot – snow, rocky trails, rivers to cross, sulphurous mud and black volcanic sand. Oh, and the last few kms are through a natural Icelandic forest. I entered with Reg last year but this time, despite my best efforts to explain how awesome this race is, I couldn't persuade anybody to go with me...

So at 6am on Thursday 16th July I found myself on the Easyjet flight to Reykjavik. When I entered my intention was to try to break 7 hours (7:14 last year) but my preparation hadn't been ideal this time. I had focussed until the 23rd May on Ironman Lanzarote – and then followed 2 months interrupted by a recurring calf injury and a chest infection that I still wasn't over by the race day. However, the choice was either to not go and lose the race entry fee and flight costs (over £300) – or just turn up and hope for the best. I knew I would feel worse if I didn't even try but arriving at Reykjavik 8am their time I wasn't sure I'd made the right decision. Still, I was committed now...

That day I registered for my race pack and basically tried to stay awake as long as I could before an early night beckoned, to catch up on lost sleep. However, during the night, I managed to get up and walk into the corner of my bed – by the morning my middle left toe was bruised and swollen. Was it broken? It didn't matter. It hurt! Somebody, somewhere clearly didn't want me to do this race!!! On that day (Friday), I went back to the Blue Lagoon – a truly amazing place that lives up to all the hype...



Well worth a visit if you ever go to Iceland. 3 pints of strong Icelandic beer by lunchtime and life seemed rosier. Strangely my toe didn't seem to hurt as much either. The rest of that day I sorted and packed my gear and had another early night.

The alarm went at 3:30 am for the 4:30 Race Bus to the start line. No nerves this year as I was not expecting much from the day really. I wasn't at all confident of even finishing with my injury problems...

At least the weather was glorious – hot sunshine and little wind - completely different to last year!! 9:05 was my start group time and we set off up the trail. The first 10km is virtually all uphill to the highest point and check point 1 at Hraftinnusker and soon we reached the snow line. Iceland had experienced a cold spring so there was far more snow on the route than usual and it was melting so was mostly rather slushy.



Mercifully only ankle deep and the coldness numbed my toe nicely – I reckon I was one of only a few competitors who was glad of it! I took this section very steadily and was nearly 15 minutes slower than last year to the first check point. I took plenty of photos too and was starting to really enjoy it.



The next part is my favourite and with no injury issues so far I ran steadily up and down various small inclines until the magical drop into the valleys towards checkpoint 2 at Altnavatn Lake. This part is a true fell runners delight for the best part of 20 minutes and I let myself go, overtaking maybe 30 runners. I knew most of them would come past me on the flatter parts but that didn't matter now! I reached Altnavatn and felt really good. Exactly 3 hours racing and it was all going better than I could possibly have imagined.

Checkpoint 2 to 3 at Emstrur has the least hills in but although my legs were tiring I only started adopting a walk/run strategy towards the end of this section. I couldn't believe I reached this third checkpoint only about

5 minutes slower than last year – and felt in better shape. 38km done in just under 5 hours.



So to the final part...17km of up and down with a few more, icy cold river crossings (which were really helping keep my troublesome calf under control). Here, my lack of specific long distance training kicked in and combined with the hot afternoon sun began to attack my reserves of energy. This last section seemed to take forever. My legs felt very battered and bruised, although fortunately I never suffered from cramps. My dream of beating last year's time faded though...I finished in 7:26. Just 12 minutes slower than 2014 and I was pleased to have got to the end.

The journey home was eventful. Our Race Bus had a tyre blowout after crossing one of the rivers and as these tyres are bigger than those on UK tractors this meant at least a 3 hour wait for a replacement bus to be sent from Reykjavik. However, the Slovakian guy I had met up with flagged down the second bus about 10 minutes later... they had 4 spare seats and I got the last one. PHEW!!! He had a flight to Munich to catch at 1am and mine was early the next morning so I didn't feel too guilty. We got back to Reykjavik at about 10 pm and I packed up.

By Sunday lunchtime I was back at Manchester airport. I've lost last year's medal somewhere at home but this one is already safely hanging on the wall!

A fine and unique race that I would thoroughly recommend.