

**HIKING TRAILS**



# **SPÁKONUFELLSHÖFÐI SKAGASTRÖND**

**NATURE ADVENTURE HISTORY**



## Country park

On the 11th of August 1980, the minister of education, science and culture made Cape Spákonufellshöfði a country park. The cape is owned and cared for by Skagaströnd municipality and all its planning is in cooperation with The Environment Agency.

A country park is an area protected for outdoor life and other public use.

## Rules of conduct

1. Please obey the rules of conduct, avoid destroying vegetation and disturbing birds and animals.
2. All motor vehicles are prohibited
3. All disturbance of the ground is prohibited as well as the disposal of garbage and other waste.
4. Pasturage is not allowed in the country park.

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# CAPE SPÁKONUFELLSHÖFÐI

Spákonufellshöfði, generally called Höfðinn (The Cape), rises west of Skagaströnd village and offers a variety of easy hiking routes. Höfðinn is a popular destination for people wanting to enjoy the beautiful outdoors where the ocean, various bird species and the majestic circle of mountains embrace the senses.

## History

Spákonufellshöfði is an ancient name just as Spákonufell (Soothsayer's Mountain), a 646 m high mountain rising just above the town. Both names are connected with the farm Spákonufell, which for centuries was located at the foothill of the mountain.

The name's origins can be traced back to the 10th century when Þórdís the soothsayer (Þórdís spákona), said to be skilled in both magic and magical arts, lived on the farm Fell. Vatnsdælasaga (Saga of Vatnsdælir) describes her as a great and intelligent woman. Later both the farm and the mountain Spákonufell were named after her.

Þórdís was among other things known for fostering Iceland's first missionary, Þorvaldur Koðránsson, later named Þorvaldur víðförli (Þorvaldur the travelled). He was described as a healthy and brave champ who earned the respect of heathens, which enabled him to work on evangelisation in Iceland from 981 – 986. A monument of Þorvaldur víðförli is situated close to his birth place, Stóra-Giljá, on the junction of Road 1 and Svínvetningabraut (Road 731).



## Trade in Höfði

In the olden days, the port at Skagaströnd was known to be quite unsafe, as described by Ólafur Olavius in 1775 “the port is not safe from drift ice, sea or storm, for nothing protects it from the SW and NW winds”.

It is likely that trade started quite early at Höfðinn, as merchant vessels were known to stop there. The trading centre was named Höfðakaupstaður (Cape Borough) for centuries. The Danes found the name quite difficult to pronounce, so they named the trading centre after its situation on their chart – Skagestrand (Foreland Shore).

In the year 1585 merchants from England and Hamburg got a licence from the Danish king to commence trade in Skagaströnd, although no references have been found of those licences ever being used.

When the Danes started their monopolistic trade in Iceland in 1602, Skagaströnd became an official trading centre for Húnavatnssýslur and Skagafjörður counties, one of twenty royal trading points in Iceland. Although the monopoly ended in 1787, it wasn't until the 19th century that the settlement started to form, counting around one hundred people in the year 1900.



The population grew fast in the thirties and forties, mostly because of increased herring fishing and the harbour being built. In 1945 the optimism reached new heights as the Icelandic government of that time, usually called The Innovation Government, planned a settlement of three thousand people in Skagaströnd.

At that time, some attempts were made to reinstate the town's original name Höfðakaupstaður, but the old name never got strong foothold again and the name Skagaströnd became common language.

## The hiking trail

The hiking trail starts at the cape's car park **(A)** (see aerial photograph page 10). This was once a place where stock fish trestles/hovels stood. They have now been torn down, all except for their concrete bases still visible. A World War Two observation post or shelter was once a little south of the car park. This shelter was used by British soldiers for monitoring Húnaflói Bay and Skagaströnd harbour.

In the early days a cannon was located at Spákonufellshöfði, some say even two. Those cannons were fired to notify farmers of the arrival of Danish merchant vessels. One of those cannons is now stored in The National Museum of Iceland.

The southernmost end of Höfðinn has two names, **Hólsnef** (Hill's Nose) and **Höfðatá** (Cape's Toe). There, a seamark can be found from the time when larger vessels couldn't dock, but were fastened at sea. When this seamark silhouetted another seamark on top of Höfðinn, the captain knew it was time to drop the anchor. Similar seamarks were on Hólanes (Hill's Point), east of the creek.

Walking along the sea side north of the car park, you will reach a peculiar rock called **Tröllamey** (Troll Maiden) **(B)**. At some time the upmost part of the maiden broke off and now it looks like her head is missing. The story says that the maiden was sitting with a book or





knitting needles, waiting for her husband to come home from fishing, when the sun came up and she turned to stone.

Further north, a large creek called **Vækilvík** or Vækelsvík (Vækil's Creek or Vækil's Creek) carves the west side of Höfðinn, but no explanations have been found

for those peculiar names. Accounts say that this is the location of the first trading centre, with merchant vessels sailing into the relatively deep creek. References mentioning boat fastenings at the creek support those accounts.

**Vælugil** (Wailing Canyon) is a small ravine on the south side of Vækilsvík. The ravine draws its name from the wailing sounds heard when the wind passes through it from certain directions.

**Reiðingsflöt** (Tackle Flat) **(C)** is a flat area north of the creek, where farmers are said to have prepared their horses after trading with the merchant vessels. Reiðingsflöt is a good place to stop and enjoy the view. In front of the flat is a small skerry named **Sauðasker** (Sheep Skerry), which can be reached on foot during low tide. A little bit further out is another small skerry, and between a small strait called **Músaund** (Mouse Strait), which is quite deep and can easily be navigated by boat.

North of Reiðingsflöt is **Arnarstapi** (Eagle Mesa), a majestic rock at the north end of Höfðinn **(D)**.

Close to Arnarstapi is a depression called **Leynidalur** (Secret Valley) or Fagridalur (Fair Valley) cutting Höfðinn in two. Just across the depression is **Réttarholtshæð** (Réttarholts Hill), and the farm **Réttarholt** (Pound Hill) east of the hill. At the top of Réttarholtshæð is a cairn called **Spánska dys** (Spanish Cairn) **(E)**, where a Spanish sailor is said to be buried. The cairn's location was most likely chosen because of its beautiful view.

**Landsendi** (Land's End), is the area where Höfðinn meets the lowland and **Landsendarétt** (Landsendi Pound) used to stand by the sea close by. The pound, which was stacked from rocks, has now collapsed although some of its remains can still be seen. Farm **Laufás** (Leaf Ridge) is south of Réttarholtshæð.

North of Spákonufellshöfði the large creek **Bót** (Patch) reaches out to **Finnsstaðanes** (Finnsstaðir Point). The coaster *Laure* stranded in the creek during a

storm in 1910, but all sailors were saved.

From Réttarholtshæð the trail leads back into the depression and up to the top of Höfðinn, passing just above the old quarry **(F)**. During the time the harbour was built, in the thirties and forties, stones were detached from the cape's

rock by huge explosions and used as fruiting. This was not popular among all inhabitants. When the explosions were at their maximum, a fairy woman visited one of Skagaströnd's locals in his dream. The fairy was very sullen and told him that the cape's fairy settlement was being destroyed and therefore predicted that the next twenty years would be very difficult for the community.

Whatever can be said about the fairy's prediction, it is a fact that soon after that the herring disappeared from Húnaflói Bay, and caused a tremendous damage for the settlement. It was not until 1970 that employment started to prosper again. Since then, many believe that ships and companies named after Höfðinn will receive bad luck.

On the top of Höfðinn is one of two seamarks which used to guide ships to the best landing places.

Until the sixties, big New Years Eve bonfires were held at Höfðinn. Children and teenagers of the surrounding houses collected material for the bonfire every year. For quite some time there were actually two New Years Eve bonfires in Skagaströnd, the second one just above the camping ground, which of course resulted in a contest for the biggest bonfire every year.

From Bankastræti (Bank Street) you can see a little pass in Höfðinn called Tjaldklauf (Tent Cleft), where farmers used to camp during trading season. A small grove planted around 1950, nestles just beside the pass.

A periscope **(G)** was situated on Höfðinn in 2007, through the agency of Skagaströnd Lions Club, providing excellent view. South are the mountains Vatnsdalsfjall and Víðidalsfjall, then Borgarvirki Fort and Vatnsnes Peninsula further west. Across Húnaflói Bay are the majestic Strandafjöll Mountains with Drangajökull Glacier in the background. To the north are Króksbjarg Cliff and the lighthouse at Kálfshamarsvík Creek and in the east Spákonufell Mountain embraces its surroundings.





## Pórdís the soothsayer

For just over one thousand years ago, Pórdís the soothsayer took her daily walk up to Spákonufell Mountain, where she combed her hair with a special gold comb. Her farm, Fell, stood at the foothill where Skagaströnd's cemetery is now situated. It is said that when Pórdís knew that she didn't have long to live, she took a treasure chest up to Spákonufell and placed it on a ledge just in front of the mountain's upmost rock, Spákonufellsborg (Spákonufell's Rock). She announced that, a woman who in her upbringing had not been baptised in the name of the holy trinity or any other of God's titles would get the chest and its treasure. Such a woman has not been found yet, so it's very likely that the chest is still there.

## Geology

Höfðinn is made from coarse columnar basalt and is without a doubt an old volcanic plug. Its main type of rock is gabbro. Skagaströnd village lies in the middle of an old central volcano, once a few hundred metres higher than the surrounding landmass. The volcano is about 10 km in perimeter, half on shore and half under water. It was last active around seven million years ago. In the ice age the volcano was eroded by glaciers, but its structure can be seen quite clearly along the sea and in the valleys east of Skagaströnd. Dykes are quite eye-catching in the landscape, as they trickle through the stratum transfigured by geothermal powers, from the time when the volcano was active.

Two large intrusions can be seen in the middle of the old volcano, which are branches of an old magma chamber. The intrusions are made from gabbro, a coarse rock that only forms when the lava coagulates very slowly, deep under the surface. One of the intrusions is Vindhælisstapi, the other Spákonufellshöfði, which the town was once named after. A prominent variant of gabbro in this area is dolerite. Dolerite contains a reddish olivine, which is sensitive to erosion and causes the rock to peel and form a coarse grit.

## Birdlife

Höfðinn's birdlife is characterised by seabirds and upland birds. Fulmar, eider duck, great black-backed gull, lesser black-backed gull, arctic tern and black guillemot are a common sight and some nest in the cape. In the winter, species such as great cormorant, mallard, long-tailed duck, eider duck, red-breasted merganser, sandpiper, herring gull, Iceland gull, seagull, raven, starling and snow bunting are common around Höfðinn and even the occasional falcon.

Common upland birds are oystercatcher, golden plover, ringed plover, snipe, redshank and meadow pipit. An old raven couple are one of Höfðinn's inhabitants and the occasional ptarmigan is also spotted there. Redwings nest in the forestry southeast of Höfðinn. Migrating birds are prominent in their travel seasons (spring and fall). Some of the migrants are passing through Iceland on their way from nesting grounds in Greenland and the Canadian Islands, to their winter habitats in Western Europe and Western Africa. Others are resident layers. Birds such as dunlin, robin, and turnstone are common but the sanderling is rare. Black-headed gulls are summer visitors.



## Vegetation

Spákonufellshöfði's vegetation varies from the sparse vegetation of gavel plains to rich, grassy swamps reaching from scar to scar. In Höfðinn you can find common varieties such as thrift, Norwegian sandwort, bladder campion, alpine sandwort, mountain rock-cress, mountain avens, thyme, glaucous meadow grass, northern crowberry, alpine bistort, red fescue, moss campion and alpine mouse-ear, in addition to various lichens, pteridophyte plants and mosses.

The trees planted at the hillside, facing the town, have had some growth problems due to snowdrift and saltiness birch, spruce and larch being the most common once. In spite of difficult weather conditions, the birch has been spreading across Höfðinn by itself for the last years.

# SPÁKONUFELLSHÖFÐI

Gönguleiðir/Hiking routes/Wanderrouten



Signs with information on local bird life and vegetation are placed along the hiking paths.

**Fyll** *Fulmar galeatus*

... (text) ...

**Hrossagökur** *Colaptes auratus*

... (text) ...

**Hrafn** *Corvus corax*

... (text) ...

**Krúa** *Struthio camelus*

... (text) ...

**Birkú** *Artemisia arbuscula*      **Kornsóna** *Senecio jacobaea*

... (text) ...

**Geldingahúppur** *Chamaenerion angustifolium*      **Lokasjóður** *Chamaenerion angustifolium*

... (text) ...

**Svarthakur** *Corvus corax*

... (text) ...

**Telita** *Copula gryllus*

... (text) ...

**Tjaldur** *Merula migratoria*

... (text) ...

**Áberlugi** *Struthio camelus*

... (text) ...

**Hrafnalla** *Artemisia arbuscula*      **Vallhúsali** *Chamaenerion angustifolium*

... (text) ...

**Krakkyng** *Chamaenerion angustifolium*      **Hvínþræmi** *Chamaenerion angustifolium*

... (text) ...

# HIKING TRAILS



Spákonufell is a natural treasure, an ideal place to enjoy the outdoors, fantastic view and all the beauty of nature. In this brochure you will find information about the village of Skagaströnd. It also holds information about Höfðinn (The Cape), its vegetation, geology and birdlife. The brochure includes an aerial photograph with marked hiking trails. The purpose of this brochure is to encourage people to enjoy the outdoors, examine, understand and experience.

Most of the hiking trails are quite short and many of them have signs with information about birds and plants.

Even though Spákonufellshöfði is not high, it offers excellent view of the mountains and valleys of Húnavatnssýslur counties, and Strandir area across the panoramic Húnaflói Bay. Here by the extreme sea, you can always enjoy nature no matter what the weather is.



**SKAGASTRÖND MUNICIPALITY**

[www.skagastrond.is](http://www.skagastrond.is)