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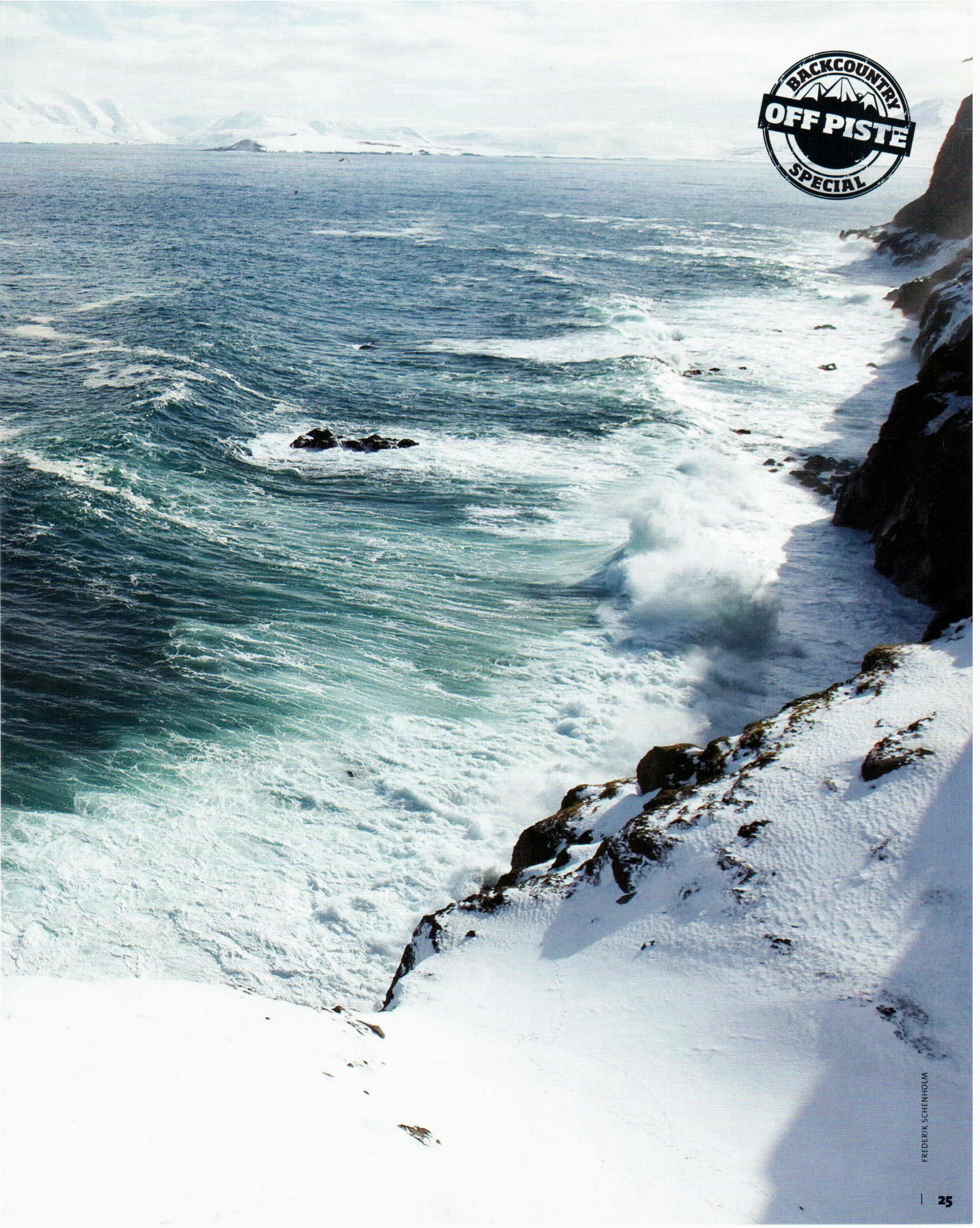
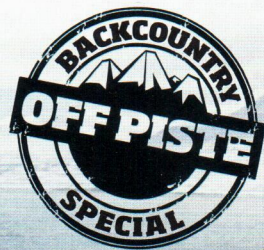
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OUT OF THIS WORLD

Heliskiing on Iceland's remote and wild Troll peninsula in late April promises flattering spring-snow turns, huge vertical and the chance to frolic under the midnight sun

WORDS Tim Woodward







An evening landing on one of the many un-named inland peaks. Right: Clients enjoy the spring snow and clear blue waters



The names of the destinations, and even of my host, were conjuring images in my mind before the plane from London 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 titled Skidadalur (Ski Valley). I would be staying at the ancestral sheep farm – and now commercial base lodge – of Jökull Bergmann, whose name literally translates as Glacier Mountain Man.

Such unlikely titles are the almost mystic, and yet entirely appropriate, geographical hooks for a journey towards what Bergmann calls “a grand adventure of first descents”.

Legend has it that the Troll peninsula in question, 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, a quick internal flight to the regional airport of Akureyri and a short transfer to Bergmann’s Klaengsholl Lodge, just inland from the small fishing town of Dalvik.

The name Ski Valley refers to a Viking called Ski who settled in the area in about AD870. But it’s also an appropriate moniker for a place that plays host to some of the most remarkable off-piste terrain you’ll ever experience. And other than your fellow lodge inhabitants, you’ll never encounter another human, let alone a cable car or lift queue.

THE NEXT MORNING, JUST A FEW HOURS after arriving at Klaengsholl, our group – which consists of myself, owner of heliski tour op Elemental Adventure and our guide for the week, James Morland, 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 snowy summit, scarcely bigger than a kitchen table, 1,300m above the valley floor.

After a few mid-altitude warm-up runs, this is our first opportunity to descend from mountain top to valley bottom, a 4,000km² area of skiable terrain in the heart of the Troll. While the



Klængshóll Lodge under the northern lights.
Below: Whales are often spotted in the fjords

summits of 1,500m may not sound too impressive, the top-to-bottom nature of the terrain makes for wild and untouched verticals that can rival the very best in the Alps and outstrip much of North America.

AS THE HELICOPTER PLUNGES AWAY FROM the anvil-shaped peak, and the spindrift dies down, we're able to appreciate the views of icy, black rock-banded peaks inland, Iceland's biggest fjord – Eyjafjörður – back over to the east, and the open waters of the Arctic sea to the north.

Clipping into our big fat skis, it's not the inspiring views or the remote, otherworldly setting that captures our attention, but the sensations underfoot. For this is spring snow as I've never experienced it.

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

Following guide James, we set off swooping down the slope, indulging in giant slalom-style turns. But 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, but then realise 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 hadn't come in late April for North American-style powder – rather for the confidence-boosting attractions of pristine spring snow.

By springtime in Iceland, the maritime snowpack stabilises, and it simply does not transform or deteriorate in the same way that it would in



high-altitude Alpine resorts. It remains eminently skiable here, varying in consistency from hard butter to dissolving sugar, the skis skimming over the top at some points, slicing down into what feels like slow-motion pow at others.

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, though – it's easily within the reach of any confident and competent intermediate.

Later in the day we venture further east over the great Eyjafjörður to the Gold Coast and an area Bergmann dubs "Hidden Land".

It's here, facing west, that we're able to savour a memorable descent from summit to sea, speeding down towards ocean-level cornices of snow, lipping out on to a pebbly beach.

We set off swooping down the slope, indulging in giant slalom-style turns

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

"I'D BEEN RUNNING SKI TOURING TRIPS here since 1999, so I knew the potential," says Bergmann, "and with experience gained from working in the Canadian heliskiing industry I had the know-how to set up an operation in Iceland. The Troll peninsula was an obvious choice as it's by far the best terrain in Iceland, and a world-class destination in its own right for backcountry."

The setting of Klængshóll is breathtaking, at the head of a long empty valley with just one lone cottage perched on the other side of the river. 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 every day with a relaxing yoga/stretch session run by Bergmann's mother Anna, whose mantras ▶

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are “Listen to your body” and “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 some time after 9am and end mid to late afternoon. However, on day three clouds keep us at base until well after midday. In the Alps or North America this downtime could be extremely frustrating, but here on the Troll peninsula, with almost 24 hours of daylight, we’re still able to get a full day of uplift. We finish slightly later at 7:30pm, but what a finish. With ski boots still on we stop off at the local Bruggsmiojan microbrewery, which produces Kaldi beer, now increasingly popular across Iceland.

ON THE LAST DAY, HAVING ALREADY HIT our allotted five hours of helicopter flight time over four days, making 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 Horse peak, the nearest one from the lodge, and just 20 minutes to descend the 1,300m to the valley floor. Back at the lodge, we’re just in time, beer in hand, to catch a group of Norwegian industrialists who are also staying there. Ending their final helicopter-assisted descent, their bearded faces are wreathed in smiles.

“Iceland is very different from any other heliski destination,” says Bergmann. “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.” ■

► NEED TO KNOW

A four-day Iceland Discovery heliskiing package with Elemental Adventure (eaheliskiing.com) costs from €5,285 per person. Price includes four nights’ full board in the Klaengsholl Lodge, based on two sharing, five hours’ helicopter flying time, morning yoga sessions, transfers from Akureyri airport, mountain guides, equipment hire, safety training and use of avalanche transceivers.

Icelandair (icelandair.co.uk) flies from Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham to Reykjavik, from £169 return. Air Iceland (airiceland.is) flies from Reykjavik to Akureyri, from £80 return. For more Iceland info, visit inspiredbyiceland.com.

With almost 24 hours of daylight, we’re still able to get a full day of uplift



The midnight sun sheds its glow on the aptly named Gold Coast