

ABOUT THE TRAIL

→ **DISTANCE** 19 km (11.8 mi)

→ **DURATION** 6 to 7 hours

→ **TOTAL ELEVATION GAIN** 1,230 m (4,035 ft)

→ **LEVEL** Moderate

Even in a place that evokes as many superlatives as Iceland, Skaftafell Nature Reserve stands out among the rest. Within its boundaries and immediate surrounds, you have the country’s highest mountain (Hvannadalshnjúkur), its largest glacier (Vatnajökull), its richest birch forest (Bæjarstaðarskógur), and its tallest waterfall (Morsárfoss). For good measure, you can also throw in the biggest outwash plain in the world (Skeiðarársandur). Despite the immensity of its natural wonders, the hikes in Skaftafell are relatively short because glaciers surround it on three sides, with the outwash plain bordering it on the other. But what the trails may lack in length, they certainly make up for in quality, and the best of them all is known as the Skaftafell Loop.

Measuring 19 km (11.8 mi) and taking an average of six or seven hours to complete, the Skaftafell Loop begins and ends at its eponymous campground. It lies entirely within Skaftafell Nature Reserve, which from 1967 to 2008 was a national park until it became part of the newly established Vatnajökull National Park (the largest national park in Iceland). Most of the trail is well marked and maintained, however, because it’s all either up or down, it’s tougher on your lungs and knees than on your navigational skills.

From the Skaftafell Campground, the loop heads northwest, reaching a junction for Hundafoss waterfall after just under a kilometer. Though impressive, Hundafoss is just an appetizer for what’s to come, as after another kilometer along the trail, you’ll reach Svartifoss (“Black Falls”). Measuring only 20m (66ft) high and not particularly voluminous (at least by Icelandic standards), Svartifoss is nonetheless Skaftafell’s most recognizable landmark. The reason for its renown is its singular setting in an amphitheater of hexagonal basalt columns. The obsidian black background juxtaposes with the white glacial water to give the place a gothic meets the great outdoors feel. It’s a locale that has inspired travelers, hikers, and artists for centuries. The most notable example is the Icelandic architect Guðjón Samúelsson, who mirrored Svartifoss’ columnar character when designing the Hallgrímskirkja church in Reykjavík, Iceland’s most iconic man-made structure.

Leaving Svartifoss, the trail heads west and then north up a stony slope to the lookout of Sjónársker (see Bonus Track). From here, you’ll be afforded a bird’s-eye view over the Skeiðarársandur outwash plain. Covering an area of 1,300km² (502mi²), this vast expanse of sand stretches from the Skeiðarárjökull glacier to the North Atlantic Ocean, and due to the landscape’s dynamic nature was the most significant obstacle in the completion of Iceland’s Ring Road in the 1970s (see Background).

Continuing north from Sjónársker, wind your way through low-lying birch scrub towards a series of rolling fells. The views



↑ **Turf-roofed farmhouses at Sel, located near the entrance of Skaftafell Nature Reserve.**
→ **Looking south over the vast Skeiðarársandur outwash (1,300km²/502mi²).**

over Morsádalur valley are stunning, and once you reach the last of the grassy high tops—Nyrorihnaukur (706m/2,316ft)—you’ll be able to spot the plunging waters of Morsárfoss (227m/745ft), Iceland’s highest waterfall, to the northwest. After soaking in the valley views, 10 minutes after leaving Nyrorihnaukur, you’ll reach a signposted junction (S4). From this point, climb steeply for half a kilometer to reach the summit of Kristínartindar (1,126m/3,694ft). The highest point of the loop, the 360-degree panorama from Kristínartindar’s apex isn’t just the best view in Skaftafell, it’s arguably one of the finest perspectives in all of Iceland. Gazing northwards, you’ll see the massive Vatnajökull ice cap (7,900km²/3,050mi²) splitting into two glacial tongues >

