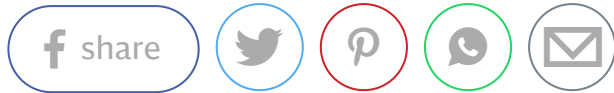


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Heli-skiing in Iceland: the flight fantastic



Skiers are dropped by helicopter atop Iceland's Mt Hestur

By **Tim Woodward**

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The names of the destinations, and even of my host, were conjuring images in my mind before the flight from London had touched down in the harsh volcanic landscape outside Reykjavik. I was heading for what looked like the middle of nowhere on the north coast of Iceland; to the giant, bulbous, mountain-strewn peninsula called Troll that points up towards the Arctic Circle, and ultimately to the end of the road at the head of the tantalisingly named Skidadalur (or Ski Valley). I would be staying at the ancestral sheep farm – and now commercial base lodge – of mountain guide and heliski operator Jokull Bergmann, whose name translates as Glacier Mountain Man.

Such unlikely titles are the almost mythic, and yet entirely appropriate, geographic hooks for a journey towards what Bergmann calls a “grand adventure of first descents”. Legend has it that the Troll peninsula, 250 miles north of Reykjavik, is named after Iceland’s last troll, who was killed in a cave there in 1764 by a farmer in revenge for stealing and eating a cow. The trip to reach the peninsula requires a five-hour drive north from the Icelandic capital or (much easier) an internal flight to the regional airport of Akureyri and a short transfer to Bergmann’s Klaengsholl Lodge, inland from the small fishing town of Dalvik, and the base for his Arctic Heli Skiing operation.

The wonderfully titled Ski Valley recalls the name of a Viking called Ski, who settled in the area at about AD 870. But it’s also an appropriate location to play host to some of the most remarkable off-piste terrain you’ll ever experience. Other than your fellow lodge inhabitants, you’ll never encounter another skier, let alone a cable car or lift queue.

The next morning, just a few hours after arriving at Klaengsholl, our group – myself, guide for the week James Morland (owner of Elemental Adventure; eaheliskiing.com), two school teachers from Norway (the wife four months’ pregnant and just seven weeks into her skiing career) and a jeweller from Germany – is standing on a pristine, snowy summit, scarcely more than the size of a kitchen table, 1,300m (4,300ft) above the valley floor. After a few mid-altitude warm-up runs, it marks the first chance to descend from mountain top to the valley in the heart of the Troll, a vast area of skiable terrain. While the summit heights of 1,500m (4,900ft) may not sound extravagant, the top-to-bottom nature of the terrain makes for verticals, wild and untouched, that are comparable with the best in the Alps and better than much of North America.



The Troll peninsular has world-class backcountry skiing

As the helicopter plunges away from the anvil-shaped peak and the spindrift dies down, we're able to appreciate the views inland to row upon row of icy peaks, back east to Eyjafjörður – Iceland's biggest fjord – and north to the open waters of the Arctic Sea. But clipping into our big fat skis, it's not the inspiring views or the remote, other-worldly situation that capture our attention but the sensations underfoot. This is spring snow skiing like I've never experienced.

Dropping into a 40-degree slope, it might be tempting to back off as one might in the Alps, fearful of entering a no-fall zone or mindful of the threat of avalanches. Yet here, in a treeless landscape devoid of glacial crevasses and famous for its stable maritime snowpack (the wetter snow sticks thickly to the steep slopes), with big run-out space visible in the valley bottom, the inclination to just let go is all too great.

Following guide James, we set off swooping down the slope, indulging in giant slalom-style turns. As I descend, I'm initially unnerved by a booming, whooshing sound as the snowpack reacts to our movement. At first, I'm convinced we're about to be hit by an avalanche, only to realise that my skis are merely slicing the top off the surface of the spring snow, which charges down the hill alongside me.

Earlier in the year, colder and heavier snowfall can provide great conditions for powder skiing. But I'd not come in late April in pursuit of North American-style powder. Instead, it was all about the confidence-boosting attractions of pristine spring snow. On numerous late-season days over the past decade – in the high-altitude French resort of Tignes – I've sought out these precious patches of melting slope, transformed briefly into silky spring snow, only for it to deteriorate and become unskiable within a couple of hours. By springtime in Iceland, however, the maritime snowpack stabilises into a remarkably consistent state and simply does not transform or deteriorate in the same way. It remains eminently skiable, varying in consistency from hard butter to dissolving

sugar, the skis sometimes skimming over the top and at other times slicing down into what feels like slow-motion powder.

On day two we move from the more open slopes west and north of the lodge into narrower couloirs, guarded by overhanging rock bands. You don't have to be an expert freerider to tackle this terrain – it's easily within reach of any confident intermediate. To meet the helicopter we ski on to grassy knolls or down to the river, and venture farther east over the great Eyjafjörður to the Gold Coast and beyond to an area Bergmann dubs the "Hidden Land". Here, facing west, we're able to savour a memorable descent from summit to sea, speeding down towards ocean-level snow and a pebbly beach.

After flying back to the lodge, we relax with drinks and nibbles – bruschetta, olives and marinated whale sushi. Bergmann tells us how the heliski operation was originally run out of the old family farmhouse, which still contains the kitchen and dining room where meals featuring locally sourced organic lamb, fish and goose are served. But alongside now sit a separate sauna hut and four detached wood-clad cottages for most of the guests.

"I'd been running alpine ski touring trips here since 1999, so I knew the potential," says Bergmann. "With my experience from the Canadian heli-skiing industry, I had the know-how and skills to set up an operation in Iceland. The Troll peninsula was an obvious choice as it is by far the best terrain in Iceland and a world-class destination in its own right for backcountry skiing."



The setting at Klaengsholl, located at the head of a long, empty valley, with just one lone cottage perched on the other side of the river, is breathtaking. The view from my bedroom in the main house is mesmerising, framed by the snow-clad sides of the valley and looking towards the huge rectangular end of a ridge, its white surface striped horizontally with harsh black rock.

The lodge routine is regular but laid-back. We start each day with a relaxing yoga and stretch session run by Bergmann's mother, Anna, whose mantra is "listen to your body" as she then intones: "It's all about the breath." This is followed by breakfast at 8am, with freshly baked bread, jams, eggs and a spectacular selection of local fish slices, from pickled to smoked.

Flying and skiing usually begin after 9am and end by late afternoon. However, on day three clouds keep us at base until well after midday. In the Alps or North America, this downtime could become extremely frustrating, but here on the Troll peninsula, under almost 24 hours of daylight, we're still able to get a full day of uplift. We finish the day slightly later at 7.30pm, but what a finish. With ski boots still on, we stop at the local Bruggsmiojan microbrewery, which produces the Kaldi beer that is increasingly popular across Iceland.

On the final day, having already hit the allotted four-day helicopter flight time of four hours, which had allowed us make 12 to 15 descents a day, I take off uphill – after a leisurely breakfast – on touring skis and skins with the Norwegian school teachers. It takes us four hours to trudge up to the top of the nearest peak from the lodge, known as the Horse, and just 20 minutes to descend to the valley floor. We're just in time, beer in hand, to catch a group of Norwegian industrialists, who are also staying in the lodge, ending their final, helicopter-assisted descent, their bearded faces wreathed in smiles.

"Iceland is very different from any other heliski destination," says Bergmann, who as the founder of Arctic Heli Skiing has been the pioneering force behind helicopter-based adventures in his native country. "Because of the very stable snowpack, you can ski much steeper and more exposed lines than you would anywhere else in the world. Add to that, skiing all the way down to the ocean basking in the rays of the midnight sun, and you have something quite spectacular."



Photo credit: Yves Garneau

Essentials

A four-day Iceland Discovery heli-skiing package with Elemental Adventure (eaheliskiing.com) costs from £4,200 per person. Trips run from the end of February until the end of June. Price includes four nights' full board in the Klaengsholl Lodge (based on two sharing), four hours' helicopter time (about 30 runs) per group of four, transfers from Akureyri airport, mountain guides, ski hire, safety training and use of avalanche transceivers. The Iceland trips are run by [Arctic Heli Skiing](#) which specialises in custom-made exploratory heli-skiing adventures and is operated by [Bergmenn Mountain Guides](#).



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