





# THE BIRTH OF ICELAND'S SKI TOURING CULTURE

Story and Photos by Karin Kirk

**I'D NAMED THE RUN,** 'Sick Day Couloir,' which was considerably easier to pronounce than *Arnfinnsfjall*. A burning sore throat and clogged sinuses weren't going to keep me off my skis, but they would temper my ambitions for the day. We eyed a straightforward route and set out into the drizzle, leaving behind a cluster of brightly colored houses in a tiny fishing settlement outside Ólafsfjörður, in northern Iceland.

"I could totally live here," said Robert, with a nod toward a tidy grey farmhouse with crisp blue trim. "It's so peaceful." I smiled, as if Robert's current home in the maddening metropolis of Dalvík (population 1400) was anything but peaceful.

I settled in behind Robert, and we skinned upward through the gentle topography of the Árdalur valley, lapsing into conversation about our families and our interests outside of skiing. Robert Thor Haraldsson has been guiding skiers, mountaineers, and backcountry travellers for 18 years, including two expeditions across the Greenland ice cap. For the past three years, he's been a ski guide for Bergmenn Mountain Guides and its sister company, Arctic Heli Ski, set in the heart of Iceland's Tröllaskagi Peninsula.

This was my fourth trip to ski in Iceland, each time the combination of enticing ski terrain and a peaceful, nature-loving culture lures me back again. But this was the first time I'd done so with Icelandic guides. I did this largely to learn more about the Icelanders, their history, and their relationship with their beloved untamed landscape. I've developed a bit of a fetish for this place, and what better way to immerse myself than to ski with the friendly locals.

"This is normally a million dollar view," offered a cheerful Robert when we'd reached the summit, sweeping his arms through the mist. "You're right out over the ocean." I admired the fog, popped a cough drop, and eyed our couloir. We had a 2,000-foot, near straight shot back to the car, all of it on good snow and even a handful of turns in decent visibility. Not bad for a sick day.



## TOURISM BOOM CREATES DEMAND FOR GUIDES

With a respectable tour under our belts, we retreated to the Bakkabrædra café in Dalvík to wind down the afternoon. After the grey day, the warmth and friendliness of the café was especially welcoming. As the hostess adorned my slice of apple cake with whipped cream, a clutch of European ski tourers pressed through the door. Their neon-hued clothes were damp but their faces told a different story: vibrant with endorphins, bright eyes, and big smiles. They filled the already-small space with cheerful energy, ogling the selection of homemade confections, fish soup, and local beer.

Iceland is indeed a happy place, I mused. We dug into our cakes and I asked Robert for his thoughts on the Troll Peninsula's rapid rise to ski touring fame.

"The popularity of ski touring here goes hand in hand with the tourism boom, and with all the attention Iceland is getting," he explained. "I think it's awesome. It makes for a lot of opportunities."

But Iceland attracts a particular brand of travelers. Over two million visitors roam the Ohio-sized island each year, with thousands being ushered into technical terrain and temperamental weather. For many, these are bucket-list adventures, spanning active volcanoes, glaciers, waterfalls, wild rivers, and, delightful ski touring.

Robert offered perspective from the guide's point of view. "We're very much an activity-driven country." He ticked down the list of enticements: "Horse riding, boats in rough water, glaciers, bagging big summits, skiing in avalanche terrain, super jeep tours -- you step out of the jeep in the middle of an icecap."

Guiding operations have expanded to fulfill the surge in demand. But one has to wonder if a country of 340,000 people can offer enough depth and expertise to accommodate all of its fans safely. "Tourism has grown exponentially," said Robert. "But education of guides has not kept up."

The upshot is that droves of people are embarking on guided trips, "all with no mountain guides association," explained Robert. "Iceland had no formal training, guidance, or mentorship."

Fortunately, the ski guide operations have avoided disaster. "We've had close calls and injuries, but nothing major."

Robert and most of his peers traveled out of Iceland to obtain professional training and certification. Robert completed his Canadian ski guide certification in 2017. But as demand for guides grows, it's not practical to expect new guides to travel abroad to get their education. It's expensive, inconvenient, and time-consuming. "You gotta offer this locally," he emphasized.

So, Robert gathered a handful of other guides, "We sat down and said, 'We gotta change something here.'"

## EMERGENCE OF A GUIDES' ASSOCIATION

In 2012 a handful of pro guides gathered in an apartment in Reykjavík. They laid out the beginnings of Iceland's first professional guides' training program: the Association of Icelandic Mountain Guides. Their aim was to create a culture of education and professionalism throughout Iceland's alpine guiding industry.

Robert was the first chairman, using his own credit card to pay visiting instructors to teach courses. His commitment was unwavering. "A local guides association was part of my agenda."

The AIMG established three avenues, or 'streams,' for education and certification. 'Hard ice' is the largest segment of Iceland's mountain guiding industry and encompasses ice climbing and traveling on Iceland's crevasse-riddled outlet glaciers. The alpine trekking program covers mountaineering and general glacier travel. The ski guiding curriculum teaches the familiar aspects of ski technique, navigation, avalanche education, and of course, sniffing out hero snow.

One thing Iceland excels at, and a familiar theme throughout my conversations, is their ability to tap into knowledge elsewhere in the world and adapt it for their own use. The Icelandic population is too small to sustain advancements in every discipline, so they look outward to build their own expertise.

In this case, they brought in veteran guides from all over the world to help shape the AIMG. Thus, the ice climbing standards and curriculum are drawn from New Zealand's program. The alpine trekking courses are designed with a partnership with the Swedes. And the ski guide training is inspired by the Canadian guides' training process.

"We're cherry picking," said Robert. "We chose the best guides for each of our needs. That's very Icelandic by nature. We're in the middle of the ocean. We draw from all around us."

## TRAINING OF GUIDES 'A GAME-CHANGER'

Garðar Hrafn Sigurjonsson, 'Gaddi,' is a kayak, ski, and mountaineering guide and the co-founder of Asgard - Beyond, a guide service in Reykjavik. In the winter he works for Bergmenn Mountain Guides. Gaddi is also the current chairman of the AIMG, and he explained the three-tiered structure of the ski guiding program. The initial course provides a basic foundation for skiing, navigation, and avalanche skills. The second-level course offers further training plus an exam, and graduates are considered 'assistant guides' that can work with supervision. The final step of the process is a full-fledged certification exam, which accredits guides to work on their own.

"Slowly but surely, it's going," said Gaddi of the implementation of the training programs." This year we were able to hold exams in our two biggest streams, hard ice guiding, and alpine trekking."

However, the ski guide program has not offered a final exam quite yet. Only about six people have made it through the second-level course. "The mountain world is a very a small environment," said Gaddi. "And in Iceland, of course, it's way smaller."

"We're hoping next spring we'll run the full ski guide exam." Launching the first generation of Icelandic-trained ski guides "will be a pretty amazing step," he added with a hopeful smile.

Membership in the AIMG approaches 100 people. "This has been a game-changer," noted Robert. "It brings us to a much higher standard. Now we have a generation of guides coming out who are properly trained." Robert was quick to point out that in a nation of natural-born climbers and skiers, "There are a lot of good, uncertified guides in this country, too. But they haven't had the opportunity to get the training they need."

## FROM SHEEP FARM TO HELICOPTER FARM

Midway through my trip, I begrudgingly took a rest day. I idled away a good chunk of the afternoon doing what the locals do: immersing myself chin-deep in geothermal water.

Dalvík's municipal pool is surprisingly upscale for a small town, with a series of hot pots, a lap pool, a waterslide, and shallow places for kids to frolic.

On this springtime Sunday, the pools brimmed with activity. An elderly man swam laps, lovingly cupping the water with each slow and methodical stroke. Children took turns braiding each other's blonde hair, interrupted by energetic bursts of splashing and diving. Most of the adults congregated in the hot pots, either engaged in lively conversation, or lolling in a state of near sleep, heads tipped back and resting on the edge of the pool, eyes closed, suspended in what appeared to be a profound state of contentment.

All the while, over our heads, a familiar red helicopter eased along the rugged slopes that rose steeply from town. The heli nosed from one white blaze to the next, assessing each as a possible ski run. I watched and wondered which pitch they'd choose. But I was the only one who seemed to notice. Helicopters overhead are part of everyday life this time of year in Dalvík. In other parts of the world, a helicopter slicing through one's quiet afternoon might not be a welcome sight. But here, the heli and ski touring operation brings life to a tiny town.

The force behind Dalvík's ski guiding operation is Jökull Bergmann, who pioneered ski touring in this region and became Iceland's first ski guide.

For many generations before him, JB's family worked a sheep farm that stretched across a broad valley, swept up graceful foothills, and ascended to alpine summits. "My grandfather was the sort of farmer who would climb to the top of the peak to look for sheep." JB recalled.

The valley's name, Skiðadalur, translates to 'ski valley.' The name pre-dates JB's endeavors, but the terrain looks purpose-built for skiing. The long, glacial valley is occupied by a braided river and is dotted with bucolic farms. Overhead, pyramid-shaped peaks made from layer upon layer of basaltic lava flows offer consistent, long, steep pitches. Glaciers put finishing touches on the landscape, sculpting out bowls and adding just enough variety to make for phenomenal skiing.



While sheep may have been the family business, the mountains beckoned. “We’d fix the fences, herd the sheep, feed them hay, and then go climb and ski,” said Robert as he recounted his early friendship with JB.

JB’s grandparents retired in the late 1990s and the sheep were rounded up one final time. After years exploring the region on skis, JB offered his first commercial ski touring trip in 1999. He had no formal certification, but instead relied on years of accumulated experience. “I was self made in every way,” he recalled.

After a few years of guiding, JB left Iceland to pursue more education and training, with the intent to bring that knowledge back home. In 2003 he moved to Canada for the Thompson Rivers University Adventure Studies program, simultaneously obtaining his Canadian ski guiding certification through the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides. By 2008, JB had clinched IFMGA certification, and he’s the first – and only – Icelander to achieve that level of certification. With international credentials in hand, JB turned his focus to developing and growing his guiding business, and he expanded the offerings to include heli skiing.

“Much to my surprise, people kept coming back year after year,” he said of the company’s early success. As the guiding operation grew, so did the demand for guides. JB only hires certified guides. “By getting certified myself I realized there’s a huge difference in the quality of the product that you can sell,” he said, “and it’s also something that sets us apart.”

Since there was no certification process available in Iceland at that time, JB’s protégés followed a path similar to his own. Most went to Canada for their ACMG certification. Iceland now boasts six certified ski guides, all of whom are employed by JB.

The centuries-old family farmstead, Klængshóll, has a new look. “This used to be a sheep farm. Now it’s a heli farm,” observed Robert. The farmhouse remains, but it’s now flanked with guest lodges built with a sleek Nordic aesthetic. A refurbished hay barn serves as a rental shop, meeting

room, and place for clients to do yoga, hang out, and gear up. Three red AStar helicopters wait patiently on the meadow.

“Every time you come back, something has been made a little better,” noted Robert. “It’s an ambitious company, always trying to improve itself.”

Following in the wake of what JB developed, two other ski guiding operations have taken up residence on the Troll Peninsula: Viking Heli Ski, and the Eleven Experience. In other parts of the country, guided ski tours are available from a handful of mountain guide operations. Even among the natives, ski touring is enjoying an uptick in participation.

All tolled, Gaddi estimates there are 25-30 professional ski guides working in Iceland, although not all are Icelandic. It’s still a tiny community by any measure, but the growth – and the competition -- is palpable.

## PRIDE AMONG LOCAL GUIDES

Örvar and I were engrossed in a deep-dive discussion of Icelandic governance as we made our way up the lower slopes of Hreppsendasúlur. It was the last day of my trip, and we’d set out for an ambitious summit. Örvar Dóri Rögnvaldsson is a Viking teddy bear, as good-natured as they come, with a philosophy that reflects a particular respect for nature, children, and women. He grew up in the far-flung Westfjords (“the Bestfjords,” he adds with a grin), and he’s an unending supply of trivia about nature and Iceland. “Ducks have the roughest sex of any animal,” he informed me. “Iceland is home to the greatest concentration of red-haired people of any country.” Rest assured those two tidbits are unrelated.

As we gained a rounded ridgeline, Örvar came to an abrupt stop. He gestured across the valley, at a recent avalanche. The slide was maybe 100 feet across, and had travelled several hundred feet down the slope. There were no ski tracks near it. Naturally-triggered. The slide’s location off a ridgetop suggested wind loading, or perhaps a cornice fall.

Örvar pulled out his radio to call dispatch to report the avalanche, and



just then the radio crackled with a report from another guide two drainages south of us. He'd touched off a small slide and lost a ski pole. A third guide chimed in over the airwaves, reporting reactive wind slabs.

A lively conversation unfolded over the radio while the three guides shared their observations and dispatcher asked followup questions. Within a few minutes, it became clear that the problem was constrained to north-facing, wind-loaded, steep slopes at the tops of ridgelines. With a better understanding of the hazard, all three guides were asked to clarify or modify their route selections. In turn, each reviewed their itinerary over the radio. In a cheerful voice, the dispatcher wished us well and we were on our way again.

As we continued on, I pondered the value of this network of local guides. With three groups of skiers out that day, we enjoyed the benefit of three sets of eyes and three data points. Had we been on our own, it would have been harder to assess the hazard based on a standalone observation.

I reflected on my initial goal to experience the Icelandic culture and to interact with the locals. During a week of magnificent skiing and exquisite snow, it was the personal interactions that were the highlights of the trip. Skiers worldwide share a common affinity for mountains and snow and fun. But to learn about the birth of a whole new ski culture was a rare treat.

One trait stood out above all: the pride among the guides was plainly visible. In their jobs, their quest to expand their skills, their deeply-rooted community, and their wild and austere landscape. This wasn't an isolated observation - anyone who watched Iceland's performance in the soccer World Cup got a glimpse of Iceland's national pride. In some parts of the world, an assertive sense of nationalism can come off as grating; in Iceland it's simply endearing.

## ICELAND'S SKIING FAME BRINGS MIXED EMOTIONS

The popularity of skiing here is not merely a source of local pride. Skiers bring tourism dollars to locales that are not part of the typical visitor's agenda. "The locals that live in these areas are pretty happy with the skiers coming in," said Gaddi, "The ski tourists stay at the hostels and guest houses and they eat food at our restaurants."

As skiers from across the globe set their sites on Iceland, many come with their own guides. "It's normal to travel with your own guide," said Gaddi. But Iceland places no restrictions on visiting guides, and the influx is bittersweet. Many of the visiting skiers have no interactions with the local ski community that's worked so hard to build itself.

"When you come to Iceland you wanna meet Icelanders," explained Gaddi. "It's not only about skiing; it's also the whole country that you're coming to."

"I'm happy when people choose local guides over foreign ones, supporting local economies and the people that live here," said Robert, echoing Gaddi's perspective. "This operation gives a lot back to the community. We hire local people, in year-round positions."

The Icelandic guides are courteous, but they clearly have mixed feelings. The uptick in visiting guides takes business away from them. This is their home turf, they know it best, and they love to share it with others. JB explained, "It was just me and my friends for years... and today there are 60 or 70 companies selling a week-long trip on the Troll Peninsula."

The Icelandic guides extend a helping hand to visiting guides, offering logistical assistance. "If they seek information we try to give them all they need," said Gaddi. Some guides take them up on the offer, and "some of them don't talk to us at all."

Generally everyone is well behaved. "We haven't had any fights or anything like that," Gaddi quipped with a wry laugh.

Nonetheless, the steady stream of visitors helps keep Robert, Gaddi, Örvar, and their co-workers bustling from March through June. Alas, JB is nowhere to be found during the spring. He admits that the high season on the Troll Peninsula is no longer his favorite time of year. Instead, JB sets his sights farther afield, to the Westfjords, Eastfjords, Greenland, and Svalbard.

"We're always doing new things," he explained with a mixture of resignation and excitement. "I went through 20 years of building it up and having fun and having it all to myself. Now I'm doing the same thing again... all over the world. And I'm enjoying it." ●



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