

ICE-OLATION

TROLLING FOR TURNS IN NORTHERN ICELAND

TEXT AND PHOTO BY BRIAN MOHR

Summit-to-sea ski descents and 24-hour daylight.

Hot springs in every village. No bears—unless a polar bear floats over from Greenland. No bushwhacking. Welcome to northern Iceland.

Near the summer solstice we spent nearly a month skiing and camping in the heart of Iceland's largest range—the Trollaskagi, or "Troll Mountains"—purportedly once home to Iceland's last surviving troll. The Trolls are one of many sub-Arctic ranges dominating northern Iceland, an area spanning several hundred miles between Iceland's West and East Fjords. They soar up to 1,400m above the Greenland Sea, just a few miles south of the Arctic Circle.

Lucking out with 20 days of blue-sky weather, we explored the Trolls, skiing long, flowing lines down glacial valleys, and steep, string-bean couloirs. The same subtle freeze-thaw cycle that preserves the region's relatively modest snowpack (150-250cm at the season's peak in April), made for delicious corn skiing well into summer. Taking advantage of around-the-clock light, we climbed and skied at night under the midnight sun, leaving pastel-colored tracks in the snow.

The Trolls are home to a small community of skiers, and there's plenty of terrain to go around. "These mountains are so big, I've hardly ever seen anyone else skiing the backcountry—not even Icelanders," says Jon Marino Saemvarsson, who grew up in nearby Akureyri and regularly skis the Trolls. "There are just a few of us really."

But local skier Jokull Bergmenn guides increasing numbers of visitors out of his family's former sheep farm near Dalvik. Ski descents from some of the region's highest peaks spill right onto his property.

"We are bringing something new and different into the old mix..." says Bergmenn. "It's my hope that people around here can really begin to benefit from having these incredible mountains in their backyard." Although Dalvik and Akureyri have their own cross-country and alpine ski areas, skiers in pursuit of backcountry ski descents are still as rare as a cheap pint of beer.

Bergmenn wants to change this, and he's not alone. In Iceland's West Fjords, Runar Oli Karlsson and Sigurdur "Siggi" Jonsson, of Borea Adventures, specialize in sailboat-based backcountry-skiing trips to the Hornstrandir Nature Reserve—a remote and mountainous peninsula in northwest Iceland. Although the mountains (up to 800m) are not as high as the Trolls (up to 1,400m), snowfall (600-900cm) and summit-to-sea descents are abundant.

You can only access the Hornstrandir by boat, on skis, or on foot. It's one of the largest wild areas in all of Europe (yes, Europe), and you can ski to natural hot springs on its northern shores. And there is a movement afoot to expand the Hornstrandir into a National Park that would include several more fjords and the Dragnajokull Ice Sheet to the east.

"There have been no sheep grazing here for 50 years," Siggi says. "There are no roads, no snowmobiles—there's no place in Iceland like this."

He's right—and there is no place in the world like northern Iceland.

SOURCE:

GUIDE SERVICES:

Bergmenn Mountain Adventures
Dalvik, Iceland
icelandicmountainguide@gmail.com
www.bergmenn.com

Borea Adventures
Isafjordur, Iceland
info@boreaadventures.com
www.boreaadventures.com

LODGING AND DINING INFO:

www.dalvik.is
www.westfjords.is
www.visitakureyri.is

AIR TRAVEL:

www.icelandair.com
www.airiceland.is



"One of the largest wild areas in all of Europe, you can ski to natural hot springs on its northern shores."

Ken Lucas: Anchors away.