



The Ski God Is from Iceland

Adventure

Text Jan Bruelle

Photos Richard Walch



Peak-to-boat skiing: The expedition yacht "Aurora" anchored in a fjord of Hornstrandir.

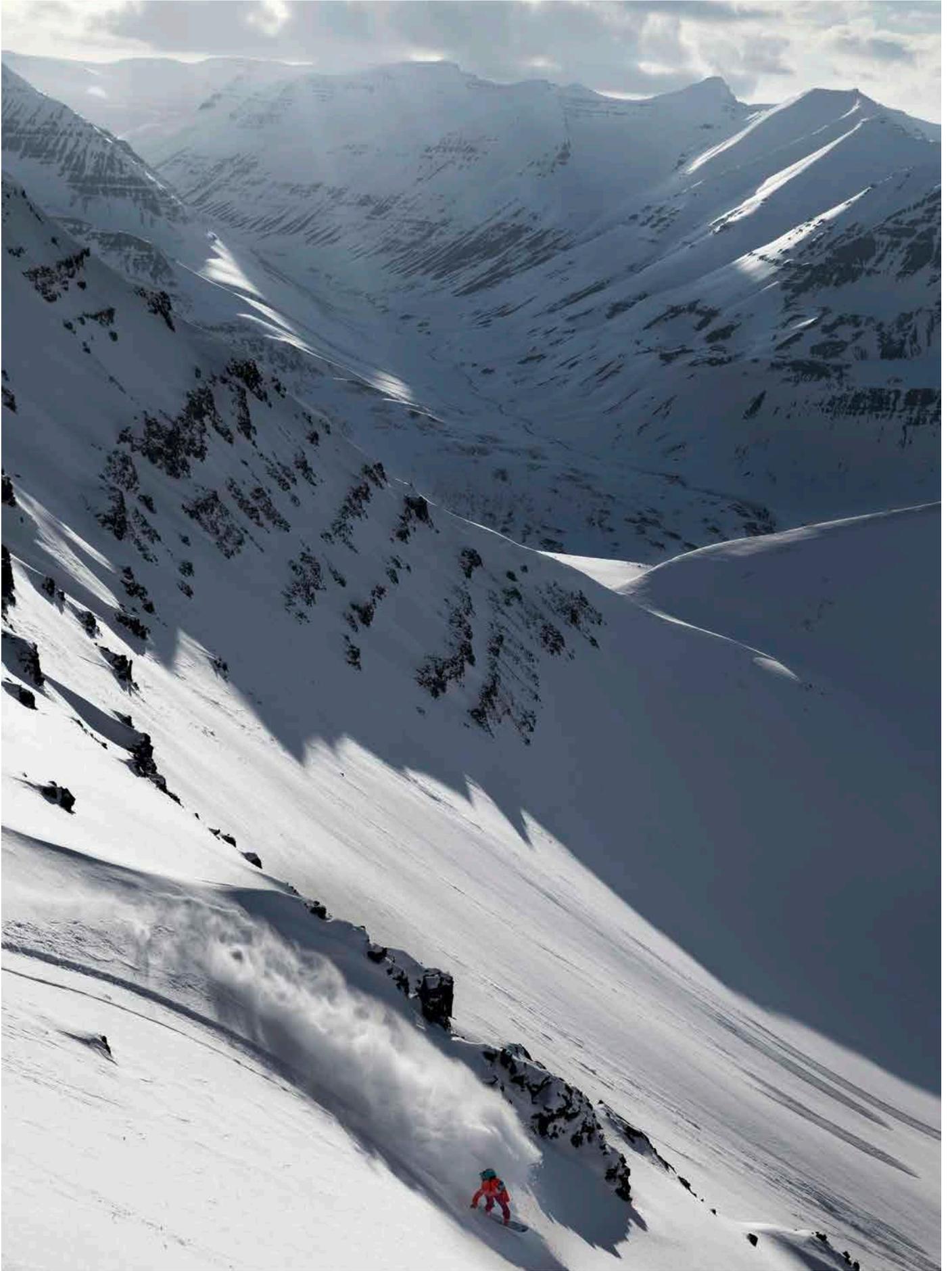
A week of extreme skiing ends with bruises and total exhaustion, but with endorphins flowing. At the end of the world. The place that only Sigurdur, the skipper, can reach with his sailing yacht, and where Gunnar's helicopter sets us down. Iceland. Adrenaline paradise.



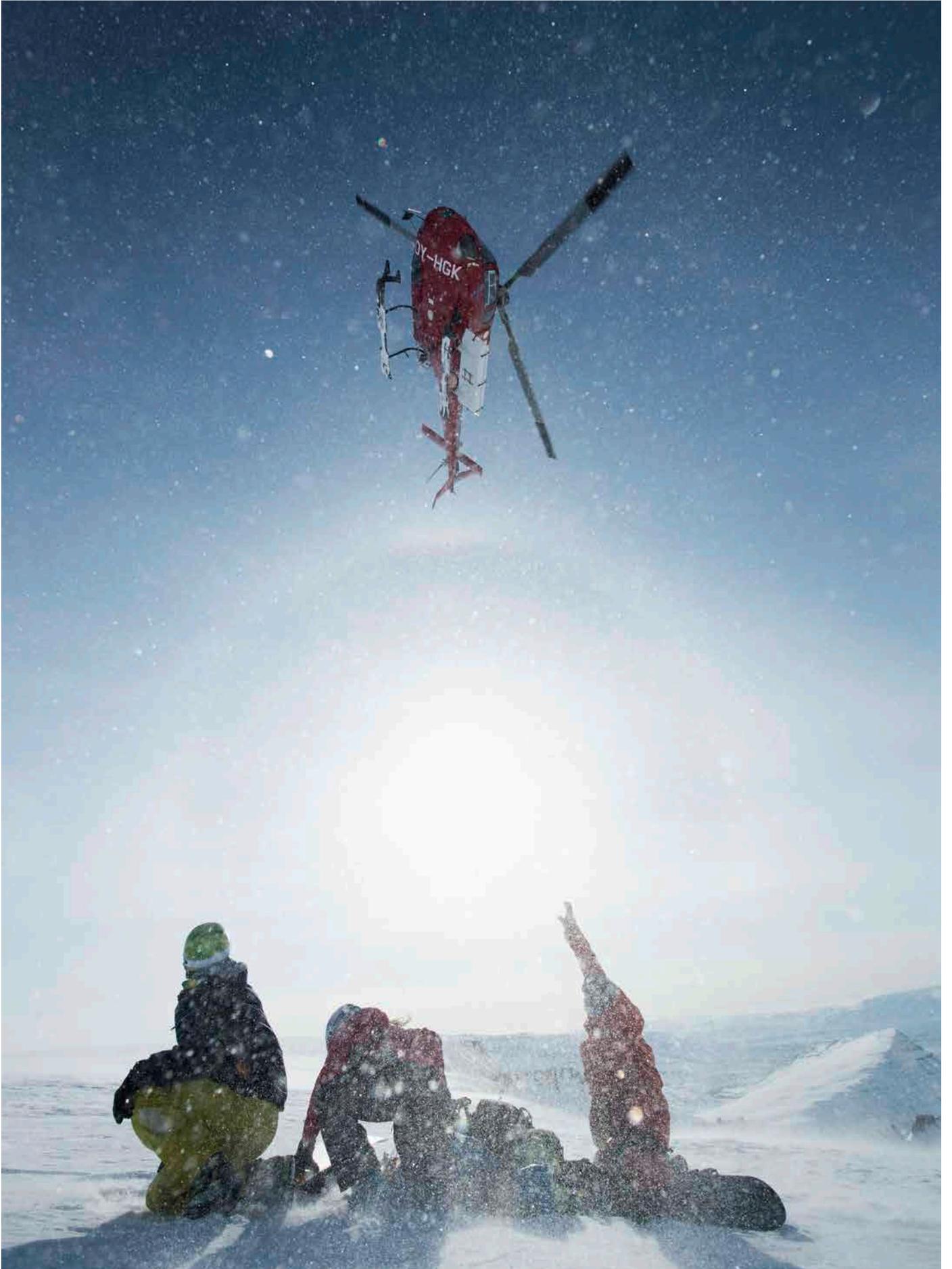
A need for speed: On the move with the snowmobile squadron from Akureyri.



Queen of the hill: Jess McMillan drops onto a lonely powder face, far above Skidladur, the “Valley of the Skier.”



Snow surfing: René Margreiter in a bone-dry, high-speed storm.



Up in the air: One of the A-list stars of Arctic Heli Skiing on the way to the parking lot.

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“Do you see your route?” Yes, I see it. Do I ever. An S-shaped couloir. Left curve, right curve, and then just straight downhill.

Renilla? Looks good. Gaddi? Thumbs up. Richard? Right there, as always.

The pilot tilts the machine to the left and whirls it downward toward the peak. It isn't exactly easy to land here. The wind keeps pushing the machine away from the narrow flat. But the man at the control stick is a daredevil. As soon as you take the headphones off your ears and the thin tin door opens, the muffled background rumble swells to a roaring noise. Icy cold enfolds us. We cower, tightly pressed against each other, in the powdery snow. Gaddi gives the pilot the signal, and seconds later, the beating of the rotors has given way to a surreal silence. We are probably the first people to be here on this summit this winter. The slope disappears behind a blunt ridge. The terrain is so steep that you almost have the feeling of floating on a snow-covered peak far above the valley. The neat groove, which from the helicopter looked as though you could pass through it with two long sweeps, can no longer be seen. Instead, there is an abrupt ravine, flanked by vertical cliffs. What looked like an easy topography from the air is, in reality, an alpine challenge.

For five days we have been travelling across this island in the North Atlantic, the majority of which can only be traversed by massive all-terrain vehicles, even in the summer. And in winter? Until the end of April the Icelandic highlands are a snow desert and at best only accessible by dedicated expeditions. First, we were in the north of the island. There, the mountain ranges rise directly from the ocean up to 5,000 feet high. Winter storms regularly supply them with fresh snow. Although they appear somewhat more relaxed than those in the island interior they are nevertheless not easy to reach. But ultimately our plan is this:

continued





All aboard! The "Aurora" leaves the port of Ísafjörður.



To ski beyond what anyone can book with a travel agent. We're on the search for the ultimate high.

Jess McMillan is one of the best free skiers in the world. She's from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and has the ability to set off Hollywood-style even after a 15,000-foot climb. René "Renilla" Margreiter was once a professional snowboarder, and though he has since opted for Argentina over his homeland Tyrol, he continues to transform his deep-snow dreams into reality. Gladly together with Richard Walch, who as a photographer has pretty much come to know the coldest side of every mountain range in the world – except the Icelandic northern ranges.

If you want to kickstart your Icelandic tour, it's best to begin the journey on Good Friday. No alcohol whatsoever is served in the capital city of Reykjavík on that day. And when the taps are opened at midnight, the island's party crowd goes crazy: The men dressed to the nines in shirts and bowties, sporting sharp hairstyles; the women in a wild mixture of punk and post-hippie fashion. The revelers are outfitted more boldly, more madly than the ones in New York, Berlin, or Paris, as they roam from one bar to the next through the tiny city center until morning.

The country thins out under gorgeous skies the further we travel along the coast toward Ísafjörður. The landscapes of Iceland leave travelers with the impression as if they were looking at the world for the first time in widescreen. It's quite possible that it is snowing on the right side of your field of vision, while in the middle the sun is shining, and somewhere to the left a double rainbow disappears into the Atlantic. We are passing the golden beaches of the volcanic peninsula Snæfellsnes. It is on this surreal glacier where Jules Verne sets off on the "Journey to the Centre of the Earth." In endless curves, an ever-narrowing road works itself alongside the Westfjords, which point like fingers toward the North Sea in the direction of Greenland. In the extreme northwest of Iceland is the Hornstrandir wilderness. We have a date with Sigurdur Jonsson. He will take us to the snow in an unusual way: with his sailing yacht.

The Aurora is simultaneously a mode of transportation and a mobile base camp for the first summit tours of our round-trip journey. Skis and boards are placed in seaworthy metal containers as we glide out of the harbour of Ísafjörður under a light snowfall. The water crunches; a thin layer of ice has formed overnight. We can see the mountain ranges on the other side of the Isarfjord only as silhouettes through the fog: mesas with horizontal peaks, steep slopes that plunge directly to the beach. It is because of these Arctic slopes we went on this long journey. "Hopefully, there won't be any polar bears on the move again in Hornstrandir," Sigi murmurs, explaining that the bears from Greenland drift all the way to Iceland on icebergs. The first few miles beyond the fjord, eider ducks in flight accompany the Aurora; later a dwarf dolphin shows its dorsal fin. After a few hours, we start searching for a suitable anchorage in the "fjord where you cannot fish," when a seal welcomes us and jauntily stretches his snout out of the ice-blue water surface. The mists have cleared. Time to climb up the first feet in the Icelandic snow. This is skiing, explorer style: With pelts under our skis, we climb diagonally up the slope. After a few hundred vertical feet, the Aurora sits like a child's toy in the fjord; black basalt jags emerge before the backdrop of the surreal blue sea. We can't topple and fall now: In case of an accident, no helicopter would be immediately available. We are on our own. Jess jumps valiantly onto the steep summit slope, mills her contours into the firn as though it were a training run on a primed course somewhere in the American Rockies. Renilla takes his turns unrestrainedly in the soft snow, and soon we are back in the galley of the Aurora with Sigi's fish stew. As we eat breakfast the next morning, we are already en route to the next fjord, past the only settlement on Hornstrandir, to our next anchorage at an abandoned whaling station.

The fjords are surrounded by perfect ski slopes that, depending on the position of the sun, await us with the best firn or shaded powder. With rarely more than an hour's climb, we reach sublime slopes and challenging couloirs; we climb over lava scree and soft moss cushions, work our way across frozen cornices and eventually come to silent high plateaus. Even more than the lonely ski runs, the magical atmosphere at the beach remains in our memory, the soft whisper with which the extensions of the Arctic swells lift and drop the algae beds in the fjords. At one point an Arctic fox is only ten feet away from me, regards me curiously, only to then disappear with rapid steps into the low-lying afternoon sun.

"Three, two, one... dropping." Jess' voice crackles through Richard's walkie-talkie.

With the experience of a professional big-mountain skier, Jess has checked her route, fastened her boots in a tough-as-nails fashion, discussed the avalanche situation with our guide Gaddi, and talked to Richard about the photography. Then she pushes herself off like a downhill racer out of the starting block, accelerates almost in free fall and saws her first turn into the descent. The spray is still in the air when she disappears from view four curves later.

Iceland

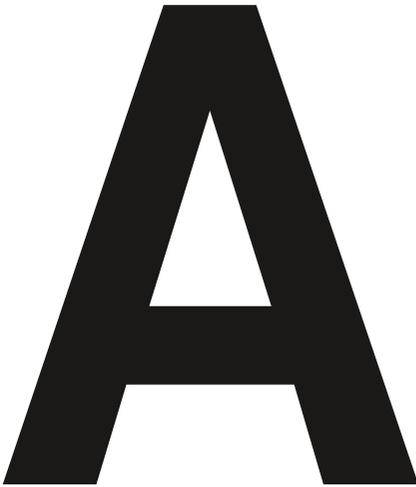
Population
325,000

Capital
Reykjavík, 118,000 inhabitants

Highest mountain
Hvannadalshnjúkur, 6,923 ft

Heli-skiing in Iceland
www.arcticheliskiing.com

Ski expeditions with
Captain Siggi
www.aurora-arktika.com



After days of journeying in the solitude, seclusion, and tranquillity of the Westfjords, we were ready for more altitude, deeper snow, and even faster descents. And the further we got towards Akureyri, the more wintry the landscape became. Instead of spring-like afternoons on the fjord beach: Icelandic horses in freshly fallen snow. Instead of a sailing yacht: a farm converted into a luxury ski hut in a valley with a telling name: Skidaladur, “Ski Valley.” Instead of springlike afternoons on the fjord beach, we came across Icelandic horses in freshly fallen snow. Instead of a sailing yacht, we discovered a farm converted into a luxury ski hut in a valley with a telling name: Skidaladur, “Ski Valley.” And instead of the high-altitude peaks reached by means of a tedious step-by-step climb, we encounter a fully fueled AStar helicopter, whose pilot would come to set us down again and again on all the majestic and imposing peaks that seem to stretch into the sky on both sides, in front, behind, and above the Klængshóll Lodge.

On Iceland alone, he exclusively covers 1,500 square miles of coastal mountains in his helicopters today. Bergmann’s slogan, “Exploratory Heli Skiing in Iceland and Greenland” means what it says: On a regular basis, Jökull takes guests

on first-ever descents. Our guide, Gardar “Gaddi” Sigurjonsson, is one of the best free skiers in Iceland, and over the many thousands of vertical feet that we crush over the next few days, he will not once say that any downhill run we have scouted from the helicopter is impossible.

The snow here is unlike anything else in the Westfjords. Thoroughly hardened, swift powder snow that throws ice-cold dust in your face. When it’s finally my turn, my heart plummets into my stomach. I take off. And don’t brake. And at full speed I realize that my downhill route is a long, white band that in fact ends at the helicopter without being interrupted by a rock ledge. The nervousness gives way to mad delight, and when I make a downhill turn near Jess and Rene, I am flooded by a surge of adrenaline that I have never known until now.

Tomahawking? That’s what you call a high-speed crash into deep snow during which you twirl like an Indian hatchet with extended somersaults down the slope. It happens to me on the last run of the day when I mistake my companions’ warning signals as applause. They wanted to warn me about snow-covered blocks of ice from a previous avalanche, into which I race at fifty miles per hour. Tomahawkers have to pay: The first round in the hot tub at the Klængshóll lodge is on me.

Eventually, even the last-minute of the helicopter budget has been spent. We are broke, covered in scratches, and we have clearly expended too many endorphins for a week. We really should travel back to Reykjavik at a leisurely pace. But before we do, we dial, one last time, the mobile phone number that our guide Gaddi gave us when we asked him if there were more inexpensive ways to get to the top of a mountain around here without having to climb every inch of it ourselves.

“Finnur,” answers a deep voice.

It’s the name of the top sledneck in Akureyri: The only person who has driven up the north face of the highest mountain in Northern Iceland in his snowmobile.

Could he and his friends maybe take us with them into the mountains for a few hours? We’re curious about the landscape and their driving skills.

A short pause.

“How many of you are there?”

The ski god lives in Iceland. And he seems to want to know if we mean business.

“We’ll pick you up in an hour at the gas station near the town entrance. Dress warm.”