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# Preparing for Portable Operation Abroad

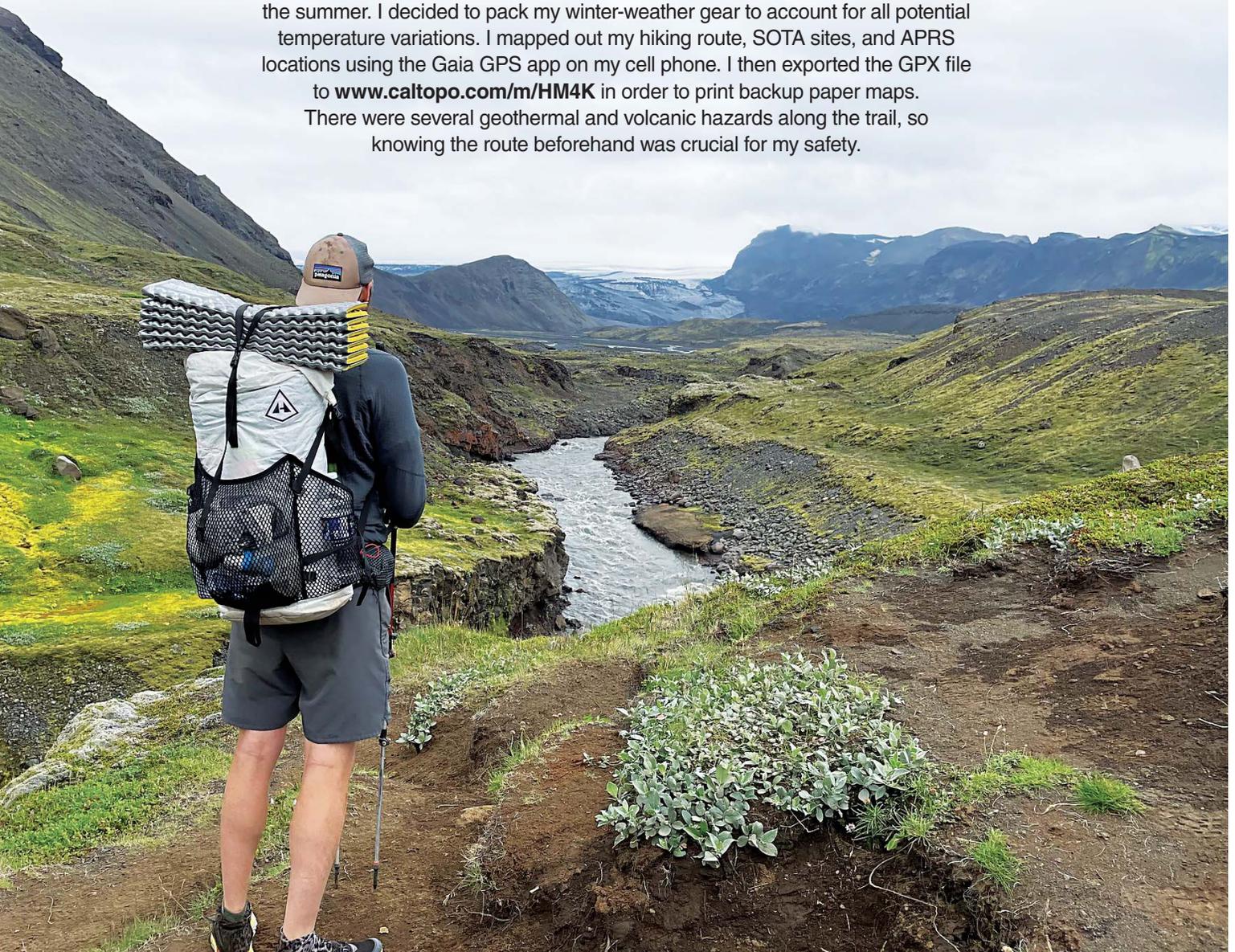
This author visited Iceland to activate a Summits on the Air site, but this wealth of travel tips can help US hams operate anywhere in the world.

**Stuart Thomas, KB1HQS**

In 2020, I had the chance to travel to Iceland for a week-long trip, including 3 days of hiking the world-famous Laugavegur trail, a remote trail in southern Iceland that features several Summits on the Air (SOTA) sites. A portable operation like this requires a lot of planning, especially because I would be operating under another country's communications rules.

## Initial Research

Before departing, much of my preparation involved research about Iceland. Because it is so close to the Arctic Circle, the weather tends to be unpredictable, even in the summer. I decided to pack my winter-weather gear to account for all potential temperature variations. I mapped out my hiking route, SOTA sites, and APRS locations using the Gaia GPS app on my cell phone. I then exported the GPX file to [www.caltopo.com/m/HM4K](http://www.caltopo.com/m/HM4K) in order to print backup paper maps. There were several geothermal and volcanic hazards along the trail, so knowing the route beforehand was crucial for my safety.



Local knowledge is always the best, so I emailed Sigurdur “Siggj” Jakobsson, TF3CW, for his opinions regarding Icelandic weather, amateur radio, and SOTA. A helpful tip for finding locals to contact is to look at the SOTA sites’ previous activators. Searching their call sign can often give you their contact information, including their email address.

## Preparing to Leave

Regarding radio operation and licenses, the FCC primarily allows you to operate within the US. But once you arrive in another country, you must follow their specific licensing requirements. One exception to this rule is the group of European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations (CEPT) countries. As an Extra-class operator, I was allowed to operate in Iceland under the call sign TF/KB1HQS. No permits or other licenses were required. This is a great motivator for General- or Technician-class licensees to upgrade. Another useful tip is to bring a laminated copy of your FCC-issued license and the CEPT rules (see [www.arrl.org/cept](http://www.arrl.org/cept)). I also carried copies of receipts for my HF and VHF radios. I packed all of my radio gear in my checked luggage, so I included copies of the above paperwork and a list of contents for the bag. I always take a picture

The village of Vik is located on the southern coast of Iceland, where black volcanic sand lines the beaches.



of the bag when I check luggage. This way, if it goes missing, I can show the airline staff what it looks like without having to worry about language barriers.

With the pandemic present, there were several requirements for both the US and Iceland that we had to meet before flying. Iceland required a negative COVID-19 test 72 hours prior to flying, as well as immunization records. We had to get another COVID-19 test before leaving Iceland, too. COVID-19 travel rules may change frequently from country to country, so be sure to keep yourself informed.

I opted for emergency medical insurance with GeoBlue (see [www.geo-blue.com](http://www.geo-blue.com)) to supplement our stateside medical insurance. Having insurance abroad is never a bad idea in the event of an issue that requires emergency medical attention. Though Iceland has very good medical facilities, we were still a long way from home and wanted to be careful.



The author, Stuart Thomas, KB1HQS, activating Hjørleifshöfði for Summits on the Air (SOTA).

## Final Precautions and Key Items to Pack

Medical preparation aside, I always carry a color copy of my US passport and an emergency card with personal contacts. Giving a safety plan to family members back home is an important additional precaution. Prior to leaving, I check the travel advisories page (see [www.travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html)) and enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), which gives me up-to-date information and allows the embassy to reach me in an emergency. For the US embassy in Iceland, I included a waypoint of the location in my digital maps, in case I needed assistance abroad.

Because we would be hiking 50 miles for 3 days, we uploaded a safety plan to the Iceland search and rescue (SAR) team (see [www.safetravel.is/travel-plan](http://www.safetravel.is/travel-plan)). I used a Google Docs template to fill in relevant details about myself, my gear, and my emergency contacts. I then sent the document to both my family and the SAR team. Iceland also provides online resources for tourists and hikers, including road and weather conditions at [www.safetravel.is](http://www.safetravel.is). I used my Garmin InReach and <https://wx2inreach.weebly.com> to request weather reports for the hiking location.

For flying, we used the app of our chosen airline along with the TripIt app (see [www.tripit.com/web](http://www.tripit.com/web)) to keep track of our airfare, car rental, and hotel itinerary. For city navigation, we used a combo of Gaia GPS and [www.maps.me](http://www.maps.me). Old-school technology works best sometimes, so we also used a simple tourist map that we picked up in Reykjavík. Money in Iceland was primarily digital for us; having Apple Pay simplified payment so that we never needed local currency.

Power requirements for personal devices and amateur radio equipment need to be considered. The website [www.world-power-plugs.com](http://www.world-power-plugs.com) is a good resource for verifying the power requirements of various countries. I carried a travel adapter to plug in my standard USB charger.

For my HF radio power supply, I used a RAVPower power delivery pack that delivered 12.8 V dc to my radio. This battery pack can be charged with any USB charger, and it can be carried aboard a plane because it is under the TSA's 100 W hours threshold. My USB battery can also be used to charge my cell phone and InReach. Along with my amateur radios and InReach, I carried an Inmarsat satellite phone. All of these could have been used for emergencies, but we mainly used our cell phones. I was able to buy a SIM card, which gave me a local number and a generous data plan. Note that virtual

SIM cards are now available. They allow both local and home numbers, and they do not require the physical SIM card to be removed. I also recommend a paper clip and SIM card holder if you remove your SIM card, as they are small and easy to lose.

Before the trip, I did a frequency search of Iceland. Their 2-meter simplex frequency was 145.500 MHz, and their APRS frequency was 145.800 MHz. It can be easy to forget that other countries have different frequency and band plans. As such, it is your responsibility to determine what is legal to operate in the host country.

Working 2-meter simplex in a remote area requires some pre-planning, especially in Iceland. Considering that the small population is mostly concentrated in Reykjavík, I plotted a bearing from the SOTA sites to the city. Being on the coast cut my potential working area in half due to the ocean. I did not anticipate making any 2-meter contacts as a result of the distance, which eventually proved true. But with that said, you never really know until you are at the site and operating.

A high-gain directional antenna such as an Arrow Yagi can help extend your reach. I also like to carry a 360-degree directional antenna such as an Ed Fong J-Pole.

For HF, I brought my five-band Mountain Topper and end-fed PackTenna with custom traps for 20, 30, and 40 meters. After striking out on 2 meters, I tried HF — the noise floor was so quiet that I thought something was wrong with the radio. After getting used to so many high-RFI environments, it was nice to have such an easy time operating. The SOTA site that I activated, Hjørleifshöfði (TF/SL-216), was an easy hike near the village of Vík. Though I had limited visibility, operating in Iceland was a rewarding experience. International travel is always a great opportunity, and amateur radio can enhance it by taking you to places the average tourist may never visit. For more information about my operating trip to Iceland, visit [www.kb1hqs.com/2021/09/29/complete-guide-to-traveling-hiking-in-iceland](http://www.kb1hqs.com/2021/09/29/complete-guide-to-traveling-hiking-in-iceland).

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