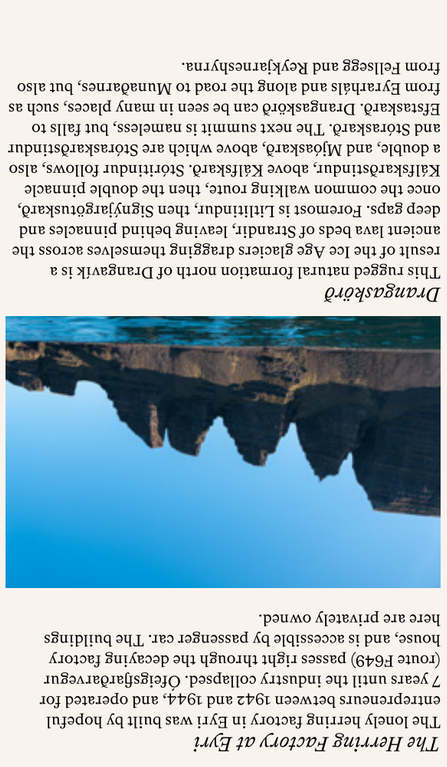

ÁRNESHREPPUR:

Northern Strandir & Hvalá Hiking Trails

HIKING TRAILS

Difficulty Level: 1● 2■ 3◆

Hvalá – Drynjandi 3–4 hours ■

To hike to Drynjandi one is recommended first to drive to the footbridge over Hvalá, where Ófeigsfjarðarvegur (route F649) ends. After crossing the bridge, one can follow the river south to where it branches northwest; there is a small but lovely unnamed waterfall to see upriver from the confluence, but to continue to Drynjandi one should cut northwest from Hvalá in a wide arc to circumvent a number of gorges. Approximately 2.5 km from the bridge you will reach the famous waterfall, which is unequivocally one of the most beautiful in the country.

An alternate option is to hike diagonally up and over the hills from the bridge, finding navigable gaps as one goes. Both routes involve some scrambling, and the landscape can be obscured by fog.

Rjúkandi 2–3 hours ●

Where Hvalá runs under the footbridge, two rivers have united, Hvalá and Rjúkandi, though Hvalá retains the name. Upriver along Rjúkandi there is a delightful waterfall; one can either walk on the south side of Hvalá from the bridge to pay a visit, a there-and-back distance of 7 km, or hike straight up from Húsá, a distance of 5 km, round trip.

Eyvindarfjörður 1–3 days ■ ◆

The next fjord north of Ófeigsfjörður is the small and uninhabited Eyvindarfjörður. At the bottom of the fjord, Eyvindarfjarðará falls to the sea in a glorious cacophony of rapids and waterfalls; this whitewater staircase is visible from afar, and presents a marvelous spectacle of water, rock and vegetation.

From the footbridge at Hvalá, one can follow the old coastal route to Eyvindarfjarðará's estuary via Hrúteyjarnes, covering a distance of 6.5 km. Cliffs and coves characterize this area, with an abundance of bird life, and the trail is mostly clear. North of Ófeigsfjörður, Dagverðardalsá must be waded. The river is usually easy to cross, but can quickly gain in power.

Hiking from Hvalá to Eyvindarfjörður and back therefore is an excellent option for a day hike; a second option is to instead hike (or sail) to Eyvindarfjörður to then walk inland and south from there. On the way upriver there are countless waterfalls and rapids, and the inland heaths offer many camping opportunities, including peaceful lakeside spots. One can then descend with Hvalá, resulting in a two or three day trip.

North to Hornstrandir Several days ◆

A popular hiking route over the years has been to follow the shoreline from Ófeigsfjörður to Reykjarfjörður, or further. An expedition that begins in Ófeigsfjörður can easily reach Drangavík by evening, where to the north, the graceful Drangaskörð rises. Some claim this to be the most beautiful wild camping spot in Iceland, where the sun sits at night behind the columns, casting them into stark silhouette. The next day trip passes the small settlement at Drangar on the way to Bjarnarfjörður, and day three can then be used to reach Reykjarfjörður.

There are several features to watch for on this route. One must be careful of tides under Drangaskörð, and it's advisable to wade Bjarnarfjörður only with great care; being subjected both to sea tides and the outflow of Drangajökull, it can often be impassable. From Bjarnarfjörður one can go Fossdalsheiði to Reykjarfjörður, or Hjarandaskarð to Sunndalur, and from there to Skjaldabjarnarvík, passing through Sigluvíkurháls to reach Reykjarfjörður. Either way, one must wade the Reykjarfjörður estuary, which is directly influenced by Drangajökull, and can be dangerous, especially in the afternoon.

ÁRNESHREPPUR

One of Iceland's most remote municipalities, Árneshreppur lies between Kaldbakur in the south and Geirólfsgnúpur in the north, covering the northernmost part of the region known as Strandir ("the coasts"); north of Geirólfsgnúpur, the lands of Austurstrandir and Hornstrandir begin. The southern section of Árneshreppur contains its main communities of Djúpavík in Reykjarfjörður, Trékyllisvík and Norðurfjörður, beyond which lie a scattering of summer settlements. Few residents remain throughout the winters, but when spring arrives, the pace of life increases, and summers are lively.

Árneshreppur was once home to over 500 residents, its population peaking during Iceland's "herring adventure", a bountiful period of fishing which dominated the first half of the 20th century. From the mid to late 1940's, when the industry collapsed, the population went into decline, dipping below 100 before the turn of the century; it continues to decrease to this day. The countryside is fertile and hardy, and fishing and sheep farming have been the foundations of Árneshreppur from its earliest settlement, supplemented with income from resources like eiderdown and driftwood. In recent years, tourism has prospered, and today provides a cornerstone of the municipality's ability to maintain full-time residence.

The history and culture of Árneshreppur was charmingly recorded by Hrafn Jökulsson as part of his memoirs in "Where the Road Ends", published in 2007.

LANDSCAPE AND NATURAL HISTORY

Árneshreppur occupies the northwestern corner of Iceland. Winters here are long and dark, the summers brief and vital bursts of lingering light. The seasons are reflected in the landscape. Flanking the shorelines are rugged mountains, particularly in the south, where the road connects three vast fjords; Veiðileysifjörður, Reykjarfjörður and Trékyllisvík. The countryside is sparse by the coasts, rising to heathlands and lake-dotted barrens, the most extensive of which are Trékyllisheiði and Ófeigsfjarðarheiði. North of Ingólfsfjörður, the shoreline reaches Árneshreppur's northern extent at Geirólfsgnúpur, north of Bjarnarfjörður, which cuts deeply into the land.

The landscape is marked and shaped by glacial ice ages that scraped the area's ancient lava beds. The lava beds are the result of eruptions that occurred between 10 and 12 million years ago, when the center of the country lay around the present Westfjords, and volcanoes spewed lava over the surrounding plains. These volcanoes are long cold, but their traces can be seen in ancient basalt dykes, geothermally altered strata, and an array of minerals and crystals.

Árneshreppur is remarkably diverse, although not as geologically active as younger parts of the country. Within its boundaries are glacial rivers and moraines, grassy valleys, lakes, world-class waterfalls, heathlands, faults, rock dykes and hot pools, driftwood, and sea lagoons. One type of fossil, the lava tree mold, appears in abundance here. The tree molds were formed when lava streamed through ancient forests, engulfing tree trunks and leaving hollows in the shapes of the trunks. In the northernmost part, and around Hornstrandir, there are also some of the world's tallest sea cliffs. Árneshreppur therefore has almost everything that Iceland has to offer geologically, besides the volcanic activity which continues to this day elsewhere on the island.

The biosphere of the area is no less diverse. The arctic fox has its sanctuary here, especially in the northernmost part, close to the Hornstrandir nature reserve. Birds and small animals scurry amidst the hummocks, eiders and seals populate offshore lagoons, and the cliffs shelter auks.

The drive to Norðurfjörður from Hólmavík takes about one and a half hours; the road is accessible to all cars during the summer. From Norðurfjörður to the footbridge at Hvalá is another hour's drive, and from Eyri one will need a 4WD vehicle. Hvá must be forded; at low tide using the seaside track, and at high tide the upriver crossing, which is steep but navigable.

The public has a right to travel the land and to stay there for legitimate purposes. This right comes with the obligation to treat nature and wildlife with the utmost respect. Care must always be taken to hike and camp responsibly, and one must never leave garbage or waste behind.

In a small part of the area covered by the map, preliminary research into the existence of lava tree molds has been carried out. These fossils are fully protected.

In the wilderness, no permit is required to camp. In settled areas, however, one must obtain permission from the landowner or rights holder for stays of longer than one night, for groups of more than three tents, or if one is camping close to human residences. If one is in a car tent, motorhome, caravan or camper van, a permit is always required.

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ÁRNESHREPPUR: *Northern Strandir & Hvalá Hiking Trails*

Polar bears and the white-tailed eagle have visited, and it is not inconceivable that on the heaths there are snowy owls that have been spotted on the coasts. Ecosystems are of many kinds, and are interdependent. Even the relatively featureless heathlands, such as Ófeigsfjarðarheiði, play an important role as collection and reservoir areas for rainfall, as well as being the breeding grounds of birds. All of these ecosystems frame an indelible picture of the wilderness of Árneshreppur, which is a land unlike anywhere on earth.

SETTLEMENT, CULTURE AND SAGAS

Sögulíð

"Landnámabók" is the oldest written record on the settlement of Strandir, and tells of Skjalda-Björn, who claimed land from Strauumnes to Drangar. Under the council of Björn, Geirólfur built a farm at Geirólfsgnúpur, thus defining the northern limits of Árneshreppur, which probably came into existence soon thereafter. Þorvaldur Ásvaldsson took the land of Drangar and Drangavík with his son, Erik the Red. To the south were three sons of Herröður Hvíraskýr; Eyvindur in Eyvindarfjörður, Ófeigur in Ófeigsfjörður and Ingólfur in Ingólfsfjörður, and further, the lands of Eirík Snare, spanning from Ingólfsfjörður to Veiðileysifjörður. Ósnúur Tree-leg settled south of there, "from Kleifar to Ófæra, including Kaldaksvík, Kolbeinsvík and Brýðisvík, and lived in Kaldbak to old age" about which he wrote;

"I have struck a hard bargain, to win this cold-backed mountain / but lose my fields".

The Family Sagas stretch into the area. Finnbogi the Mighty moved here long ago, establishing a farm in Finnbogastaðir, where he repelled assassins sent by his enemies. And the Saga of Gretir the Strong tells about the descendants of Ósnúur. Tree-leg, Gretir's ancestor, as they fought the men of Trékyllisvík over a beached whale at Ríflsker, during a famine when fishing across the island had failed, and even driftwood was sparse. The men were poorly armed, having only the tools they were using to butcher the whale, so they improvised, using whale ribs and even chunks of meat as weapons.

The Age of the Sturlungs

"Sturlunga" is a collection of sagas detailing a period of violent internal upheaval in Icelandic history. The first killings took place in Árneshreppur, when chieftains from the Western regions sent thugs to stir up trouble. In 1117, a well-known farmer and follower of Hafliði Másson lived in Ávík; his name was Hnitir. With him was Þorsteinn, who was regarded widely as "popular, calm ... and the luckiest of all men at fishing". The ill-fated Ólafur Hildisson asked Þorgils Oddason, the chieftain at Staðarhóll, for advice, and was told to "go north to Strandir to earn some income, as was the custom of many men". Mar Bergþórsson, Hafliði Másson's nephew, went too, and treated Ólafur so terribly that Ólafur vowed revenge; however, in his lucklessness he ended up killing Þorsteinn instead. In the following repercussions, Mar killed Hnitir, igniting the famous feud between Hafliði and Þorgils, and in turn the era of turmoil which defined the Age of the Sturlungs.

Trékyllisvík also appears later in Sturlunga, as Þórður Kakali Sighvatsson set off from there in 1244, for the famous sea battle of Flóabardagi. He and his men subsequently returned after fleeing the battle, with Kolbein the Young in pursuit. Þórður's men either sought sanctuary in the church or escaped to Arnesdalur; those who fled fared better.

Árneshreppur provided a hardy but rewarding existence to its inhabitants over the next centuries, but doesn't bear much news until Jón Guðmundsson the Learned was born there in 1574. Jón began to study the ravens and magic stones that lay along the beaches, and continued with this interest and had to flee from his farm in Stóra–Ávík in 1616, and there is no evidence that he ever returned. He was convicted of witchcraft in 1631, but lived in East–Iceland until his death in 1658.

Sorcery and Witchcraft

Sorcery and witchcraft have long haunted the lands of Strandir, and in the mid-17th century a trial took place in Árneshreppur that reverberated across Iceland. Three alleged sorcerers, Þórður Guðbrandsson, Egill Bjarnason and Grímur Jónsson, were burned to death at Kistuvogur in the autumn of 1654, beginning what came to be known as The Burning Age. Þórður's daughter Margrét fled the area with the help of the local parish priest after she was accused of witchcraft herself; she beat the litigation, escaping the flames, but from Galdra-Manga and the tales surrounding her, many legends were born.

PLACES OF INTEREST

Djúpavík

Djúpavík was the site of a booming herring processing industry dating from 1934, and the factory still stands, in spite of production being halted in the middle of the last century. Today one can view a history installation here, and art exhibitions are often held as well. The living quarters for the women workers were renovated in 1985 to become Hotel Djúpavík, which has been operating ever since.

Reykjarneshyrna

At 316 meters high, this spectacular mountain at the southern tip of Trékyllisvík is formed from the waste from an ancient lava strata. Reykjarneshyrna's cliffs face seaward, and its iconic slope descends gently, offering an easy hike to the top, where an expansive view awaits. Opening into the sea below the cliffs is a sea cave, Dugnhola, and further east is Þórðarhellir, a small, secret fissure named after its sole inhabitant, the outlaw Þórður.

Grásteinn at Stóra–Ávík

Above the houses at Stóra–Ávík stands a large granite oval, called Grásteinn, or "Silverstone". This stone travelled from Greenland with the icebergs at the end of the last ice age, about ten thousand years ago. At that time, the sea level was considerably higher, and therefore the rock was stranded up the slope quite high. If viewed from its weathered side, white, dark and clear crystals can be seen within the granite.

Krossneslaug

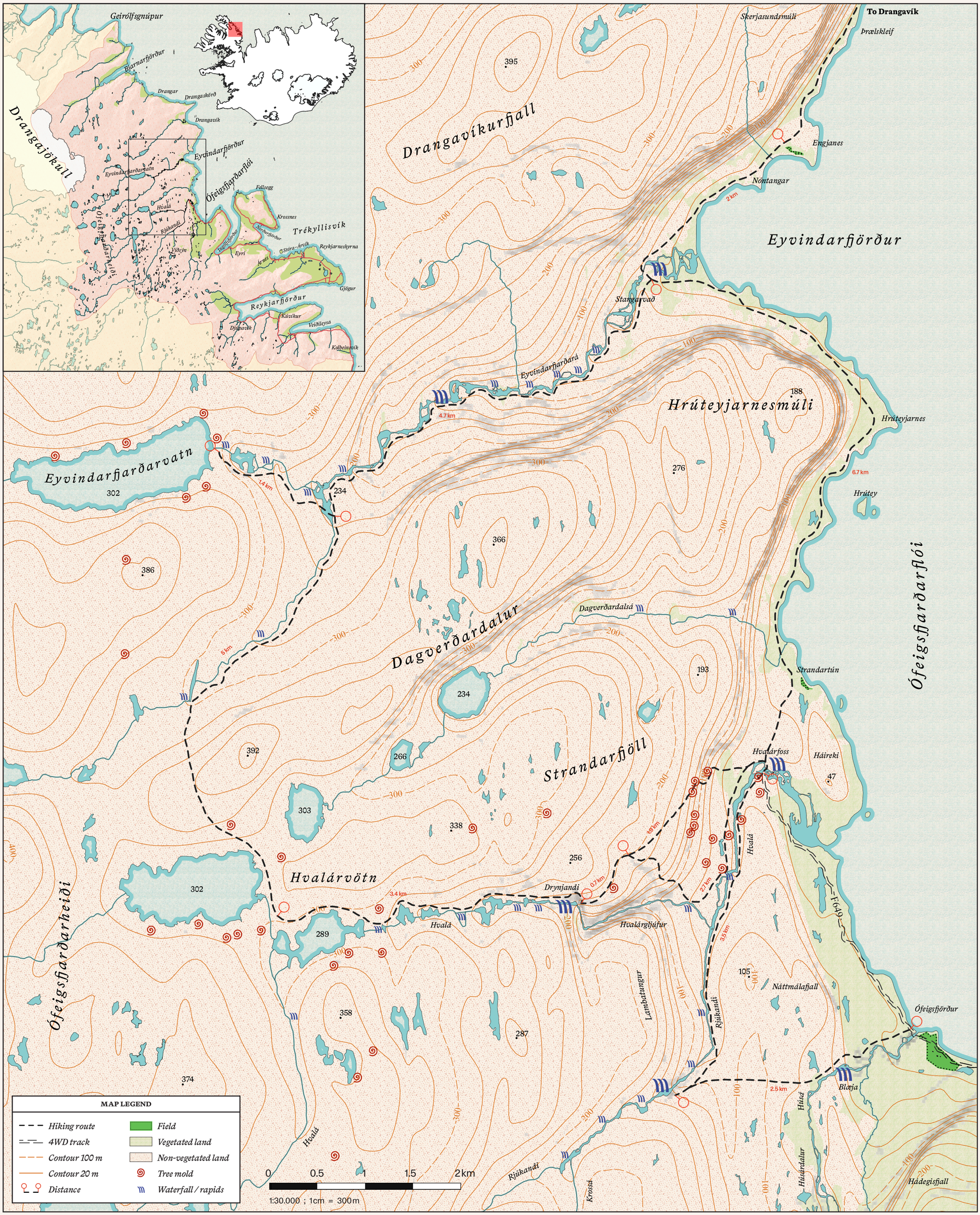
The Árneshreppur swimming pool, established in 1954, lies in a pocket of shoreline about a mile north of Krossnes farm. The pool's warmth initially relied on natural hot pools, but in 2008 drilling was performed to access deeper geothermal chambers. The unique location makes Krossneslaug an evocative destination, its waters only a short distance from the open Arctic Ocean. The Leifur heppni Youth Club maintains the pool.

The Herring Factory at Eyri

The lonely herring factory in Eyri was built by hopeful entrepreneurs between 1942 and 1944, and operated for 7 years until the industry collapsed. Ófeigsfjarðarvegur (route F649) passes right through the deserting factory house, and is accessible by passenger car. The buildings here are privately owned.

Drangaskörð

This rugged natural formation north of Drangavík is a result of the Ice Age glaciers dragging themselves across the ancient lava beds of Strandir, leaving behind pinnacles and deep gaps. Foremost is Litlitindur, then Sigtryggstuskarð, once the common walking route, then the double pinnacle Kálfskarðstindur, above Kálfskarð. Stóritindur follows, also a double, and Miðskarð, above which are Stóraskarðstindur and Stóraskarð. The next summit is nameless, but falls to Efstaskarð. Drangaskörð can be seen in many places, such as from Eyrarhálls and along the road to Munaðarnes, but also from Fellsegg and Reykjarneshyrna.


Geirólfsgnúpur
Bjarnarfjörður
Drangar
Drangaskörð
Drangavík
Drangajökull
Eyvindarfjörður
Eyvindarfjarðarvatn
Ófeigsfjarðarflói
Fellsvegg
Krossnes
Hvalá
Rjúkandi
Norðurfjörður
Trékyllisvík
Ingólfsfjörður
Víðeyn
Eyri
Árnes
Stóra-Árvík
Reykjarneshyrna
Ófeigsfjarðarheiði
Gjögur
Reykjarfjörður
Kúvíkur
Veiðileysa
Djúpavík
Kolbeinsvík
To Drangavík
Skerjasundsmúli
Prælskleif
395
Drangavíkurfjall
Engjanes
Nöntangar
2 km
Eyvindarfjörður
Stangarvað
Eyvindarfjarðará
4.7 km
188
Hrúteyjarnesmúli
Hrúteyjarnes
6.7 km
Hrútey
276
1.4 km
234
302
Eyvindarfjarðarvatn
366
386
Dagverðardalur
Dagverðardalsá
5 km
193
Strandartún
Ófeigsfjarðarflói
234
392
266
Strandarfjöll
Hvalárfoss
Háireki
47
303
338
1.9 km
256
Hvalá
302
Hvalárvötn
Drynjandi
0.7 km
3.4 km
2.7 km
Hvalá
Hvalárgljúfur
289
3.5 km
F649
105
Náttmálafjall
Lambatungur
Rjúkandi
358
287
Ófeigsfjörður
374
2.5 km
Blæja
Húsá
Húsárdalur
Hádegisfjall
Hvalá
Rjúkandi
Krossá
MAP LEGEND
Hiking route
4WD track
Contour 100 m
Contour 20 m
Distance
Field
Vegetated land
Non-vegetated land
Tree mold
Waterfall / rapids
0
0.5
1
1.5
2 km
1:30.000 ; 1cm = 300m