

Over unknown Iceland on a Raleigh Roadster

In 1933 Horace Edward Stafford Dall and his Raleigh three-speed roadster, complete with fully enclosed chain case, made the first crossing of Iceland's Sprengisandur wilderness by any wheeled vehicle, preceding the first motorised vehicle by a month. Ben Searle narrates the incredible story.



Sprengisandur is the virtually trackless volcanic and glacial wasteland of central Iceland, and probably the bleakest area of Europe. The man attracted to its challenges, Horace Dall was an intrepid cycle-tourist. He made a first

crossing of the High Atlas mountains in the thirties and was arrested and accused of spying. He was eventually rescued by the French Foreign Legion. No one could believe he was holidaying in temperatures of over 48 degrees centigrade. He also toured Lapland, sleeping in tents with the native Sami.

Dall showed extraordinary talent and resourcefulness in a number of fields. Born in Chelmsford in 1901, he was a pre-eminent optician and prolific innovator of scientific instruments. He died in 1986.

The story of his remarkable cycle crossing of the interior of Iceland is narrated on the backs of his original photos.

It was during a strenuous tour in Western Iceland in 1932 that Dall conceived the ambition to cross the fearsome Sprengisandur. He had assumed that the crossing would be comparable with his road and track journeys of the previous year, and was not well equipped. He took just 1.75/lb (0.8kg) of glucose and impalan pemican (dried meat), stove, sleeping bag, but no tent. He had expected a track of some kind but had to guide himself by cairns, compass, and a poor 1:1000,000 map which showed little more than the direction of some of the formidable rivers.

The point of no return

Dall enlisted help to cross the first major river – the point separating 'civilisation' and wilderness:

'The great moment has arrived! The Icelanders rowed back to their truck after having carried out their contract to dump me and the bike on the north side of the Tungnaá river. This is deep and very swift and I waved goodbye to them with mixed feelings as I realised the nature of the trackless wilderness ahead. These were to be the last human beings I saw until reaching Myri Farm in the north.'

No sooner had he left the river and headed north-east into the wilderness when a heavy rainstorm gave him a vicious send-off. He had to climb high in the hills to avoid boggy ground, was often in mist and had to make very frequent compass checks.

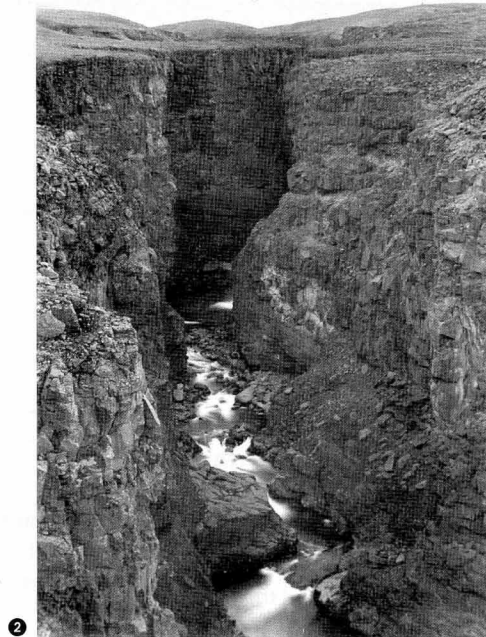
'The first day gave a taste of the rough stuff – rocks, gullies, sand and swamps, and I quickly realised that my hopes of making thirty percent use of the bicycle were to be disappointed'. ①

By the evening of the second day Dall was becoming distinctly worried: 'This is only one of the many gorges and rivers which the compass course led me to. I had to detour five miles before I could cross both the gorge and the river – the walls are 500ft high. It was interesting to speculate on what kind of obstruction was coming next'. ②

'I had an exciting moment when I came across pony tracks. Later, after I had tried to trace them through bogs and rivers and they insisted on going at right angles to my compass course, I decided they were wild ponies, and ignored them, but not before wasting much valuable time... ▷

He emerged from the wilderness well dressed with polished shoes and a tie – as if going to a job interview in Reykjavík.





Kept prisoner by the river

'The Skjálfandafljót river held me prisoner for more than a day - most of the time wedged between the water and the cliffs. On the parts where the struggle was worst I did no photography, the job in hand was sufficiently worrying. The ground here was of a flour-like consistency - very hard to get through...

5th day of the wilderness. Great joy! Have just escaped from the Skjálfandafljót by way of a side valley which enabled me to climb above it. The cycle here is 800ft above the river - a terrific volume of glacial water from the Vatnajskull icefield - the largest in Europe.' ③

Dall finally reached the southern most farm of the north:

'Myri farm and luscious green pastures. Civilisation! I was able to send a telegram via the British Vice Council to the farmer who

rowed me across the Tungnaá river - telling him of my safe arrival at the north (in accordance with a promise I had made to relieve his anxiety).' ▷

It was only his stamina, pluckiness and sheer good fortune with the weather that got Dall across. Remarkably, he made the crossing with food to spare, and was able to ride 5-10% of the way. It might be argued that Dall's crossing was more of a walk than a bike ride. Well, the same could be argued about the first car crossing - for most of that journey, the



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driver and passengers had to walk beside the car, if not help it along by pushing it. It, too, was ferried over the Tungnaá river by the same rowing boat.

In 1996 I called in at Myri. Farmer, Hedinn Húskuldsson, who was nine years old at the time of Dall's arrival remembered him clearly; 'He emerged from the wilderness well dressed with polished shoes and a tie - as if going to a job interview in Reykjavík. He didn't even seem that tired! The neighbourhood still spoke of him many years later.' ④

As Dall was a passenger over the Tungnaá river, credit for the first 'under one's own steam' coast-to-coast crossing by this route goes to the British Rough Stuff Fellowship expedition in 1958, organised by Dick Phillips (who still runs cycle and walking tours of Iceland - tel 01434 381440). While a track had become sufficiently well established by that time to ride 75% of the way, a half mile of rope and an inflatable rubber dingy were carried to cross the rivers!

Sprengisandur today

The modern-day crossing of Sprengisandur

bears no resemblance to Dall's or Phillips' experience, and in recent years its appeal has grown immensely. Each year more than 100 cycle-tourists take up the challenge. They must carry provisions for 300km (220km between habitations), and make their crossing during the brief open period of late July to early September. Now the only major unbridged rivers (glacial) are two branches of the Fjördungakvisi. These require care but are not dangerous in normal conditions. The rewards are views of the huge icecaps, distant peaks and volcanoes, and a grand feeling of solitude, isolation, and the splendour of the wild.

Most cyclists will want to allow at least five days for the crossing, but it is wise to carry provisions for double this, due to unpredictable strong winds and the possibility of snowfall in any month. The track runs at over 900m for 125km, is unsurfaced and consists mainly of compressed volcanic sand. It is almost all rideable by MTB. The Nyidalur tourist hut half way across and a cafe/guesthouse near the southern end are the only facilities.

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► The author crossing part of the Fjördungakvisi. About a kilometer of the track was under the glacial run-off.

▼ A group of Italians traverse Sprengisandur. The icefield Vatnajökull dominates the backdrop.

