

FINDING HOME UNDER ICELANDIC SKY

TRACKING ANCESTRAL LINES WITH ICELAND'S
GLACIER MOUNTAIN MAN



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In my mind, Iceland had always been someplace foreign, someplace far away. But staring north to the Arctic Circle with three thousand feet of perfect corn dropping direct to saltwater fjords, I am overcome by both dramatic perspective and a sense of place. Six days deep in a warm culture, in an isolated location with the resonance of home, I am left wondering how we had landed here and what we had found.

The easy answer is we were lured to Iceland's north coast with the promise of adventure heli-skiing underneath a twenty-hour sun, in three stacked zones holding sweet corn lines that had never been skied. Our group of fellow travelers was drawn to here by the promise of the unknown but also by a personal sales pitch from Jokull Bergmann, Iceland's first fully certified ACMG guide.

For the moment, what we were seeing was spectacular. We were alone with twenty hours of Arctic daylight, perched between two deeply carved inlets—Heoinsfjorour and Olafsfjorour—in the rugged topography of Iceland's Troll Peninsula. On our first clear day we had toured—rolling through one-lane tunnels and past traditional red-and-white farmhouses in our DIESEL rental—then skinned from sea level as Ski Journal photo editor Grant Gunderson captured skiers Sven Brunso and Matthias Giraud etching signature lines against a backdrop of Arctic Circle sunsets above a remote fishing village that was once the herring capital of the world.

But we came to fly and our first day lifting off from the N1 gas station beneath the Olafsfjorour town ski jump opened up a new window on northern solitude. In zone that had never seen heli tracks, we hike high above a barely populated coast then ski to shoreline, lifting quietly again to the narrow ridgeline in stunned silence. With vis clear to Flat Island on the Arctic Circle, the location is the definition of peace—until the rhythmic thumps drop a second guided group of Arctic Heli skiers into our basin.

Our Revelstoke-based, Icelandic-raised guide Fridjon Thorleifsson, watches calmly as his boss landed on the opposing ridge. In no time we observe Bergmann, Arctic Heli's owner/operator who had spent thirteen years building his grassroots guiding operation and promoting the potential of the Trolls, start blowing off steam by ripping fast, first-descents and chasing the circling sun from aspect to aspect.

"They were supposed to be heli ski-touring, but I just said 'fuck it, I want to ski,'" recounted the 33-year-old, ACMG-certified Bergmann later that night. "I just went straight to the bottom of each run and figured they were big boys and they could take care of themselves."

With a lifetime of local knowledge, it wasn't the setting that had been stressing him out but the backdrop that had turned his April to June season into a bit of a logistical and financial mess. If you didn't hear, last May was when Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano sent ash plumes skyward, shut down European airspace and stranded travelers around the globe.

For Bergmann the natural disaster meant cancelled bookings, stranded guests and watching his lone heli go AWOL while it conducted media overflights of the eruption. Compounding that chaos were unpredictable weather patterns, an incoming group of high-maintenance euros and a ski touring party from Reykjavik posting bitter comments on his Facebook page after being snaked on the last clear day—and the fact that Bergmann's cell phone was lost somewhere in the mountains.

So when the stranded guests landed an outbound flight and the clouds cleared out the fjord toward the Arctic, it made perfect sense that a few first descents were what this man needed to drop back in.

At the end of the day, what I needed was confirmation from our guide Freon that the exit we were scoping, back to our final pickup, would go clean.

"I hope so," replied Freon, as he peered down at exposure and shoreline.

But the line went clean, after a sketchy knife-ridge sidestep, a three-thousand foot chute and a walk through sheep pastures and past fish drying racks back to the Arctic Heli van—which brought us back to a 10PM dinner of salted cod lasagna, cured horsemeat and fresh baked bread at our farmhouse accommodation in the Skioadalur Valley.





"WE PAUSE FOR A COFFEE ON THE ABANDONED COAST, WHERE TREELIKE IS AT SEA LEVEL AND THE TOURING CABIN SEES ONLY A FEW GROUPS PER SEASON. THEN WE CONDUCT AN OVERFLIGHT, PICK OUR LAST SUNSET LINE AND RIP ONE MORE DOWN TO THE MOSSY PICKUP"

THE HIDDEN HOMELAND

It had taken the four of us six days to adjust to the Icelandic rhythm in a land of natural wonder and coastal weather. We arrived between volcanic ash plumes and forced airport closures then rolled the six hours north through lonely, powerful landscapes to the tiny fishing village of Dalvík at the entrance to the Skiladour.

Iceland's north is harsh country settled by hearty stock who carved out an existence through fishing and farming in a land that was once much colder and much snowier.

Both livelihoods are now in decline and the abandoned farmsteads that dot this countryside are a monument to a disappearing lifestyle in a country that seems torn between an allegiance to the past and an embrace of the future.

In the farmhouse that was once Bergmann's childhood home, we spent our down days eating home-baked breads, dining on traditional foods such as barbecued whalesteak and listening to classic Icelandic tales washed down with Kaldi beers from the local microbrewery in a country where most alcohol was illegal until 1991—a strange fact Bergmann explained through the lens of Nordic history.

From their founding sagas to their local histories, Icelanders are storytellers. This trait seems either due to the island's isolation or the Irish that makes up the other half of this culture's DNA, but every oddity we encountered and every place we visited came with both a powerful backstory and an unfinished narrative. And the Hidden Land, our second untapped heli destination, which sat just across the water, was another Icelandic place shrouded in story.

Over the dinner table, Bergmann slowly unrolled the Hidden Land lore of the farmer's wife who killed two polar bears with a pair of scissors and the nationally famous poet who was rescued from childhood tragedy on what is now called the crazy coast. It is a roadless area bypassed by progress, where abandoned farmsteads now serve mainly as access routes for snowmobilers who ride here late into July.

The next day our departure was also late, due to a refueling backlog at the little, local Akureyri airport, where stranded international jetliners caused a major delay in refueling the portable Arctic Heli fuel tank with Jet A. But we were buckled into ski boots by 3PM, fly-

ing across the vast Eyjafjörður fjord to a delicate landing on a seaside peak with sweet Arctic corn waiting patiently for only our turns.

Every day, on every aspect, the snow we'd skied had warmed to fast, buttery corn without getting completely cooked. This far north, the spring sun stays low on the horizon and the temps hard freeze at night, resulting in some of the best corn snow any of us had ever skied. As a powder snob, I was skeptical that corn snow could pull Swiss, German or American skiers for the adventure heli experience. But by my third day sinking into lines of undisturbed corn, the journey made sense.

With the sun high above the horizon and no other skiers anywhere in the range, our Canadian guide Kirk Becker led us into private lines off Arctic Heli's radio repeater peak. One thing is clear from our vantage high above the water, this experience is far from a standard CMH, TLH or RMR heli week. We slowly work our way down faces of refreezing corn that drop to the mossy coastline then load up to scout the perfect shot. The soft aspects and perfect sunsets, however, do not line up and we wind up chattering at full speed down solid slopes back to the pickup.

We pause for a coffee on the abandoned coast, where treelike is at sea level and the touring cabin sees only a few groups per season. Then we conduct an overflight, pick our last sunset line and rip one more down to the mossy pickup—with the heli then racing retreating daylight back to the barn just before aerial curfew at 10PM.

THE GUIDE'S HOUSE

After a traditional Icelandic meal of meat soup home-cooked by Bergmann's mother Anna and calls to our mother's on mother's day, I wander downstairs into the cramped basement room that serves as a cook's storeroom, wi-fi hotspot and guide's office for the Arctic Heli operation.

For days this room has been a hub of activity with guide's meetings, weather forecasting and visiting media groups pouring over maps of the northern ranges, all while the cook grabbed foodstuffs to feed the stranded guests. But under the unfiltered single-bulb light, after the swirl has subsided, I finally find Bergmann alone checking email and weather."

"ICELAND IS A BEAUTIFULLY ISOLATED CULTURE, WITH AN INDEPENDENT CHARACTER DEFINED BY FLEXIBILITY AND PRACTICALITY. IN TEN DAYS WE HAVE LEARNED TO ADAPT LIKE ICELANDERS—TO POWER OUTAGES, RUMORS OF ECONOMIC CRASHES AND TO THE COASTAL WEATHER—RATHER THAN STRESSING ABOUT SCHEDULES AND CIRCUMSTANCE. "

"What's the weather look like for the next few days?" I ask.

"Let's not talk about that," he replies.

It's been a tough road for a 33-year-old self-made guide to pioneer a new operation in an unknown and unpredictable place. Yet a new booking has come through and, at least for now, Bergmann appears to be winning the battle to build a viable business here. In what he classifies as a "very, very Icelandic struggle" he bought ancestral land, farmed by four generations of his family, back from the bank just before his grandparents passed.

"If I wanted to live here I could either be a sheep farmer or a mountain guide," says Bergmann reflectively. It appears to me either choice would have been tough, but Bergmann's path was almost predetermined since his name, in Icelandic, means man of mountain and glacier.

His history includes learning to climb as a Sheppard watching over his grandfather's flock in the peaks of this valley and earning the ceremonial rank of high man at age thirteen, climbing to the tallest peaks to chase sheep into the flat valleys for the fall round-up. When this traditional lifestyle disappeared, more than a decade ago, he was off on another route through Chamonix, Canada and Greenland to become Iceland's first internationally certified mountain guide.

The second act of his story includes coming back home for a death in the family, meeting his future wife and almost perishing in an ice-climbing avalanche that flushed through a gully feature and broke his neck as well as 15 other bones. With great determination he walked out to safety and was guiding again six months later.

But true to the name, he is a man of resolve, evident in the effort he has undertaken to pioneer his business and draw ski tourists into

the unknown. But Bergmann has a powerful vision and a compelling destiny.

"When we started 13, 14 years ago, nobody had a clue that there were mountains in Iceland," he explains to me surrounded by wall-mounted maps of the local ranges. "For the first five, six, seven years I would be the only guy ski touring and about six years ago it started changing."

"Icelanders in general are super open to new things and new ideas," says Bergmann reflectively. "But nobody in town understands what the hell I'm doing. To them it's complete madness. They have no conception of what it is."

"But in the end, the people here that can't farm sheep or fish anymore," he says. "They have a completely undiscovered economic paradise here."

THE BACKYARD RANGE

Iceland is a beautifully isolated culture, with an independent character defined by flexibility and practicality. In ten days we have learned to adapt like Icelanders—to power outages, rumors of economic crashes and to the coastal weather—rather than stressing about schedules and circumstance.

So we take it in stride, when the clouds lift the next morning and we are granted one last window, with a chance to finally ski with Bergmann in the glaciated peaks behind his house. We boot up at noon, with the heli fueled and our host keen to ski.

"Let's go find some shit, how do you guys feel about that?" says Bergmann as he jumps into the shotgun seat of the heli and we lift off from behind the barn.





"THERE IS A WORD IN ICELANDIC THAT MEANS THE ROPE THAT BINDS YOU TO YOUR ORIGIN," HE SAYS AFTER THE HELI LEAVES US ALONE WITH A VIEW OUT THE VALLEY TO THE FJORD. "AND IT'S AN EXTREMELY STRONG FEELING WITHIN ALL ICELANDERS."

We start with a speed run down peaks Bergmann now owns behind the house. We reload by a raging glacially fed stream, in a valley now abandoned to community ownership, then set down on a peak steamrolled long ago by glacial recession. While Gunderson shoots, Brunson and Giraud ski another first descent in sweet Arctic Circle corn. I hang back as JB pounds in heli flags to mark a landing zone on his home turf.

"There is a word in Icelandic that means the rope that binds you to your origin," he says after the heli leaves us alone with a view out the valley to the fjord. "And it's an extremely strong feeling within all Icelanders, even if it's a mess at times, with eruptions, earthquakes, harsh winters, darkness and everything, its extremely rare to find Icelanders that leave Iceland for good. They always come back."

We break for lunch in the sun and trade stories about our families, then we lift off again to ski Stairway to Heaven, a classic glacially carved run. It is one of six runs on a day of four first ski descents in a dramatic land with a powerfully welcoming pull.

"My next idea is another first descent," says Bergmann back at the pickup. "I'm not sure if it connects but it ends up in a really cool bowl feature."

So, for the crescendo, the heli drops Brunson and Bergmann on top of another first descent. Giraud skis a featured face off a parallel ridge fast and smooth, then Gunderson trains his long lens on Brunson as he slays a prime corn line at speed. His clients safely to the pickup, Bergmann drops his own line, charging the sweet Arctic corn with the certainty of a skier who knows where he belongs.

"To me, this land, there is this incredible bond that really exists. And obviously I'm a very lucky guy because I realized at a very early age that I had an opportunity here," said Bergmann earlier. "That

these mountains, that nobody wants, and everybody thinks are in the way, are actually my gold. If I could mine this gold, I could turn what was such a mess—sheep farming in such a harsh region—into the exact opposite, something really good and really productive."

AFTERGLOW

For our last skiing act in Iceland, we reload for one last 1100-meter line from the Horse to the house. The backyard peak is the high-point of the Skioadalur range and a destination that now draws ski touring groups from in and out of country. We click out after reaching grassline, boot it back from the Horse to the barn and return for a dinner of roasted local lamb and Icelandic deserts at the farmhouse as the sky remains dusky until dawn.

A new group arrives the next day and Bergmann is lost to their program, so we pack up then soak in natural hot springs, visit geothermic mud pots and taste fresh nectar straight from the fermenting tank at the local Kaldi microbrewery before leaving the north. After a return to Reykjavik and a rebook due to another eruption we drop into the madness of an Icelandic Friday night pub crawl and watch a Nordic culture make up for centuries of prohibition. Then we wake to the hangover of international flight.

By the time I ease into Sigur Ros and Bjork in Iceland Air's Saga class, home has started to seep into my sleep-deprived thoughts. It is a tough thing to find, but the concept exerts a powerful feel. It is power in a whirlwind, peace in turbulence and strength in uncertainty—a sense of calm from a sense of place. The vortex we discovered is a tough place to leave, but our time in this foreign homeland has come. Yet, somehow, feeling home in such tangible form is inspiration to cultivate those same roots. And, in essence, isn't that the one place we all travel to find?