

You're going where?!

FIRST LINE OF DESCENT

Six first descents before lunch – it's all part of the norm if you head into the wilds of northern Iceland. The only catch is you need a heli... But it's not about bagging peaks. It's about boutique exploratory heliskiing deep in the arctic wilderness

WORDS **TOM ROBBINS**



It's the middle of May. London has been sweltering for weeks, the grass in Hyde Park is beginning to turn brown - Wimbledon is only a few weeks away. In the ski resorts of the Alps, winter is a distant memory. The snow has long since melted, and in the Krazy Kanguruh, Dick's Tea Bar and the Farinet, the chairs are stacked on tables and the dance floors are silent.

So, standing at a bus stop near my house in Hackney, carrying a pair of skis, boots and a giant kit bag, I feel pretty silly. But as bizarre as it seems, I'm setting off on what I'm pretty sure will be the trip of the season. I'm heading to Heathrow, then flying north, first to Reykjavik, then even further, in a small turbo-prop plane to the north coast of Iceland.

There's something a bit magical about this journey. With each degree of latitude I gain, the clock turns back a few months. As we leave Reykjavik, I see snow on the hilltops, and by the time we touch down in Akureyri, it's full-on winter once more. Stepping out onto the runway, at the end of a long fjord surrounded by snowy peaks, the bus stop in Hackney seems like a strange dream.

I've come to sample a new heli operation, Arctic Heliskiing, whose season only really gets going in late March, and runs until the middle of June. It was set up by Jökull Bergmann (whose name translates as 'glacier mountainman' but who is known to all as JB). He grew up here, but moved away to train as a guide in Chamonix, then worked for



PHOTO GRANT GUNDERSON

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several of the big heliski operators in British Columbia before coming back to start his own business.

Despite JB's training in Canada, Artic Heliskiing feels very different to the big, five-star heliski companies of BC. Instead of running two or three helicopters with 40 clients at any one time (who stay in purpose-built hotels offering all mod-cons and yoga classes before breakfast) this is small-scale, adventurous; what JB calls 'exploratory heliskiing'.

JB picks up our group of eight from the airport in a 4x4 van with monster tyres and we travel north once more to the Troll peninsula, past Akureyri (the second largest city in Iceland, though it only has a population of 18,000) and along the side of the fjord. After an hour, near the fishing village of Dalvik, we turn inland and the roads become smaller, the farmhouses fewer and further apart. Soon tarmac changes to gravel, and then the road gives out altogether and we find ourselves on a farm track beside a stream heading up into a desolate valley. At the far end of the track is a whitewashed farmhouse, traditional in design



“The heli drops us on a nameless ridge surrounded by frozen wilderness. We turn and gawp at the view”



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and unremarkable, save for the helicopter parked outside it.

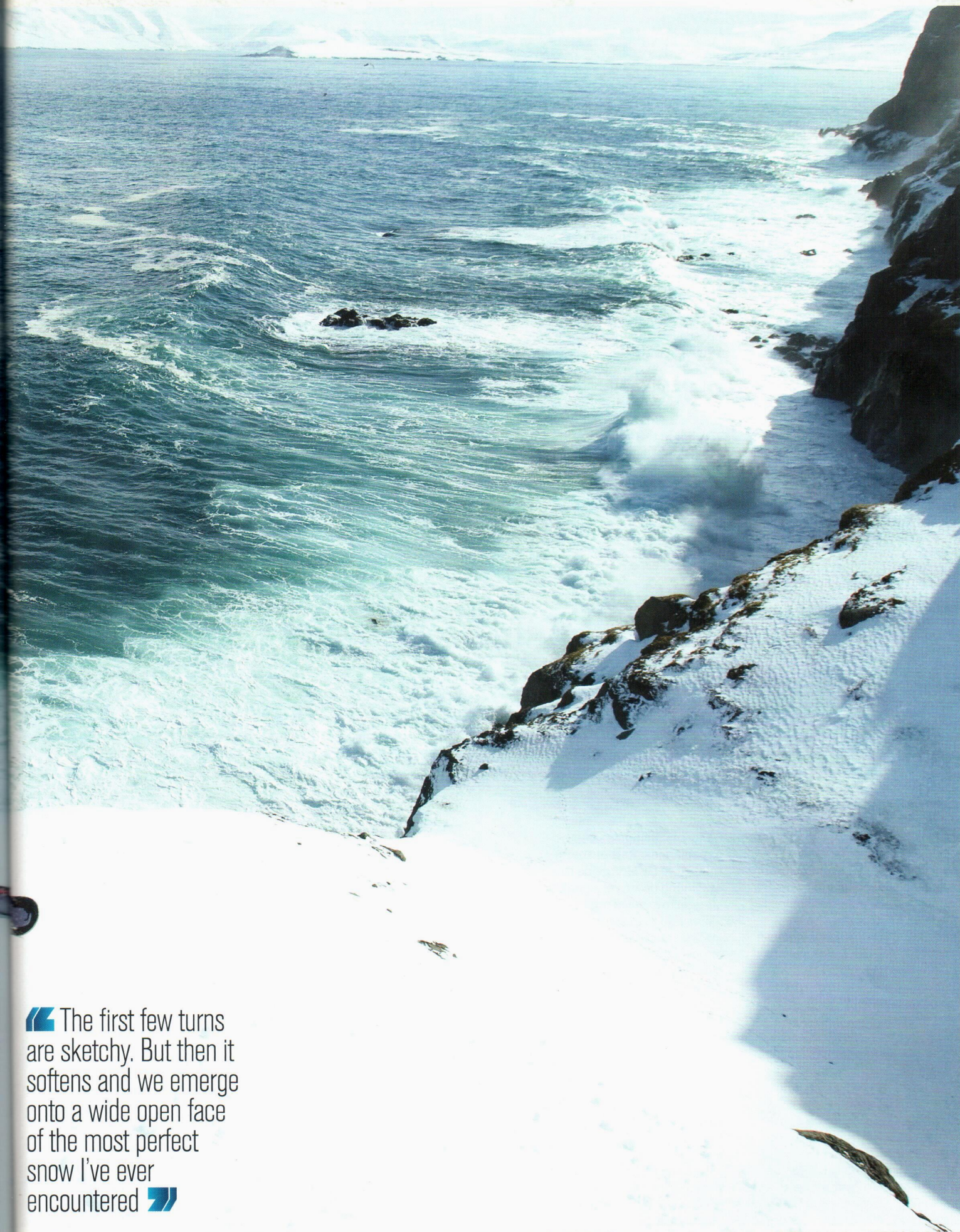
This is Klængshóll (Raven Hill) Lodge, our base for the next four nights. It's not luxurious, but its six bedrooms are cosy and it feels like a real home. JB's grandparents were the last farmers to work this land and as a boy he lived here and helped out as a shepherd. In the lounge is a bookcase built by his grandfather in 1921, with his

initials and the date carved into the wood. The latest ski magazines sit alongside leather-bound Icelandic sagas on its shelves.

Exactly what JB means by 'exploratory heliskiing' becomes clear on day one. The heli drops us high on a nameless ridge, surrounded by frozen wilderness. We turn around and gawp at the view - whichever direction we look in, there isn't a

single sign of human existence. We windmill our arms to warm up, clip in and get ready to drop.

The first few turns are sketchy - breakable crust that saps your strength. But then it softens, we have a few blissful powder turns, and emerge onto a wide-open face of the most perfect spring snow I've ever encountered. We make huge, super-fast turns down it, sometimes skiing close together, sometimes hundreds of ►



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continued

metres apart. By the bottom I've begun to understand why some people say they actually prefer spring snow to powder.

That's not to say you can't get deep pow here - you can, especially earlier in the year - but you'll probably encounter every other type of snow too. And anyway, unlike heliskiing in Canada, this isn't just about finding good snow, it's about exploring too.

As the day progresses we push deep into the mountains at the centre of the Troll peninsula - flying up to one ridge, skiing down to the valley bottom, getting picked up and dropped at the next ridge, and so on.

At lunchtime, Snorren, the pilot, parks up on a little island of heather and crowberry bushes where the snow has melted and we break out the sarnies. "Well boys, that was a pretty good first morning," says JB. "Six first descents before lunch!"

He's not joking either - six of the nine runs we've done have never been skied before. In the Alps a first descent is enough to give you bragging rights for life. Here they're so common it's not even worth commenting on before you stop for lunch.

Of course it's not that the runs we've skied are so extreme that no one has dared tackle them, it's simply that so few skiers have ever come to this area before. Both Dalvik and Akureyri have a few small ski lifts, but there are no real 'resorts' around here to draw skiers. Heliskiing is in its infancy - JB began trialling it here in 2008, but 2011 was the first full season. In a busy week Klængshóll Lodge might have 10 guests, while the possible skiing area covers 1,500 square miles. All of which adds up to the fact that there are going to be first descents up for grabs for many years to come...

And so the day goes on. By the time we turn for home, we've notched up 15 runs, eight of them first descents. Each run averages

about 850m of descent, though some can be as much as 1,600m.

There's huge variety too. On one run we ski for a mile or more over a gently-sloping glacier as the clouds swirl around us (my mind wandering off into a daydream about being a polar explorer). On the next we're making jump turns in a tight, steep couloir, my heart hammering.

Not every descent is perfect - in the morning some are icy, and by the afternoon some of the lower sections are getting slushy and sticky. But this all adds to the challenge, the feeling that this is a genuine adventure for serious skiers, rather than something controlled and manufactured.

Back at the lodge, we squash round the large kitchen table and toast an unforgettable day, before tucking into some fabulous local food. One night we eat geese that JB shot in the valley, another we have lamb reared on the surrounding hillsides. At breakfast there's freshly baked bread, jam made from the crowberries that grow all over the mountains, súrmjök (a sort of milky yoghurt for pouring on cereal), local cheese and eggs from the chickens that roam nonchalantly around on the grass beside the heli.

One evening, Sonja (the chef) lays on some appetisers - a plate of dark purple sashimi in a light soy sauce, and some smoked meat served with mint and juniper. Both are delicious; I sneak seconds, and thirds. "What is it?" I ask, between mouthfuls. "Minke whale," says Sonja matter-of-factly. And the meat? "It's... what's the word in English? A baby horse - a foal!"

Day two brings more new experiences. Rather than aiming inland we fly alongside the fjord and touch down on a peak with staggering views out over the water and to the seemingly endless succession of snow-covered peaks on the far side. The weather changes fast here and the view comes and goes, at one moment appearing beneath bright blue skies, the next visible only through a tunnel in the dark clouds.

JB knows the aspects of these runs so intimately (two are even named after his kids, Íssól and Úlfur) that even with the crazy weather he manages to make sure we hit them when they've had just the right amount of sun. Run after run feels like sliding through soft butter, not just for a couple of sweet turns, but for the



Best spring snow, ever





PHOTO TOM ROBBINS



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Not every descent is perfect, but a lot are

PHOTO ELEMENTAL ADVENTURE

length of whole thousand-metre faces. We ski at speed, trying to cram in as many runs as possible, stopping only to stare at the deep blue fjord far below. Twice JB pauses to say: "Oh by the way, that was another first descent..."

The changing weather can be tricky for Snorren too. On our third day, to get from the farmhouse to the barn, where the skis are waxed, I have to walk at a crazy angle, leaning against the wind. The wind forces Snorren to abort the morning's first landing and so we sit it out at the house, debating whether to go walking, whale watching or to see the hot springs and geysers at Lake Myvatn, a couple of hours' drive away. Perhaps predictably we opt for a lazy lunch then a visit to the local brewery, but just as we're about to leave the wind drops and we scramble back to the heli. It's 5pm when we lift off, but we ski until 9.30pm, notching up six epic runs as the sky begins to turn pink. You could keep going even later - this far north, it doesn't get properly dark until the early hours in

May, and in midsummer not at all.

The funny thing is that you come here hungry for first descents and extreme lines but, while you're sure to get both, you end up getting a lot more besides. I'll never forget the run down a peak called Kerahnjúkur, where we jumped from the heli with only one ski touching the snow, then skied hundreds of metres of steep spring snow without stopping.

Nor will I forget what I've learned about Icelandic culture - about life in these remote farming communities at the furthest fringe of Europe. And I won't forget sitting in the sun outside the farmhouse at 10pm, chatting to Snorren and Sonja, drinking a Viking beer and throwing a stick to Donna, the farm dog.

After four days in the arctic wilderness, it's time to do the time-travel trick in reverse. We set off after breakfast and by early evening, I'm back in London and it's summer once more. **FL**

Tom Robbins is travel editor of the Financial Times

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Icelandair (www.icelandair.com) flies from London to Reykjavik from €235 return. Air Iceland (www.airiceland.is) flies from Reykjavik to Akureyri from €65 return.

➔ www.visiticeland.com

WHERE TO STAY

Elemental Adventure (0203 059 8787) offers four-day packages in Iceland from €4,850, including full-board accommodation, guiding and transfers from Akureyri.

➔ www.eaheliskiing.com

