

SUB-ZERO SPELEOLOGY

AN EXPEDITION INSIDE THE LOFHELLIR ICE CAVE

Dark underground passages, crawling through gaps in the rock, rope assisted icy accents, and wet bums—the Lofthellir Ice Cave isn't for claustrophobes. For the rest of us, it's a unique adventure into a fascinating geological phenomenon.

by Shaun Busuttill

■ I'm not claustrophobic, I'm just a realist. From this angle, in this subdued light, I don't see how I'll fit through that small, narrow hole. But it's the only way inside the ice cave proper, and, I'm told, it's been done thousands of times before, and by much bigger men than me. Sure enough, after climbing up the jagged basalt and lying down on my stomach, I manage—only just—to pull myself through the rocky aperture with the help of a rope, emerging into an underground cathedral of ancient ice stalactites and stalagmites sculptured over hundreds of years.

I'm crawling inside the Lofthellir Ice Cave in Lake Mývatn, North Iceland, on a caving adventure through a permafrost ice cave within a lava tube. It's a rare geological formation, to be sure, but not surprising in Iceland. Here, the two fundamental earthly elements of fire and water not only coexist and share dominance over the land but dance a geological tango, taking turns in forging a landscape at once dramatic, powerful and beautiful. In this dark, subterranean space, ice—lots of it—has replaced the fiery magma that once flowed here, like a scene change in the second act of some grand Icelandic saga.

A RARE FIND

Ice-filled lava tubes, such as the 3,800-year-old Lofthellir Ice Cave, are extremely uncommon and fragile, existing in only a handful of places on the planet: they're the speleological equivalent of a needle in a haystack. Spotted from the air in 1989 after a part of its roof collapsed during an earthquake, the ice cave I'm exploring with Hannes, my knowledgeable guide, and five other brave souls, is just a 370-meter-long section of a much larger cave complex hidden underground at the foot of the Icelandic highlands.

This unique geological treasure on private property is off-limits to the general public and only accessible via a super jeep tour with the folks at Geo Travel. To get here, we had to endure a 40-minute bone-rattling drive from the town of Reykjahlið over an ancient lava field in the shadows of Mount Hvannfell. This was followed by a 30-minute hike through volcanic terrain incised by fault lines and decorated with pahoehoe lava and its characteristic rope-like formations. Ten minutes underground, and it's already been worth it.

This unique geological treasure on private property is off-limits to the general public and only accessible via a super jeep tour with the folks at Geo Travel. To get here, we had to endure a 40-minute bone-rattling drive from the town of Reykjahlið over an ancient lava field in the shadows of Mount Hvannfell.

SUB-ZERO EXPEDITION

I've never been inside an ice cave before, and to be honest, I'm a little outside my comfort zone. It's about 0°C, darker than night, and extremely slippery: the floor is completely iced-up, like an underground skating rink. It's a good thing we have spiked gumboots, helmets and head torches, but even still, sometimes our crampon-like wellies aren't enough to stay on track, especially when traversing slippery descents further into the icy cavity. During these moments, we hold onto ropes to keep from accidentally damaging the precious stalagmites and frozen waterfalls—and angering the resident trolls.

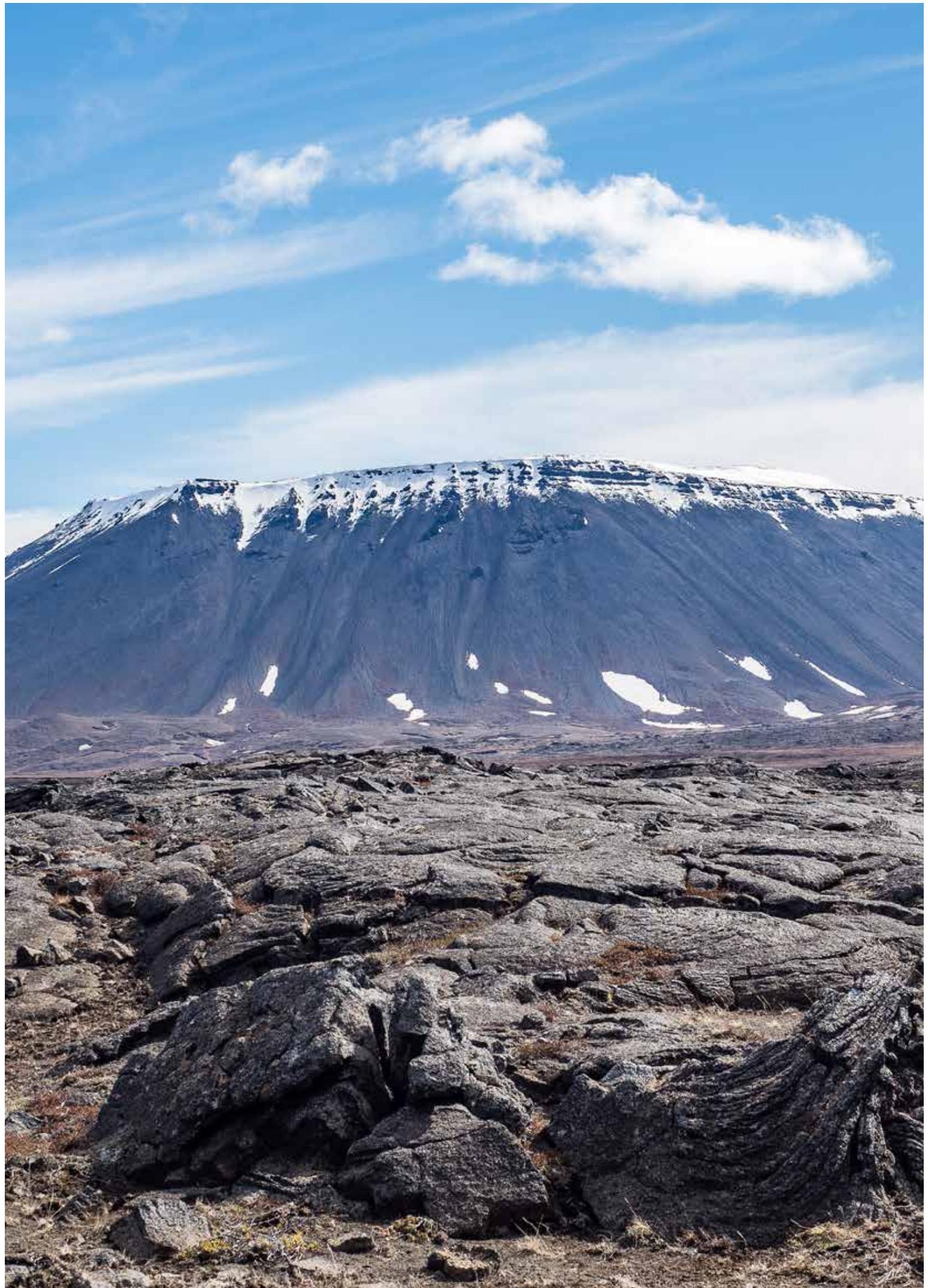


It can also be a bit difficult when we need to get on all fours to slip through crevices and when making our way down slimy stair-like sections. In exceptionally tricky parts, we walk sideways as our spiked boots grip better that way. But it's exhilarating to be on this sub-zero expedition through a lost world frozen in time.

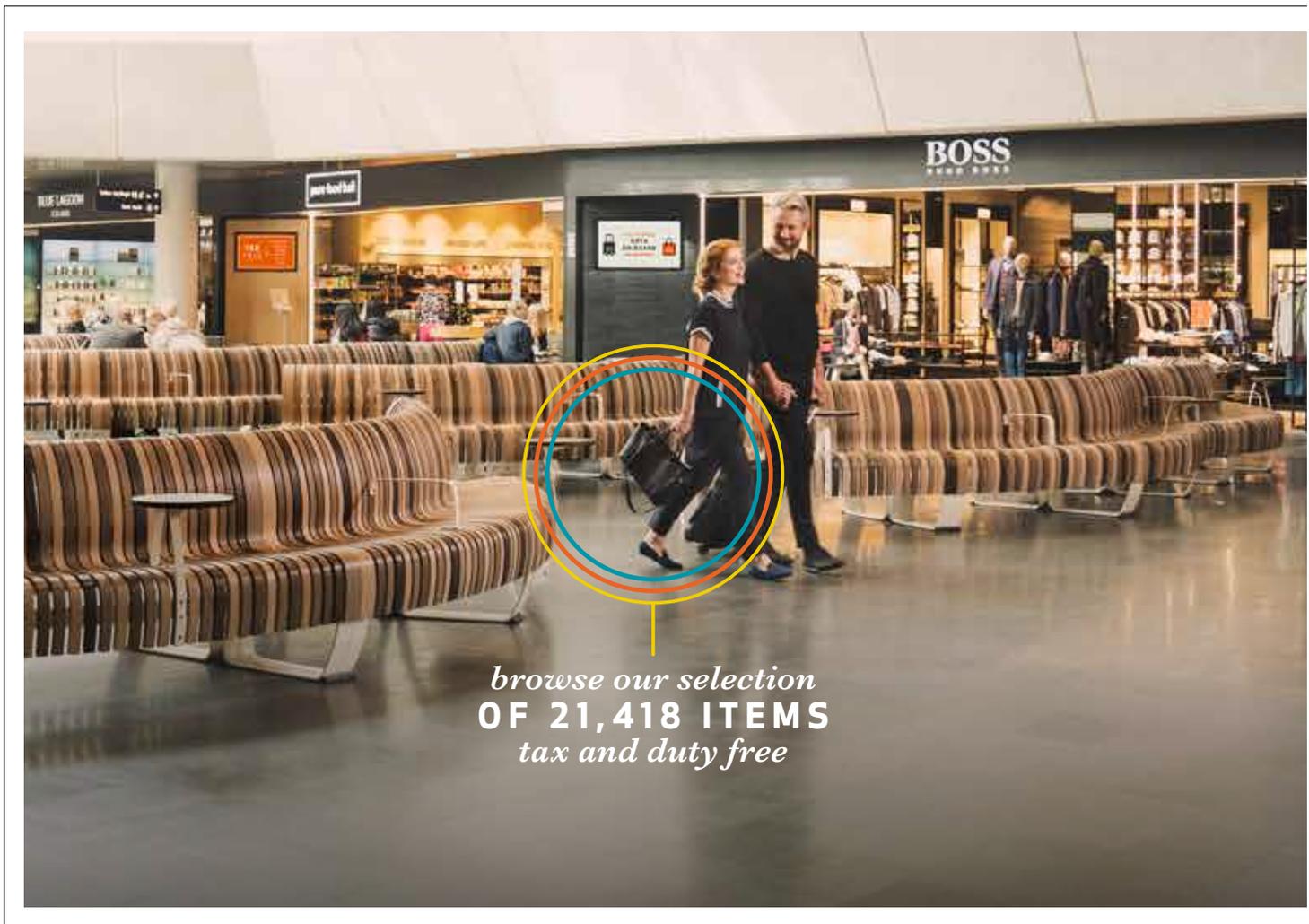
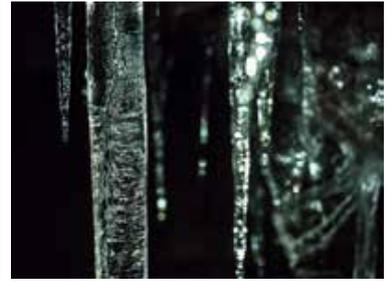
THE FIRST CHAMBER

Hauling myself up an ice sheet the size of a hillock with a rope, I take small steps, putting faith in my boots to grip the slick surface until I reach the top at the opening of the first large chamber of the cave. Finally, I have a chance to stretch out and walk around a space colonized with glistening ice sculptures, many larger than the mighty Vikings who settled this land in the 9th century. In fact, the Lofthellir Ice Cave is home to the biggest ice sculptures ever found in an Icelandic cave. The chamber is also occupied by a massive floor-to-ceiling block of solid ice, as well as stalagmites of various sizes congregated in corners together like frosted trolls.





SUB-ZERO SPELEOLOGY



Each step is a gamble as we go down a slippery staircase to the final chamber, a massive cavity of towering ice figures and shadows hidden within shadows. There's still much more of this cave complex to explore beyond this point—but not for us.

"Shh!" exclaims Hannes all of a sudden. "Please be quiet, and turn off your head torches." We oblige, unsure of what's about to happen. Panic prickles up its ears and dissipates just as quickly as the chamber is immediately awash with color, courtesy of Hannes' strategic placement of multi-colored LED head torches behind monumental stalagmites. Even the stalactites hanging from the ceiling, all crystal chandelier-like, are resplendent in reds, greens and aquamarine.

A SURREAL SOUNDTRACK

Besides being pitch black and biting cold, it's also eerily silent in this frigid subterranean world—except for the pitter-pattering of water dripping from the ceiling. "It takes about a day or two for rainwater to filter through the porous lava rock," Hannes explains as we walk single-file through the ice cave onwards to the final chamber, ducking and weaving through majestic ice statues, occasionally gripping the jagged rock for added support in tough sections.

Reaching another large cavernous space, we're told, once again, to turn off our head

torches and keep silent. It stays dark this time, but punctuating the black silence is a soulful, harmonic ringing. It sounds like the cave is singing to us, but in actuality, Hannes is playing the cave, gently tapping a stalagmite in its sweet spot to produce a beautiful, resonant sound—like a small meditation gong. It's totally unexpected, and sublime, especially in our heightened state. A surprise around every corner it seems.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

Each step is a gamble as we go down a slippery staircase to the final chamber, a massive cavity of towering ice figures and shadows hidden within shadows. There's still much more of this cave complex to explore beyond this point—but not for us. Turning around to head out the same way we came in, we first stop to pose for photos among the gigantic stalagmites and take a final look around the frozen chamber.

I'm not nearly as nervous crawling through the cave opening on the way back. After all, what goes in, must come out. And besides, it's not every day you get to

experience something truly unique. Only around 10,000 people have ever set foot inside the Lofthellir Ice Cave, and I'm so grateful for the privilege. Thank god, I'm not claustrophobic.



You can book your Lofthellir Ice Cave adventure and other great North Iceland experiences with Geo Travel at geotravel.is.

The hottest spots near Lake Mývatn

Where to sleep: Hotel Laxá – hotellaxa.is. **Where to eat:** Eldey restaurant at Hotel Laxá and Vogafjós – vogafjosfarmresort.is – try also the Geo Travel Food and Culture tour. **What to see:** Dimmuborgir, Hverfjall, The Bird Museum, Krafla, Askja, Lofthellir Ice Cave, Dettifoss Waterfall, Godafoss Waterfall... the list goes on **What to do:** Amazing activity tours with geotravel.is, scenic flights with Mýflug Air, a dog sledding tour with snowdogs.is, super jeep and snowmobile tours with amazingnorth.is and so much more.



it's not
WAITING
if it's
FUN



KEF airport is the busy place to be.

And because it's the only shopping centre in Iceland that allows suitcases, you can skip waiting and start shopping.

Be fashionably early.

WWW.KEFAIRPORT.IS

