

Panoramic Plates in Iceland

About 68 years ago the first panoramic plate (geological marker) in Iceland was put in place by the Iceland Touring Association. It is located on a hill, Valhúsa-hæð, in Seltjarnarnes, a town close to Reykjavík. The pioneer who designed it was a surveyor by the name of Jón J. Víðis. He died in 1975 but his nephew, Jakob Hálfdanarson, picked up the torch and is now the primary designer of panoramic plates in Iceland. Early on, he assisted his uncle in designing these plates. He worked with him on 12 of the 23 plates that Jón designed and positioned. He since has designed 16 of his own.

According to Jakob there are now 72 panoramic plates remaining in Iceland even though 76 have been put in place. The work on each a plate takes about two years to complete and costs around one million kronas. This aside, they have been of great assistance to many tourists trying to find the lay of the land.

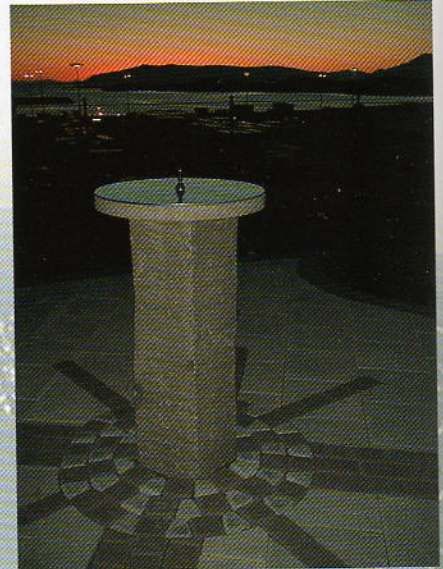
Jakob says that it can be tricky to put in a panoramic plate so that it is positioned properly and points precisely to topographical features. To make sure that he gets this right he always brings two specialists to help with the positioning. He remembers an incident when a panoramic plate, after undergoing repairs, was replaced on Vífilfell. It was foggy and it was put in by memory. Later, on a bright day, they had to get up there again to reposition it.

Making of a panorama plate

What does a disc on a good panoramic plate look like? Jakob says that the most common one is divided into a few concentric circles from the centre of the disc. The innermost area contains information about the plate's exact location. This includes latitude, longitude and altitude, as well as information about its builders. In the next area there are stars indicating cardinal points and old Icelandic time intervals. The largest circle contains topographical names. At the outside edge there are lines which start at the pin in the middle of the disc and point to various topographical sights. The names of these sights are either written in a bow-like manner across the line, or alongside it. The area outside

the names shows outlines of the mountains and other landmarks. Originally the panoramic plates were made of copper but because copper tends to oxidize as time passes, they are now covered with chrome for longer durability. A panoramic plate cannot be moved to another location because it is designed for a specific locality and would display the wrong information if it were to be placed somewhere else.

The number of panoramic plates corresponds to a few more than one each year since the first one was put in. Lately, the number has increased faster with more people taking part in making them. The Iceland Touring Association has been in the lead and early on they were the only ones paying for new panoramic plates (15 plates and one as a gift from the Public Road Administration). The Lions, Rotary, Ministry of Education, and private enterprises have also



Kleppsskaft in Reykjavík.

been sponsoring panoramic plates lately. Two plates are located at Kambarnir at Hellisheiði. When a new road through Kambarnir (which lies through Saurbæjarhraun) was made, the PRA had a new plate made, but the old one is still there. The Icelandic Touring Association had put the old one up on the edge of Kambarnir but it is worn and hard to read.

The panoramic plate at Þverfellshorn in Mt. Esja was made in memory of Jón Víðis on his 100th anniversary in 1994.

Disappearing panoramic plates

The biggest threat to panoramic plates today is people. Some people have carved their names on the plates and some plates have been stolen. Plates at Þingvellir,



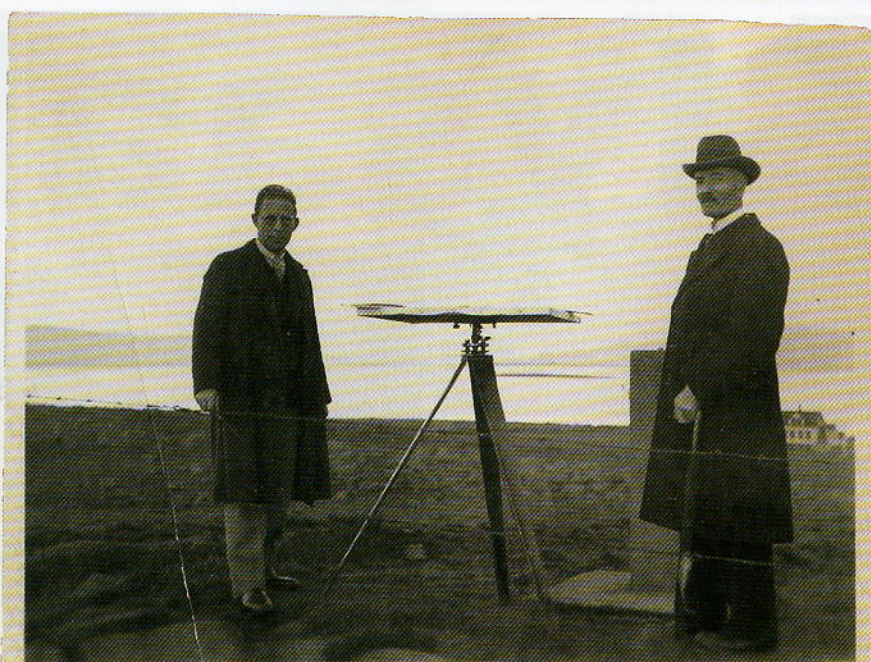
Klofningur in the Dalasýsla county.





The panoramic plate in the town Borgarnes. The setting is much more massive than on many other plates. It was put at the top of a water container, with stairs leading up to it, rail all around the container and copper plates directed to topographical sights. The cardinal points are indicated both with white stars on the platform and on the abutment itself.

Uxahryggir, Svignaskarð and Hornafjörður were stolen and all but the latter have been replaced. A plate located near Blönduós is also missing but it is not clear what has become of it. It seems to have disappeared when the road was moved to a different location.



On Valhúsaheð on Seltjarnarnes October 15, 1935. Jón Víðis, surveyor, and Bjarni Sæmundsson, topographical advisor, working on the very first panoramic plate. It was put in on March 11, 1938 and renovated 1995-96.

Mt. Námafjall by Lake Mývatn

The story of the plate on Mt. Námafjall is special. The original one was oxidized and worn by sulphur steams but when a new one was to replace it, there was a disagreement about one of the topographical names. The name Hverfelli is the old name but the ruling was in favour of the name Hverfjall, which

has been used since 1900. There was disagreement, even with the court ruling, so the plate was never replaced.

Written by Jónas Guðmundsson based on material from Jakob Hálfðanarson and from an interview with him.

Photos: Jakob Hálfðanarson. Photo of Jón Víðis published with authorization of copyright owners.



Panoramic plates in Iceland, 2004.