



ski touring in iceland

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Four skiers on an icy island. And a number of high mountains. Fredrik "Frippe" Ericsson looks at me through his goggles. He's cold. So am I. We've been here a long time. Standing on the very summit of Snæfellsjökull. Photographer Fredrik "Schenis" Schenholm is screaming out instructions, but most of his words are dying in the wind, before they reach us. Only his enthusiasm holds us back. While Frippe and I are facing the wind, being showered by ice-cold spindrift as the camera's shutter is running wild, Schenis enjoys and captures one of the most splendid views any one of us has ever seen from a mountain. And it's not the first time we're standing on a remote summit with skis on our feet. Frippe has skied off of three 8000-ers, planning a fourth expedition for fall 2008. Schenis is a contributing photographer to ski and travel magazines in more than fifteen countries. Two

years before this moment I made the first ski-descent from the summit of Mount Everest, by the Norton Couloir. Yet we're all stunned. The mountain rises from the outmost tip of a delicate peninsula. The North Atlantic Ocean dominates our view. Only a narrow strip of land, scattered with mountains, connects us to Iceland. The Saga island.

It's been two days since we all hooked up, coming from three different parts of Europe. Frippe arrived from Chamonix - the European capital of mountaineering. Two years ago we all lived there, amongst some of the wildest and most impressive mountains of the western European continent. Now Schenis arrived by train from Gothenburg, one of the most beautiful cities of Sweden. The city attracts a staggering 3.5 million visitors yearly, not only due to its more than 1000 years of history, but mostly to the credit of Liseberg amusement park. Schenis himself though was attracted to the city for another reason: His passion for mountains led him to share his time between geological studies in Sweden and photographic assignments to mountain areas all over the world. When I skied Everest, Schenis climbed above 7000m to document the descent; the descent that led me to leave my apartment in Chamonix for a new life in Oslo, swapping days of skiing for days with Scandinavia's leading companies as invitations to give motivational talks started entering my e-mail in-box at ever-increasing speed. Going to Iceland was a welcome opportunity to change the pinstriped suit for my other favorite work suit: my ski-clothes.

Meeting up in front of Icelandairs Check-in counter in Scandinavia's main hub, Copenhagen's Kastrup Airport, is a sought-after meeting. Together we make a good posse. But we are still a player short. We are meant to be four.

Air-travel is a major industry for the island, conveniently located mid-Atlantic. The days of mandatory refueling are history, but Icelandair is still going strong, offering an atmosphere long gone for the ones among us used to the short-haul flights of the European Continent. Food and drinks appear as a courtesy, a word most of us no longer use when relating our latest adventures in the air.

Finance is the major economic sector on Iceland. The value of the three main banks, Glitnir, Kaupthing and Landsbanki, equals ten times the island's gross domestic product. You don't have to be very interested in international finance to know that last year was a rough ride.

Just before Icelandair's flight attendants told us to find our seats and sit down comfortably, other men sat down in another place. Deeply concerned men of the Icelandic National Bank. They were in fact so concerned about loan-financed consume and geared-up investment, they upped the interest-rate to 15.5%, the highest in Europe. Players on the international finance markets feared the



land was on verge of bankruptcy as the Icelandic Crone (ISK) went down 30% relative to other currencies in days, as analysts feared the National Bank (read: taxpayers) will have to pick up the bill at the end. It's not really as if the nation will go bankrupt. Iceland has moderate foreign debt and cheap energy with an industry willingly profiting from it. Then there's the fishery. So rich, UK and Iceland has fought a number of fights about fish; fights so intense British tabloids named them The Cod Wars. At most four British naval vessels patrolled Iceland's coast and live shots were fired on trawlers. In the end NATO had to tell the parties involved to behave themselves. They did, but the Icelanders

may get scared again. The financial situation will hurt. For you, dear reader, this is of course exciting news. There's a sale going on for travels to Iceland!

Three hours after take-off we touch down on the Leifur Ericson-terminal, named after the Iceland-born Viking-explorer who sailed his long-ship from Greenland to North-America in year 1000, where he set foot on the American continent as the first European. The event is celebrated in USA on the 9th of October each year.

Loading up the rental car outside the airport is an unusual experience. The little under-motored car too often connected with the term "rental" is replaced by a shiny

Toyota Land Cruiser. Frippe gets to drive, as I'm DJ Thor and Schenis finds comfort in the wide back seat. The geologist absorbs impressions from the vast volcanic flats that are the outskirts of Reykjavik. We're kings of the road, a little while. Then Frippe bursts out, "What's that?"

"Super-jeeps," answers a seasoned Schenis from the back of the car. He's been here before and is familiar with the gigantic cars of the island, adapted to off-road use.

Traveling towards Reykjavik sends our thoughts to early morning. Something is missing on the roads - other cars. Wide American-built roads lead to the compact inviting capital city of Reykjavik. We spend a night before heading

to the fishing village of Olavsvik, a small community on the north coast of the narrow peninsula called Snæfellsnes.

A vicious storm attacks from the north, picking up considerably as we approach the westernmost tip of the peninsula. The land has a rawness to it that is hard not to admire. We're thinking of the people who came here by fragile long-ships a thousand years ago and made this place home. Known as Vikings their tribe has forever been associated with endurance, navigational skill and adventure. We feel different from the Vikings when the wind makes us hesitate about simple tasks such as leaving the car to pick up warm coffee from the gas stations along the way. The



driver has to fight with the steering wheel just to keep the car on the road. Two hours after leaving Reykjavik we find Olavsvik's only hotel, with the fitting name Olavsvik Hotel.

The next day a gale has taken the storm's place. We load up the car with daypacks and head a few hundred metres up the foot of the volcano Snæfellsjökull. Jökul is Icelandic for glacier, indication that the summit is draped in a permanent ice-cover. We change over to new means of transport; driving at up to 70kmph (45mph) we reach the summit in ten minutes. Climbing the mountain under our own power in the harsh wind-chill of the ice-cold humid air, hitting us directly from the North Pole, would be demoralizing to say the least. Some would even suggest dangerous. Snowmobiles minimize our exposure-time, making the summit within reach. No one suffers any frostbite.

The descent is a true adventure. It's not the snow conditions that impress us. We can just guess that yesterday's storm took away more powder-snow than it deposited on the slopes. Only on a few isolated spots do we find occasional patches of soft snow. But the view! The experience. There's no doubt this is a day to remember. Letting our skis pick up speed we find our way towards the big blue ocean that is the North-Atlantic.

Martin Hesse sits by the window of Flufelags Islands Fokker 50, bound for Akureyri. The former free-skiing competitor has his daily work in the German fashion industry. Now his eyes are resting on ice. Under him, mountains are stacked together, seemingly forever. It's a monotonous landscape, yet he's amazed by the unlimited variations under him. "They're like snowflakes", he thinks, "All different, within strict design-limitations." The coffee resting on the small drop-down table in front of him has long ago lost its warmth. He's too eager to get down so he can start hiking up and then rip the climbing skins off his skis and get down to business. Ski-business.

The short chubby aircraft with a cruising speed of 490kmph (304mph) spends forty minutes in the air before it touch down on Akureyri International Airport. Claiming the skis takes Martin a matter of minutes. There's a certain beauty to small airports.

After skiing off the majestic Snæfellsjökull we traveled north and made Dalvik our new base. Finally we are all gathered in the Land Cruiser and





stop for a burger before going to bed early. The nightlife is not the most impressive part of this region.

Next day the sun is out and so are we. Again we load up the car and head for Skidurdalur, a valley cutting into the mountain range Martin studied from above, yesterday. A simple dirt road winds its way up the snow-covered valley. We pass a few farms without seeing any farmers. Only the classic small Icelandic horses are present, patiently standing in the ever-present wind, observing us.

Iceland is by no means a typical goal for skiers. But of the few who come here, many stop by the lodge of Iceland's first, and so far only UIAGM-mountain guide, Jökull Bergmann, and his mother Anna Dóra. As Jökul is busy with heli-skiing in

Canada, his mother greets us in the doorway next to another member of the household, their dog Dimma - The Black One. The challenge is now to pick one of the many mountains that surround the little lodge. Once climbing skins are attached to our skies, and the course chosen, gaining altitude is simple. The slopes seem to be uninterrupted from the valley floor all the way to the summits. Clouds are playfully negotiating their way around the landscape, high and low, lingering on summits and drifting down in the valley. Soon we arrive on yet another summit. The turns we can make are earned by hard labor. A fact we don't really contemplate. We're too busy enjoying the view.

The next day whiteout and a poor weather forecast force us to look for alternatives. We travel an hour westwards and find ourselves in Myvatn, a good place for adventures of the easy kind. As we park outside Sel Hotel Myvatn our car resembles a Morris Mini compared to the super-jeep next to us. As we finish our pasta, the owner of the hotel sits down at our table, challenging us to explore the lake with his super-jeep. The temptation is hard to resist, and moments later a seasoned

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driver exits the road, entering the thick snow-covered ice on the lake. The car appears to be meant to travel anywhere, with huge tyres it floats on dense snow. When we ask about the car's limitations, the driver answers, "The car has only one limitation, the skills of the driver. In fresh snow the high snorkel provides air for the engine, and a GPS leads you to your destination. But they're expensive toys," he adds. "First

you buy a brand new SUV, and then modify it for some 40.000 USD."

After getting back on the road the driver stops in front of a series of hydrothermal valves. This sparks Schenich to start a small lecture.

"Deep under us pockets of water boil in the hot ground. The warm water then travels several hundred metres to the surface, where it exits by boiling mud-pots. The

landscape is wild and magical, just like it was a thousand years ago when Vikings admired the same phenomenon and named the many lava shapes in the area."

But the driver saved the best for last: Minutes after leaving the boiling mud behind, we pull up in front of the area's latest attraction: Myvatn Nature Bath. A group of enthusiasts have gathered the hot water in a series of small artificial lakes. In a snowy landscape we let our exhausted bodies sink into the 40°C (105°F) warm water. After a day of no skiing we have found the perfect after-ski activity. ■

After our visit to Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark stepped in, guaranteeing loans to Iceland up to 235.000.000.000 USD. The interest rate and currency rate remained unchanged.

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