



# RIDING THE WAVES

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Up. Down. **Up. Down.** In skiing as in life. When in Iceland with the Warren Miller film crew, **three of the best female skiers on the planet**, and a crew of curious Frenchmen, you're wise to remember that the down is, in the end, the most fulfilling part.



• Jess McMillan, Sierra Quitiquit, and Julia Mancuso might have seen a whale here if they'd stopped slaying it long enough to watch for one.

### In the Keflavík, Iceland,

airport hangs a sign advertising the Icelandic Phallogological Museum, home to the world's largest display of penises. A few turns down the customs queue hangs another sign, this one with a picture of the ocean and an Icelandic adage: "A wave is never alone."

I think about the latter—though the former does beg pondering—as I skin toward Horse, a peak on northern Iceland's Troll Peninsula. I'm bunking at Arctic Heliskiing's lodge with athletes Julia Mancuso, Jess McMillan, and Sierra Quitiquit, who are skiing for Warren Miller Entertainment's 64th film, *Ticket to Ride*. But I'm skiing with the lodge's other guests, seven French guys with skinny pants and even skinnier skis, because it turns out filming a ski movie involves about as much actual skiing as, say, horseback riding. Only it's colder. And you have race boots on your feet.

We're deep in the valley's blue shadow, our summit blazing in the morning sun. The lodge used to be the family farm of Arctic Heliskiing's owner, Jökull Bergmann, but it's so remote, with such an unfor-giving landscape, I wonder what the hell they grew. Icelanders are resilient, all right—their homeland, after all, is a blister of molten lava encrusted by ice and de-forested by Vikings. Hence the saying, A wave is never alone. When your husband's fishing boat is lost at sea, your house crumbles in an earthquake, or your crops get flattened by a vol-

canic eruption, you'd better swim to the surface and look behind you: Another wall of water is coming to crush you again.

I am no stranger to waves. My marriage recently slipped through my fingers like a fistful of sand, and my daughter is now sifting through the remains for something to put in her pocket. But I'm an optimistic American. And I can't help but think that I'm due for some calm seas. And boat drinks. And skiing.

The Frenchmen and I have settled into an easy touring rhythm—squeak, clomp, squeak, clomp—keeping a good pace because even a quick stop to attach ski crampons requires an additional layer. My hands are in a continual freeze-thaw cycle, every phase of which hurts.

"Iceland is not a nice place for a picnic," says Didier, the tidily built French guide, as we shove some dried fruit in our mouths.

The French are curious about the athletes. "Are they nice?" Pierre asks. I want to explain how I met the girls yesterday on a grassy perch jutting up from the Greenland Sea, but I'm not sure they would understand. Not because their English is halting (which it is), or my French ghastly (which it is), but because I'm still not sure I understand.

"Dude," said Sierra as she walked over the lumpy ground to greet me. "I just popped off this tasty



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nug and punted it!" Her braids, which hang down to her waist, swung as she hugged me warmly. "Sorry, I'm *totally* frothing out!"

"Yes," I reply to Pierre between breaths. "They are very nice."

We continue skinning and pass some holes in the snow with little egg-shaped droppings. Ptarmigans. This morning, as I walked to the ski barn, I saw a cloud of tiny snow wrens fly from a skeletal tree, flashing left and then right, synchronized like a

school of fish. I wondered what they eat.

The ridge is rocky and our ski crampons make a ting-tang sound as they bite into the ice, but the wind-buffed ramp on our left looks gorgeous, the snow crystals glittering brighter than LED Christmas lights. As we approach the summit hump, we find it feathered in hoarfrost so thick, it feels like we're climbing onto the back of a giant prehistoric bird. Or, as my five-year-old daughter might say, like Falkor, the Luck Dragon.

We eat sandwiches, take photos, and pull off our skins. Didier gathers us up like a nervous hen, pecking his chicks into place. He bounces down first, his tracks the perfect mate for powder-8s, and stops at the next knoll. One by one the French muscle

tight turns in the cream with their Ski Trabs and Dynafits. It's not deep, but the top layer is perfectly uniform, and I inhale the pitch in three greedy arcs.

"You know," says Einar, our hunky Icelandic guide who looks fresh off a Viking boat, to the French, "we have plenty of fat skis in the lodge." They cluck and pshaw, shaking their heads.

"We are built for speed!" Pierre says.

"Maybe for the uphill," laughs Einar.

The radio beeps. It's J.B., the lodge's owner. He's with the athletes in the heli, and he tells us Sierra is going to ski Horse naked. The heli roars up to the top, and the French are abuzz, fumbling with their phones, craning to see. What I know—and what I don't tell them—is that Warren Miller makes family films, and the

chance she'll be naked is exactly zero. Sure enough, she skis by in a pink swimsuit. But all they see is skin. And they're awfully happy about it.

**J.B. is a slight man with** wild burnt-red hair and the Gumby limbs of a climber. We're standing on the black sand shore in Dalvík, the closest town to the lodge, while the athletes load onto a boat and the cinematographer takes the doors off the heli. The pilot, Snori, parks wherever he likes, which today is in a patch of mud next to the road. When he needs nicotine gum, he lands at the gas station.

J.B.'s grandparents' farm, a cluster of buildings at the end of a remote valley called Skiðadalur (or "ski valley"), was the closest thing to home for him

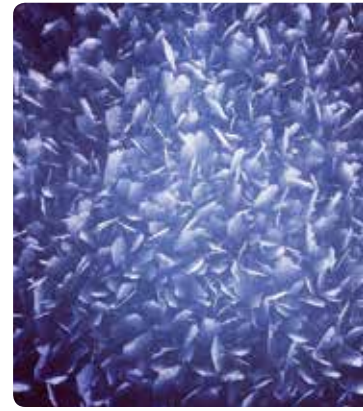
when his mother, a "single crazy gypsy lady," moved all over the world when he was young. He never knew his father.

His voice is soft, his lips never quite close over his teeth, and his face is always calm. But there's a power there. His name literally translates to "glacier mountain man." He can trace his family's history in this same valley back to the year 850. He guided in Chamonix, British Columbia, and Nepal but decided to return permanently to Iceland to care for his dying grandfather, whom doctors had given three weeks to live. "He was a tough motherfucker, though," he says. He lasted four times that.

We walk through the muddy sand to the dock. The water is clear and teal in the sunlight, with big,



**Heli heaven »**  
Jess McMillan skis to the sea.



**Clockwise from top left »**  
Julia Mancuso, Sierra Quitiquit, and Jess McMillan bask in the glow of girl power; airport antics with Sierra's hula hoop, fashioned with plumbing supplies from a local hardware store; Icelandic hoarfrost; skinning up Horse; Julia "at rest" on a down day; Julia executes an impressive header down the newly christened run Nizza.



lumpy starfish clustered on the rocks near the pilings. Distant cliffs, so steep that they're snowless, plunge into the fjord. It looks like the Island of Doom. The only thing missing is David Attenborough, standing on the pier with wind ruffling his fur-lined hood.

The bank, J.B. continues, took the farm long ago. So J.B. and his mother scrounged to buy it back. He had ideas of creating some kind of ski-touring business, but "everyone else tried to convince me there was nothing here," he says. "But I knew there was something here." He looks out at the boat, whose name, coincidentally, is *Dreamer*, motoring into the bay. "My mom said to me, 'Always remember you can do what you want.'" Now he has two A-Stars parked in his backyard.

Instagrams: Kim Beekman (small), Mike Arzt (large).



**Above »** Sierra Quitiquit and the pink swimsuit in question.

**We eat a breakfast of**

muesli and fresh-baked bread—I skirt the fuchsia cold cuts, salmon paste, liver pâté, mushroom cheese, and some kind of meat chutney in a jar—at the lodge’s farmhouse table, above which hangs a board mounted with just enough of a slice of cow’s head to get the horns. The house, with its narrow hallways, steep staircase, and voices everywhere, feels like a ship adrift in a white sea.

We gear up in the cedar-scented ski barn and then board the heli to a peak farther up in the valley. The plan is to ski and skin our way up and down three summits back to the lodge. We wait for the second group on the summit, and I take in the 360-degree view. The peaks’ faces are crosshatched by rock and perfectly flat at the top. Everything in every direction is white. So white that the shadows become colors—blues, grays, pinks, oranges. Vermeer would have a field day here.

Our first ski, a long, mellow valley, cradles four inches of windblown cornmeal on top of Styrofoam. It makes a purring sound under our skis, like when you rub velvet the wrong way. It’s beautiful, and it’s exactly what I needed to still my mental scab-picking. Looking back up, I smile at our tracks. In an untouched swath wider than a football field, the French still criss-cross all the way down.

At the top of our third and final descent, we spot the film crew on the summit of the opposing ridge. We watch the girls drop lines. From this far away, they are just dots and curtains of snow at the crests of their arcs. The French are pretty sure they’re all naked. They start laughing and giving each other shit about I don’t know what, and then I’m laughing because they’re giving me shit. Apparently the only progress I’ve made on resurrecting my high school French is to speak English with a French accent. We feel like drunk people. Which, of course, is why we love to ski.

I kick-turn around to pick my line. This is our best run yet, a steepish face of super-blasted wind-buff. Clouds make perfect cloud-shaped shadows on the pitch, and the wind spits mists of ice crystals in my face. I get up to speed and the snow is so creamy, it’s effortless. I stop, breathless, at the bottom, and watch Einar trail me with wide, slarvy slashes.

Then we race, the French with their poles flying, down the valley. The finish line is the hot tub, or, as I stupidly repeat because it’s one of the few jokes I can communicate, “French soup.”

**Julia’s bag lies open on** the floor of our room, a giant mess of neon ski clothes and sequined Buffs. How strange someone else’s belongings seem. How comforting and familiar they become. I think about the things I used to know. My husband’s backpack. His O’Neill sweatshirt. So familiar that, years from now, if I were to see them again, they’d still feel like mine.

It’s our last night here, and our tattooed and Chuck Taylored chef Gufi (“protector of God”) is preparing Arctic char. He’s humming and chopping in the kitchen, and it smells like baking bread and lemongrass soup. He cooks three meals a day for 20-some people with a refrigerator the size of my dishwasher. Sierra starts telling me about her boyfriend, Julian Carr, who has hair as long as hers. She describes the psychological process he goes through before launching 70-foot cliffs. I find myself wondering who cleans their shower drain.

The French roll in from their own happy hour in the ski barn, and things start to get fun. Gufi opens up the Vodkaskot—a liquor that looks like soy sauce and hardly tastes better. He clears away our sushi salad and notices mine is barely touched. “I don’t really do mayo,” I wince. He takes my bowl and holds it up to my face, “Keep the fucking fork,” he says and downs my shot.

We pour some wine and J.B. informs us he officially named one of the girls’ first descents Nizza, after the Icelandic candy that has become their inside joke. (“I’m

freezing my Nizzas off...” You get the picture.) It also happens to be the run down which Julia front-flipped. “If you don’t fall, you’re not trying,” she says. “Center-punch that nug!” Sierra says. “Wait, did you just tag that photo of yourself on Facebook?” asks Jess, looking up from her phone. Nizza joins runs named Rim Job and Long Cock and runs named after Snori’s bitchy ex-wife, a prostitute brought in by the Russian mafia, and after J.B.’s wife, which may not have been his best leadership decision. “You headed over to Sunna?” the guides say over the radio. “Oh, yeah. I’ve been going down on her all day.”

Then, it being almost Easter, J.B. breaks out foil-wrapped chocolate eggs for dessert. Each one has a slip of paper inside with an Icelandic proverb, like a fortune cookie. The language looks polite, all the letters topped by little hats and dots, but it’s impossible to pronounce. We go around the table, passing our strips to J.B. for translation. “It’s better to bend than break.” “Everybody has his burden to carry.” Then we come to mine: “Everyone thinks his bird is the most beautiful.” I think of my bird, with her flat feet and epic eye-rolls. I miss her terribly.

**The next morning, our** rental van looks like it holds the belongings of a rock band. Twelve sets of skis and boots for six people, camera equipment, drybags, suitcases, backpacks, computer bags, a hula hoop, and one dried fish brick that we should definitely not have stored in the glove compartment. The road is barely visible



Average vertical feet per run

**3,000**

Heli-ski season

**Feb.-  
June**

Terrain skiable by helicopter (square miles)

**1,500**

Highest elevation (feet)

**5,000**



**Limelight** » Jess, Julia, and the author do stupid things under the eerie northern lights. A few Gull beers may have been involved.

ahead, discernible in spots only because of the orange plastic markers sticking out of the windblown snow. Sierra plugs in her tunes, and we start rocking out to awesome '80s jams. "Strangers, waiting, up and down the boulevard..." We drive by peeling stucco farmhouses and a few plots of trees, all in neat rows like hair transplants.

We unload at the airport, next to babies snuggled in sweaters, an old guy in a POC hat, a woman boarding a plane carrying nothing but a large shovel. They look at us like we *are* a rock band. There's no wi-fi, so the airline counter person lets me hop over and use the computer to send an e-mail. "We are very homey here," the woman says.

A few hours into the plane ride, I get up and walk down the aisle to the bathroom. A mother loosely hugs her standing son into her and, judging by where his head hits her stomach, he's about the same age as my daughter, Cate. I feel a physical need, like a muscle needing to stretch, to touch Cate's hair and feel the heat of her head through my shirt.

Back in my seat, I find my notebook and out falls a postcard of Julia. She wrote, "Smile, Cate! Go for gold!" and even spelled her name right. Cate's not really a skier yet, though it's not for any lack of trying. She's more of a refuser to stand up after falling, and a thrower of ski poles.

But I'm not going to give up. Because I know as well as the Icelanders do that this world is full of waves. And skiing is a sure path to some kind of joy. ♦