

FREEDOM

Words: Pete Oswald • Photo: Will Oswald

Location: Iceland

I stand high above the Arctic Ocean on Iceland's northern coast, just 50 vertical metres below the summit of a mountain known as 'The Horse'. Leaning on my poles, panting heavily, I look downwards. A pure white blanket of untouched snow covers the harsh volcanic rock, leading all the way to the tumultuous ocean, crashing on the frozen cliffs of the Troll Peninsular far below. The air is so crisp and still that every vibration sounds crystalline.

Beneath me, I can hear the repetitive swoosh-tap of the ski-touring bindings of my girlfriend, Sophie, and my brother, Will, as they skin up the slope towards me. A single trail stretches out in the snow behind, to where their distant figures chug like slow trains up the tracks I have carved out in front of them.

I drink as my lungs cry out for air. After only two quick gulps I am absolutely gasping. My body is totally beat. Will arrives, bent over his poles, releasing great lungfuls of billowy warm breath into the frozen atmosphere. He says nothing, but his expression betrays the pain of exhaustion that we all share.

Staring at the blank white canvas in front of my skis I force a step forwards and upwards. My legs are full of lead; weak and stiff. For four days we have been slogging up mountain peaks from sea level to over 1300m. Now, we are wrecked. But I force another step and the momentum allows another. My eyes are fixed on the nothingness of white ahead and my mind wanders to visions of chairlifts, snowmobiles and helicopters. Why have we chosen to come here and slog up these mountains like this – inducing our own pain and suffering – there are so many easier ways to ski.

As I power through the final lunges over the crest and onto the flat summit, I give up on rhythmic breathing and burst into a panting frenzy. Beyond the front of my skis are endless, white mountain tops. All of them as flat as a cricket pitch and at the same elevation as the one I stand on, as if all the peaks have been cleaved by a sword.

The frozen ocean covers the horizon to the north and the plateau of mountains stretches as far as I can see to the south. An isolated sense of freedom fills me. There is no sign of human life for hundreds of kilometres in every direction. No need of money, internet or mobile phones; no obligations or social pressures, or financial concerns. Under the brilliant rays of the sun we bask in the bliss of the moment, in the victory of the climb.

Time passes. Our gaze shifts from the stunning vista to the mountain below. Exhaustion turns to excitement; breathlessness to butterflies. Now it's time to ride – to fly down this peak. Time to unleash the freedom we have earned. Just us and our skis. Mocking the mountain.

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