

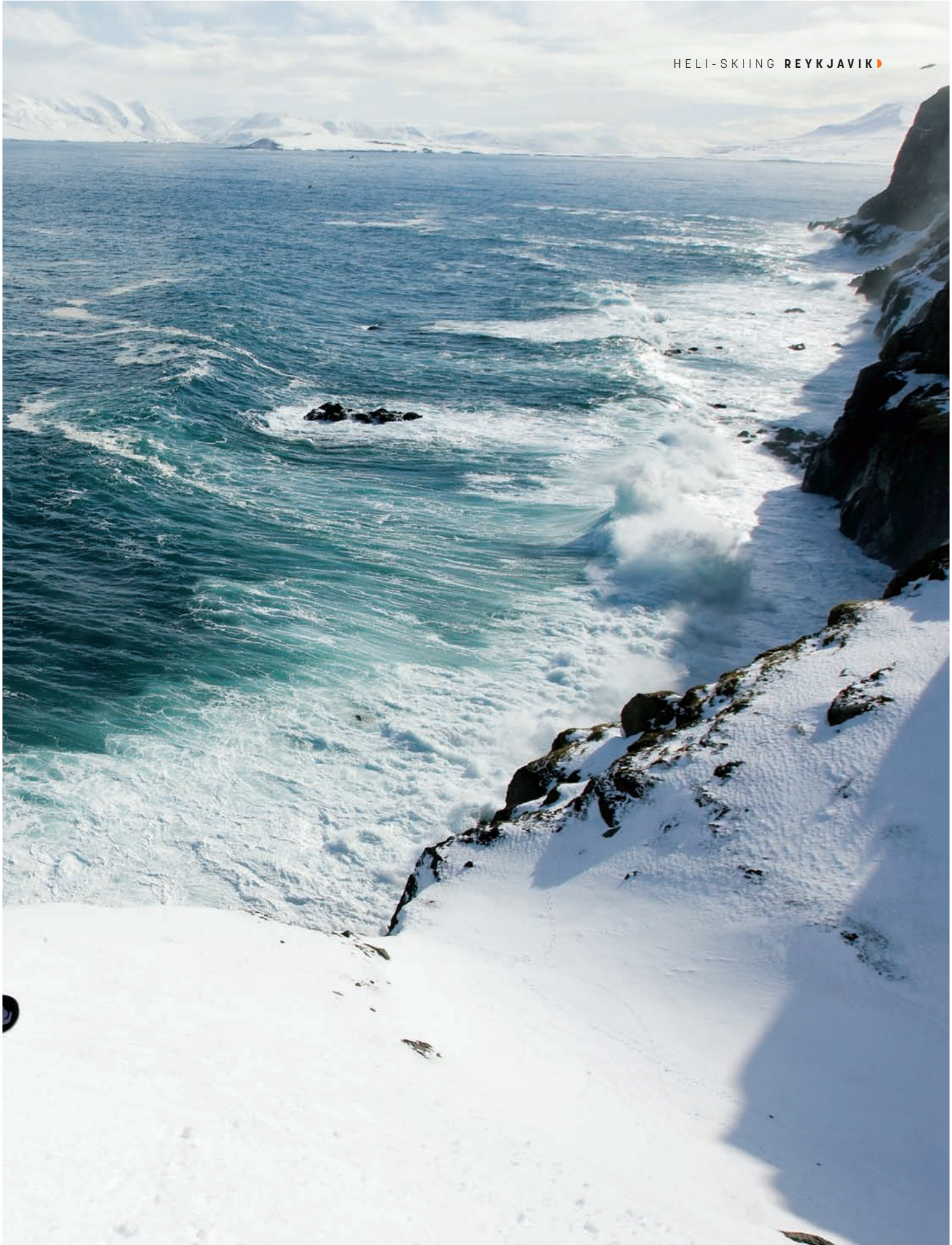


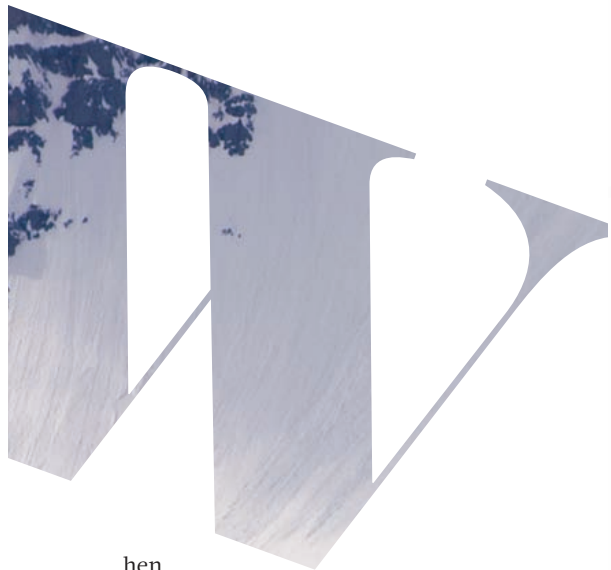
Volcanic rock and icy fjords provide a unique backdrop to a skiing adventure, as we found on a heli-skiing trip to Iceland's Troll Peninsula

DESCENT FROM HEAVEN

WORDS • ALF ALDERSON

HELI-SKIING REYKJAVIK





When a man tells you his family have lived in the same valley since God was a lad, you can understand how it is that he knows the area so well. In fact, Jökull Bergmann's ancestors settled in northern Iceland before God - at least the Christian version of the deity - even existed, as far as they were concerned. His Viking forebears were still worshipping Thor when they rolled ashore on the Troll Peninsula in their longboats back in the 9th century and they've stayed there ever since.

It means that now, more than a thousand years later, their great, great, great (continue ad infinitum) grandson, universally known as 'JB', has a pretty unique type of local knowledge - something he uses to good effect as the head guide with Arctic Heli Skiing, Iceland's only heli-ski operation.

And so it is that I find myself in one of the company's six-seater helicopters with four fellow skiers. It's a bracing morning, and we're heading towards the summit of 1,100m Mount Kárahnjúkur on the very same peninsula where JB's ancestors first landed. Our pilot, Snorri, hovers with only one skid on the ground, while the other hangs in space over vertiginous crags. After we've all emerged from the safe side of the 'copter onto the summit and gathered up our skis, Snorri takes off, then drops like a stone to clatter down towards our pick-up point over a 1,000m below. At times like this, you wonder who is having the most fun: the pilot or the skiers.


Although these mountains are modest in height - few rise much above 1,500m (considerably lower than the 3,000m summits of the French Alps) - there is something

uniquely wonderful about skiing here. Iceland's ski terrain is unlike anything the resorts of Europe and North America can offer. Flat-topped mountains tower over steep slopes and wide valleys. Crags and cliffs, streaked with black-banded rock outcrops, contrast starkly with the snow. And then, perhaps the most singular feature of the Icelandic heli-ski experience, there's the constant presence of deep, blue fjords and the Atlantic Ocean way

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down below. On many runs you're actually heading down to sea level, and the presence of the North Atlantic serves as a dramatic backdrop, with mighty swells booming onto the black volcanic-sand beaches where several descents finish. At times the landscape is so powerful, it almost makes it impossible to concentrate on what lies ahead.

So it's fortunate that our first run of the trip takes us down the gentle upper slopes of the Gljúfurárjökull glacier, which sits at the head of Skiðadalur, the valley where Arctic Heli Skiing is based. It's a superb introduction: we begin slowly, getting a feel for our skis and the snow conditions on the slopes as the cool, sub-Arctic air caresses our faces. Gradually, the slopes >>



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steeper, the skiing becomes more challenging and exciting, and that caress becomes a fully fledged slipstream whistling past our goggles as we drop into wide *couloirs* (gullies), slicing through the snow with ease. I feel a convulsion of wild-eyed joy at the thought that this is just the first of scores of runs ahead of us.

Comparisons between heli-skiing and resort skiing are pointless – there are no lift queues, no lifts, no mountain restaurants, in fact, no sign of humanity whatsoever, and every run is down untracked snowfields. The sight of hundreds of metres of virgin snow isn't something you encounter too often in the Alps and, even when you do, it'll be criss-crossed with tracks by mid-morning. Here, in Iceland's far north, every single run you make is down a glistening carpet of pristine white draped across a slope that may never have been skied before.

After our first day, having clocked up close to 12,000m of downhill, JB tells us that nine of the 14 runs we've done have been first descents. A smug grin can be seen spreading across everyone's faces as it sinks in that we are the first people *ever* to ski these slopes. Even better, JB reckons there are "thousands" of such runs here.

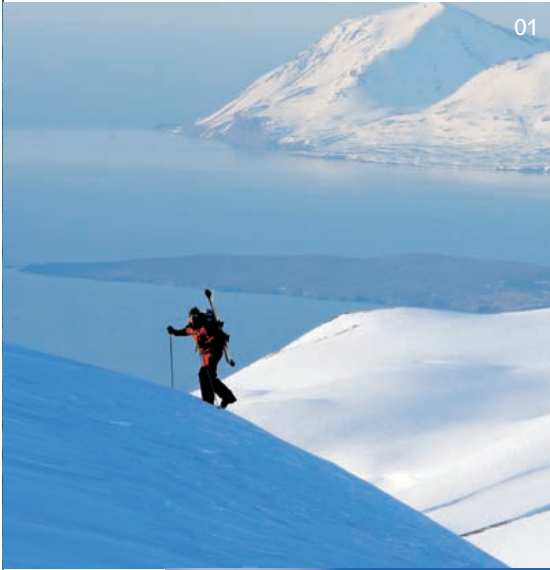
Of course, you don't have to rent a chopper to enjoy skiing here. There are several small resorts dotted around the country, the best of which is Hlíðarfjall (*hlidarfjall.is*), near Akureyri, Iceland's second biggest city. It has almost 400m of downhill, with 27 runs, nine lifts and three cross-country ski trails. There's also some fantastic ski touring in the north of the country, as well as on the slopes of the now famous – but still unpronounceable –

Eyjaflajökull volcano (*bergmann.com*).

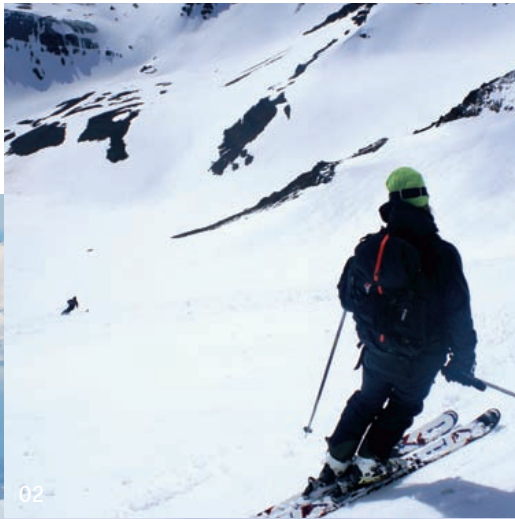
Because of the high latitude, there are great snow conditions in Iceland well into June and the season doesn't even start until March.

One experience you may care to leave to others, however, is sampling the local culinary delicacy. Known as *hákarl*, it is – allegedly – a Viking speciality and is made from shark's flesh that has been buried in the earth for a few months and then hung up to dry for several more. They say it's been a traditional winter dish here since JB's original ancestors landed, but while I can't confirm that fact, I can report that it is indeed as awful as it sounds. White or red in colour and cut up into chunky cubes, it gives off a strong whiff of ammonia. Sampling it one evening, I only managed a mouthful.

Thank God for Brennivin, the local hooch, which I hastily poured on top of it to rid my mouth of the taste. Another Icelandic speciality, despite being made from fermented spuds and known locally as 'Black Death', actually isn't that bad. Deliciously warming after a gruelling day on the slopes, it also represents pretty much the extent of the après-ski scene here, as we're based in a remote farm, with just moorland and a couple of impressive waterfalls for company. ➤



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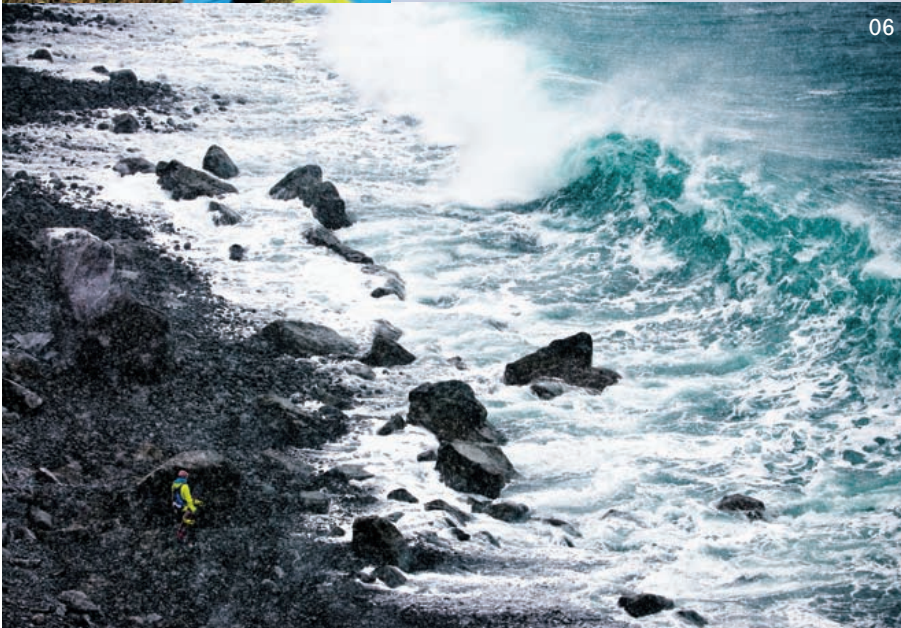
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SKIING THE TROLL

- 01 Fjords make a truly astonishing backdrop to Troll Peninsula skiing
- 02 Heli-skiing can mean being the first person to ski a slope
- 03 Local delicacy hákarl – cured, raw shark
- 04 Getting ready for pick-up
- 05 Our writer, Alf Alderson (in green trousers) in the mountains
- 06 Stunning contrasts are everywhere, like the North Atlantic waves crashing on the black volcanic shoreline

ICELAND OFFERS SOFT, BUTTER-SMOOTH 'CORN' SNOW WHICH YOUR SKIS WILL SKIM ACROSS – AND WARM SUNSHINE TO GO WITH IT



PHOTO: FREDERIK SCHENHOLM

Klængshóll is JB's family homestead and it's far removed from the often glitzy timber lodges of North American heli-ski operations. Dinner is eaten in the farmhouse kitchen along with fellow skiers and members of JB's family, after which everyone sits outside to enjoy the pastel shades of sunshine on the mountains before going early to bed. We dined fantastically well on everything from Arctic char and catfish to ptarmigan, goose and lamb – all local and organic. Booze consumption remained modest, since you want a good night's sleep after heli-skiing – and you don't want a hangover when you're in a helicopter.

You only need to be a confident and competent intermediate skier or better. All the specialist gear, such as fat skis and avalanche safety equipment, is provided

along with a brief exercise in how to use it, and snow conditions are far less demanding than the powder that is part and parcel of traditional heli-ski destinations such as Canada, Alaska and Russia. Iceland's maritime snowpack produces very user-friendly, classic spring skiing conditions of soft, butter-smooth 'corn' snow, which your skis will skim across with ease – and quite often warm sunshine to go with it.

It all amounts to a magical experience, even for a hardened ski buff. Indeed, there's an Icelandic saying that pretty much sums it up: "Hvað er ekki að líka?" It means "What's not to like?" Shark meat aside, of course.

Arctic Heli Skiing (arcticheliskiing.com) operates from March to June with prices from €4,760 per person for four days of all-inclusive heli-skiing

Reykjavik need to know

(2,110m)

height of the country's highest mountain, Hvannadalshnúkur



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(10)

number of ski resorts in Iceland, of which Bláfjöll (skidasvaedi.is) is the largest

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(4,000km²)

the area available for Icelandic heli-skiing



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