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Virgin snow

By Tom Robbins

In the wilds of northern Iceland, a young boutique company helps skiers live out their dream: the first descent

In an empty valley in the far north of Iceland, sitting on a soft mattress of crowberry bushes and moss, we are eating sandwiches. The sun is out and spring is beginning to take hold, leaving little islands of exposed vegetation where the snow has thawed. Ours is covered in rucksacks, ski equipment and brightly coloured clothing, but beyond its noisy shores, the valley is white, silent, and without the slightest trace of human existence. In a few minutes a helicopter will arrive and whisk us away, and the valley will return to its pristine state: it will probably be months before it hears another voice, maybe years.

“Well that was a pretty good first morning boys,” says our guide Jökull Bergmann (known to all as JB), looking back up at our tracks snaking down from the peak high above. We crane our necks to follow his gaze. “Six first descents before lunch!”

I almost choke on my sandwich. For mountaineers, the ultimate achievement is the first ascent, to reach a summit where no one else has stood. For skiers, it’s the first descent. In 25 years of skiing, I’ve read much about them in magazines, thought about them often, but never dreamt I would get the chance to make my own.

But up here, first descents are common. It’s not that the runs are so fearsomely difficult that no one has dared attempt them, simply that so few skiers have ever been here. Iceland has no real ski “resorts” in the European or North American sense, though a few towns have a handful of ski lifts on the hills nearby. It has only one internationally certified mountain guide (JB) and only one heliski company (his).



To reach it, we fly to Reykjavik, then north in a small turbo-prop plane over the frozen, empty interior, to Akureyri, the country’s second city (though it has fewer than 18,000 residents). There we are picked up in a giant-wheeled 4x4 minibus, and driven even further north, first on tarmac, then gravel roads and eventually bumpy farm tracks.

After an hour of driving up the Troll Peninsula, we turn inland close to the small fishing town of Dalvik, and continue by a stream along a wide, windswept, valley. The farms become less frequent, and finally, at the end of the track, we reach a small white farmhouse, inside which JB and Snorren, the helicopter pilot, are sitting on a sofa, watching the *Eurovision Song Contest*. Whether we are technically even still in Europe is debatable, but the annual competition is an Icelandic obsession, not to be missed even here, at the dead-end of the Skíthadalur valley, with the dark shapes of mountains looming at the windows.

The farmhouse, Klængshóll (Raven Hill) Lodge, is our base for the four-night trip. Whereas most heliskiing accommodation is in purpose-built hotels or chalets that are a blend of Alpine and Rocky Mountain kitsch, this is a real home. It is not luxurious (most of the six bedrooms are not en suite) but it is cosy. JB, whose name literally translates as Glacier Mountainman, grew up here, helping his family of sheep farmers. In the lounge is a bookcase built by his grandfather in 1921, with his initials and the date carved into the wood. The latest ski magazines sit alongside leather-bound Icelandic sagas on its shelves. On one wall is a black and white photo of the valley from the 1940s. It looks exactly the same as it does now.



The Klængshóll farmhouse

One day in the 1980s, a Swiss woman knocked on the farm’s door and asked for directions for her hike. The farmer sent his grandson JB to accompany her, the young shepherd’s first guiding job. He went on to work as a ski guide in Chamonix and for several Canadian heliski companies, before returning to try to develop skiing here, partly to raise money to keep the farm in the family. After successfully running ski-touring trips, he first trialled heliskiing here

in 2008, building up to a first full season this year.

JB calls this “boutique” heliskiing, as opposed to the “industrial” operations in Canada, which might cater for 40 guests at a time and use two or three large helicopters. Here, the skis are waxed and sharpened in the barn, beside spare tyres and pieces of farming machinery. The helicopter is parked outside, with chickens pecking at the grass around it.

Once this was the poorest farm in the area, its altitude of 200m making it, at this latitude, less productive



View the slideshow



The helicopter lift

than those by the coast. The ground is covered in snow for eight months of the year; the sun doesn't rise above the mountain tops for two of those – scratching a living here must have been a constant struggle. Today, clustered beside me at the kitchen table are Rolex-wearing bankers, lawyers and entrepreneurs, proof that isolation and wilderness have become desirable commodities.

The chickens scatter as Snorren fires up the helicopter on our second morning. The previous day we had worked our way, valley by valley, into the little-visited centre of the Troll Peninsula, but today we are heading to the coast. We fly over Dalvik and the village of Olafsfjordur, watching small fishing boats heading out from the harbour on the black water. Finally we come in to land, Snorren perching the helicopter skids on a snowy summit. We clamber out, and crouch in the snow until the helicopter lifts off and drops away into the valley below. The pounding of the rotor blades is replaced by a sudden quiet and we turn and stare in silence at the astounding view. Often in the mountains it can be hard to see much beyond the next peak, but here, high above the fjord, we can see a succession of snow-covered peaks and valleys that continues endlessly to the horizon on both sides of the water.

It's May, close to the end of the season, and the snow isn't the deep powder of skiing folklore. Instead it's what Europeans call "spring snow" and Americans know as "corn". Hit it when the slope has had just the right amount of sun, and it feels like sliding through the softest butter.

Our group of five stands alone at the top of a huge mountain face then, one by one, we push off, flying down wherever we like, at some points coming close together, at others hundreds of yards apart. There's a feeling of space, of freedom. Perhaps two-thirds of the way down each run, there is the unmistakable smell of the sea and close to the shore we come upon Snorren, waiting in the helicopter to take us to the next summit. After a dozen unforgettable runs we head back to the lodge, stopping en route at Dalvik's municipal swimming pool, where the children rush outside to watch the helicopter slowly drop from the sky and land in the car park. We feel like astronauts returning home or visiting rock stars (though I slightly ruin the effect by getting stuck on the children's water slide).

JB tells us that when he first talked about setting up a heliski business here, everyone said he was mad, that skiers wealthy enough to go to Courchevel, Aspen or St Moritz would never spurn them in favour of the obscure Troll peninsula: "Icelanders have a habit of thinking anything Icelandic is inferior."

To outsiders, though, the advantages are obvious. Unlike many heliski destinations, you can get here in a day, without jet lag, from any European or east coast US city. The season runs from March until June, so you can come after the northern hemisphere winter draws to a close, and on bad weather days when the helicopter can't fly, rather than sit inside and play boardgames (as you might in Alaska), you can visit volcanic geysers or go whale watching.

But ultimately, coming here is about swapping the routine of a conventional ski trip – the lift queues, the busy pistes, the throbbing europop in the apres-ski bars – for an adventure, the chance to experience a real wilderness, to try something new. In the space of a long weekend, I have my first taste of skiing from summit to shore, of skiing on a glacier under the midnight sun, and of making a first descent.

Back at the farmhouse we sit outside in the late evening sun, while Sonja, the chef, serves appetisers – a plate of dark purple sashimi in a light soy sauce, and slices of smoked meat served with mint and juniper. They are so delicious I can't stop sneaking seconds and thirds. What is it, I finally ask? "Minke whale," says Sonja. And the meat? "It's ... what's the word in English? A baby horse – a foal!" Two more firsts.

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Details

Tom Robbins was a guest of Elemental Adventure (www.eaheliskiing.com) which offers four-day packages at Arctic Heliskiing (www.arcticheliskiing.com) from €4,850. He flew from London to Reykjavik with Icelandair (www.icelandair.com; returns from £197) and on to Akureyri with Air Iceland (www.airiceland.is; returns from €65). See also www.visiticeland.com

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Secret skiing: Away from the crowded pistes

Four ski insiders reveal their favourite lesser-known resorts.

Derek Taylor, Editor of Powder Magazine

"Monarch Mountain, Colorado: Skiers from Denver and Colorado's Front Range drive right past this four-lift mountain on their way to Crested Butte or Telluride but it gets some of the best snow in the state, has fantastic tree skiing and features a small cat skiing operation as well."

www.skimonarch.com