



Words by Sophie Stevens & Will Oswald | Images by Pete Oswald

Iceland isn't a place you have a whole lot about, except perhaps in regards to devastating volcanoes or conquering Vikings. Touching down at Keflavik Airport in the South-West of Iceland, it appeared we had just landed on the moon. How could we have ever imagined the limitless, epic, backcountry lines we were about to embark on?

Volcanic activity and a near arctic climate have created a dark, barren, uninhabitable-looking landscape where the only things that seem to grow fruitfully are big ginger beards. Somewhere down the line people (Vikings) decided to settle on this remote island and have since created a fascinating community. With a population of only 320,000, Iceland is a very proud nation. And so they should be.

Driving north in our less than adequate rental car, the mountain ski lines rose as hopes of great skiing grew in our minds. As we reached Akureyri, over 400km to the north, almost everything around us was crying out for a track here, and a slash there – no uncharted glaciers or impassable cliff bands. Was this too good to be true? Large volcanic craters reminded us that entire communities have been killed by these volatile mountains. The skinny roads barely gain elevation beyond the valley floor or the rugged coast, but they don't need to. The snow is thick right down to the crashing Arctic Ocean, which bashes ice-laden cliffs. Was there something the locals knew that we didn't? Why does no one ski here? We had heard tales of trolls living in these mountains. That must be it. Just to be sure, we chatted with some locals.

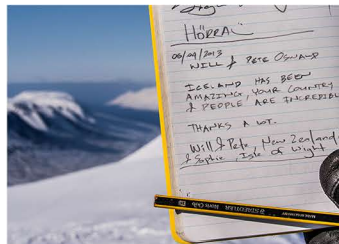
Conveniently the only ski guides in Iceland, Bergmenn Mountain Guides, are located a short drive up the Skiðadalur Valley. With two choppers already loaded up ready to set off, we managed to grab the only guide who wasn't running around frantically. He had a broken leg. Trolls perhaps? When asked where we should ski, he simply said, "Look around you man, you can ski anywhere". It was as simple as that. There was no ego chat or warning us not to go here or there, or that it was too dangerous without taking one of their guides. We were surrounded by endless, epic, untracked terrain.

The mountains in Iceland look as though someone has conveniently the top 100m off all the peaks; they are flat on top and, quite chopped for Bergmenn Guides, perfect for landing a helicopter. There are only 10 helicopters in Iceland and two are parked right in front of us, Jökull Bergmenn is on to something here.

Being on the cusp of the Arctic Circle the weather can be pretty harsh and unpredictable, particularly on this isolated island not much bigger than the North Island of New Zealand. Luckily for us, our first day was bluebird and we were very quickly stripping down to base layers for the skin up. A three to four hour skin and boot pack elevated us from sea level to the top of a 1,300m peak. From the flat top we were surrounded by epic faces with the perfect gradient, features and terrain for big freeride-style skiing – steep concave faces with shelved cliffs and steep landings. For our first run of the trip we chose to ski an open aspect with fast wide turns in 10cm of crisp powder. As our run descended below 700m, the snow turned to a fun, afternoon spring thaw. We pulled up our last turns with smiles of glee and relief that the burn on the way up, and the voyage to Iceland, had been worth it. Reflecting on the day's triumph we sunk into the Daikurbýggð natural hot pools and listened to the locals telling us passionate yarns about their fishing culture, Icelandic history and politics – the Prime Minister is listed in the phonebook!

Ólafsfjörður is our next stop, about 60km further north and getting close to the most northern part of Iceland. We were less than 50km from the Arctic Circle. After a brief scoping session around the fishing village of little over 800 people, we decided on another 1,200m vertical route, which would allow us to ski right down to the Arctic Ocean. We were taking full advantage of the 14 hour long spring days. >>>

Main Image: Sophie Stevens & Will Oswald in awe of the Dettifoss waterfall



Top Left: Will rips toward the bottom of the Skiðadalur Valley.
Top Right: Sea ice in the Eyjafjörður fjord, with Akureyri township beyond.
Bottom Left: They leave their mark in a notebook tucked into a gear rack car on top of the Hlíðarfjall mountain range.
Bottom Right: Soph and Will skin along the flat topped Hestur mountain which translates to "The Horse".

As we put our skins on and jammed our plastered feet into ski boots, a local cruised up on a snowmobile. We passed glances to each other and realised we were all thinking the same thing. Rough introductions and a bit of friendly persuasion later, Soph scrambled on to the back and Pete and Will tossed two prussics to the back of the snowmobile and boosted up 1,000m vertical in 10 minutes with Will and Pete towed water-ski style behind. We waved goodbye to our unpronounceably named friend and again were greeted by big open valleys with steep headwalls, allowing us to pick some fun lines up high, looking down on the Arctic Ocean.

The next morning brought the Icelandic weather we had been told about. With a blizzard in the high mountains we still wanted to explore so we travelled east towards more unpopulated, volcanic terrain and Lake Mývatn. After getting stuck and spending three hours digging out our low-price Kea rental car (due to its 2WD and low profile, not our Kiwi driving attitude of course), we found out the hard way why most of the tourist sites here are Summer access only. We gave up testing the limit of our rental insurance and decided to put on our skins and walk. We were stunned and awestruck by our discovery; with not another foot print or ginger beard for miles we came across the truly spectacular 44m high Dettifoss waterfall (Europe's most powerful waterfall). Mist instantly froze to a thick ice wall built up

from a dark winter of pounding, Arctic-cold water. We felt belittled by this remote raw beauty.

Our next terrain treasure find, a stark contrast to the dead Dettifoss waterfall yet equally secluded, was the Mývatn natural hot pool, a geothermal spring with natural healing minerals, swirls of changing temperatures and a sandy bottom – totally rejuvenating.

After several exhausting days touring we decided it was time to ride some lifts at the local Hlíðarfjall ski field, just 10 minutes from Akureyri Backpackers, our hostel. Think similar in size to Coronet Peak, with lifts like Chou and more rear entry boots and straight skis than a Treble Cone rental closing day. A 100m boot pack from the lifts to the ridge-line above brought some of the best chutes and snow we had skied so far. We sessioned until light would allow before loading "everything" into the car for an all night drive back to Reykjavik and our flight home.

Our faithful Kea rental chased the distant setting sun as we shared nostalgic memories of this wonderful trip and how lucky we were to ski and experience such unspoilt yet desolate beauty. Just then we remember Pete's skis are still sitting on the ski rack at Hlíðarfjall ski field! No worries – we'll be back.