

A landscape shaped by fire and ice

SUZANNE MORPHET
explores the ancient
crevasses of Iceland's
Falljokull glacier

The waves are huge, ominous, close together. They're also static, frozen in time. And they're not actually waves, but narrow walls of ancient ice, the uppermost layer of Iceland's Falljokull glacier. Falljokull means "falling" in Icelandic, and this glacier is named for its steep ice fall, "basically like a frozen waterfall, kind of cascading over a cliff", says our guide Kristian Azor, as we stand in awe of these blocks of ice that really do resemble standing waves.

We're wearing helmets and crampons and carrying ice axes, yet walking across a glacier perforated with deep crevasses doesn't initially strike me as safe or "beginner-friendly", which is how Arctic Adventures describes this tour.

I've hiked on glaciers in Canada multiple times, but none were like this.

In my experience, crevasses are something to avoid, not seek out.

"If it's going to be dangerous, we won't do it," Kristian assured me at the outset.

Before coming to Iceland, I researched the company, which has been in business since 1983, and learnt that in 2025 it achieved the Iceland Tourist Board's highest gold class environmental certification for quality, safety and environmental care.

So despite my early misgivings, I relax and follow Kristian up a path into a world of sculptured ice unlike anything I've ever seen.

Falljokull is one of about 30 outlet glaciers flowing off Iceland's voluminous Vatnajokull ice cap. If you look at a map of the country, you can't miss Vatnajokull. It's the big white patch in the south-east corner of the island, and the centrepiece of Vatnajokull National Park.

It is also the largest glacier in Europe, with eight volcanoes buried beneath its icy dome.

Falljokull is just a small part of this large ice mass, and the area



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we walk is minuscule, but it's accessible and otherworldly.

It doesn't take long — maybe 10 or 15 minutes after putting

crampons over our boots and stepping on to the glacier — before we're walking between rigid walls of ice.

It's hard to believe this glacier is moving, bending, cracking and compressing like some living thing as it slowly advances down the mountain.

"It's not moving on a perfectly straight line, but it's changing direction, sometimes going a little bit steeper, sometimes a little more flat," Kristian explains. "It's also creating a lot of tension within the ice, so this tension is releasing in the form of cracks."

Some of these cracks are beneath us, unseen, which is why we follow in Kristian's footsteps, where he knows the ice is solid. Other cracks are large enough for us to walk through in single file.

Kristian and other guides have chiselled some of the ice walls to make the natural pathways wider. Some paths come to another wall of ice — a dead end, as in a maze — while others meander for many metres, maybe kilometres.



Guide Kristian Azor, right, checks the ice in a crevasse with his axe. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Top, Suzanne Morphet walks through a crevasse on Falljokull glacier. Above, an Arctic Adventures guest plunges his axe into a wall of ancient ice.

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Above, guide Kristian Azor leads the way along a crevasse in the ice on Falljokull glacier. Below, Arctic Adventure guests descend an ash-covered path on the glacier. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



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Some of us plunge our own ice axes into the walls, feeling the heft of the axe against solid ice and testing our strength and dexterity. When Kristian uses his axe to break off a piece of ice, he tells us to look for a rainbow.

"When the light comes in under certain angles, it refracts the different spectrum," he explains. "It acts like a crystal, like when you have diamonds, you know, and they have these little rainbows in them."

Kristian, who is from Slovakia, has also worked in New Zealand as a glacier guide, and says there were no rainbows in the glacial ice there. "My theory is that the glaciers in Iceland are older . . . and thicker. The ice is more compressed, so I think it's just more crystal-like compared to the ice in New Zealand."

Like any glacier though, Falljokull began as fresh white snow, in this case at the top of Oaefajokull — Iceland's highest peak, and one of the volcanoes in Vatnajokull National Park. Now, after centuries, it's streaked with ash from long-ago eruptions. "It erupts every 400 years or so, and it's quite catastrophic every time," Kristian says.

It feels so peaceful in this icy domain that it's hard to imagine something as blazing hot and devastating as Oaefajokull's eruption in June 1362, which unleashed glacial floods, killing hundreds of people and destroying 160km of coastline.

Yet, it was here, in the realm of the Vatnajokull ice cap, where the term "fire and ice" was coined. It's a place you'd never want to wander on your own, but also a place you don't want to miss on a trip to Iceland.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Arctic Adventures. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.



Above, exploring the glacier on foot. Below, a guide points to the Falljokull glacier, a small outlet glacier off the Vatnajokull ice cap.



fact file

■ Arctic Adventures offers a variety of professionally guided tours on glaciers in Vatnajokull National Park, including Crevasse Labyrinth: A Glacier Maze in Skaftatell. Priced from \$US138 (\$195) per person.

The Big Travel Quiz Night has sold out

200 readers got in quick to secure tickets for our fun evening, writes **PENNY THOMAS**

A huge thank you to everyone who booked tickets for our upcoming event, The Big Travel Quiz Night.

We were blown away by the response, and the event sold out far more quickly than we expected.

To everyone who secured a ticket, we can't wait to see you at the Pagoda Resort & Spa on Friday, August 28.

And to those who missed out, we'll be hosting more travel events in the future, and as always, eTravel subscribers will be the first to hear about them. So keep an eye on your inbox — we'd love to see you at the

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