

PIRATE PARTY IN ICELAND'S WESTFJORDS



made turns back down toward the water at the end
our first ski day, caught the Zodiac raft back to our boat,
I proceeded to have the most epic après-ski in history:
champagne and cold beer on the deck of the boat, followed
icy plunges in the Arctic waters. Here, Kerstin Ulf enjoys some
before the cold plunge in the Westfjords.

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KATE Shaw and Kerstin Ulf have been speed-dialing Icelandair since Saturday morning when we arrived in Reykjavík, Iceland. It's Tuesday and their ski bags still haven't appeared. Fearing they may not show before our scheduled departure for a trip aboard a sailboat in the Westfjords, in the remote northwest corner of the country, we started searching for replacement skis.



First, we tried the Icelandic version of Craigslist, but came up empty-handed. Next, we tried the most well-respected outdoor store in Reykjavík, but it was closed. Then, on the way back from dinner, we walked by an alleyway where, barely visible, we spotted two pairs of skis. Darcee Mond—another friend in our group of seven women hailing from Tahoe, Utah and Colorado—ran over, exclaiming, “They have tech bindings!”

It was as if the heavens parted and sent a gift straight from Ullr: two pairs of well-loved skis mounted with Dynafits. Better yet, they were sitting next to a trash can. I started laughing. Kerstin took photos. Darcee began rationalizing why these skis belonged to us. Then, a curtain peeled back inside the closest apartment. A man peered out. “What are you doing?” he asked.

He told us he worked as a guide at a local heli-ski operation and he'd skied that day, then set his skis by the dumpster when he took them out of his truck. “I'd let you borrow them,” he said, kindly, “but I'm going skiing this week and I need them.”

His name was Loki, which happens to be the name of the Norse god of trickery. Turns out, the skis weren't a gift from Ullr after all. They were a giant tease from Loki himself.

And that's how a bunch of American gals nearly became thieves in Iceland.

You've probably never walked on seaweed in your ski boots before. It's more slippery than you think. After taking the Zodiac to shore, Captain Oli would unload us near a pile of green seaweed, and we'd all try not to eat it before touching dry land.

BELOW

It was an unseasonably warm winter in Iceland last year, so finding a consistent strip of snow was a challenge. Running water underneath the snowpack was our biggest threat. Here, Lizet Christiansen enjoys a solid stripe of snow next to a tumbling waterfall.



WE SCRAMBLE OVER SEAWEED THEN ATTACH SKIS TO OUR BACKPACKS TO BUSHWHACK UPHILL THROUGH TUNDRA.



Skiling from one fjord into the next and dropping over to catch a sight of our waiting watercraft was magical. Here, Kate Shaw, Lizet Christiansen, Darcee Mond, Kate Shaw, Lizet Christiansen, Darcee Mond, and Kerstin Ulf boot it back to the boat.

“WHY ARE YOU BRINGING skis to Ísafjörður?” a man in line at the Reykjavík domestic airport asks. “There is no snow there.”

Ísafjörður is the gateway to the Hornstrandir Nature Reserve, an uninhabited, 220-square-mile swath of wilderness with no roads, stunning fjords and a massive glacier that looks, from a distance, like a giant marshmallow atop a mountain. Five out of seven of us were dragging bags large enough to stash a dead body. Iceland was experiencing one of its warmest winters in memory and the snow that normally blankets the peaks was, apparently, melting fast.

In Iceland’s Westfjords, the mountains spike a couple of thousand feet straight up from the sea, but they’re flat on top due to Ice Age glaciers, as if someone took a knife and whacked off the top. On the small plane to Ísafjörður, the stubby mountains out my window look almost entirely brown, with sad strips of white, many going horizontally instead of vertically, which would render skiing practically impossible. The guy in the airport line had said, on a slightly more positive note, that usually there is snow this time of year—it’s late April. “But not this year,” he added.

None of this can dampen our excitement. We’ve been planning this trip for months, squirreling away money and researching Iceland’s best hot springs and bakeries. Among us are a doctor, geologist, photographer, lawyer and yoga teacher, all fiercely devoted skiers. Four of us, including me, are moms, leaving young children at home with their dads and rejoicing in the simple freedom of an airplane ride without a fussy toddler.

After our plane touches down in Ísafjörður, Kate and Kerstin manage to find a touring outfitter that has rental AT skis with tech bindings. Throw in some skins, crampons and two bulky helmets, plus a bunch of loaner gear from the rest of our all-lady crew—extra gloves and goggles, spare rain pants as ski pants, a shared pack towel, and whippets in lieu of ice axes—and we are good to go.

We meet up with our guides from Ice Axe Expeditions—Lel Tone and Erin Laine, both from Tahoe—and load gear onto our floating home for the next five nights. Her name is Aurora Arktika, a 60-foot sloop owned by captain Sigurdur “Soggi” Jonsson, who grew up sailing and skiing through the Westfjords with his father. In the summer of 2005, he met famed British sailor Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, who was stopping in Iceland en route to Greenland. As the story goes, over some chicken curry and beer aboard the boat, Jonsson decided to buy the sailboat from Knox-Johnston.

He never intended to create a full-fledged business, but he wanted to sail into the fjords and not go bankrupt, so he started offering guided trips. The business took off, thanks to

BELOW

We boarded Aurora Arktika, our home ship for five nights and set sail into the remote Westfjords of Iceland. On day one of the trip, Kerstin Ulf, shown here, accidentally grabbed the wrong ski boots (she and Darcee Mond had the same boots in slightly different sizes) and she and Darcee both spent the first hour or so of the day wondering why their feet didn’t feel quite right.

an increase in adventure tourism to Iceland, and in 2016, he bought a second, even bigger boat, the Arktika, which sleeps 14.

The Arktika looks like a pirate ship, imposingly red and black. The captain is a stout, bearded former fisherman in a sweater named Ólafur Guðmundsson—goes by Óli. Óli’s fiancé, Rebekka Guðleifsdóttir, is the cook—she also works as a photographer and fine artist and has blond hair as long and smooth as a mermaid. Every day, Rebekka swims in the frigid waters for longer than she did the day before.

After leaving the marina in Ísafjörður, the boat cuts across open sea and we spot whales in the distance. Caroline Vines, an ER doctor from Salt Lake City, catches a fish almost instantly—her first fish ever. Then everyone catches increasingly bigger cod, which we’ll later eat for dinner. We settle into life on the boat, three of us each to snug bunkrooms. Finally, it’s time to tackle problem two: lack of snow.

Óli delivers us to the shoreline via a zippy Zodiac ride and we scramble over seaweed then attach skis to our backpacks to bushwhack uphill through tundra. An hour of trudging later, we reach the snowline and stick skins to skis. Soon, another dirt patch requires us to remove skis again and tromp over rocks, mud and moss.

We stop to eat and spot tiny, friendly seals poking their heads out of the salty water below. We traverse over the flat-top ridgeline and descend into a bowl slicked with soft, slushy snow. The sun is still high in the sky, even though it’s late in the afternoon. “It feels like it’s always noon,” Kate says.

Back in the grass and seaweed at the bottom of the slope, Óli scoops us up in the Zodiac and brings us back to frosty beers next to a bucket of bloody fish on the boat. Lel pops a bottle of bubbly and does a one-legged can opener into the ocean in a red bikini. It’s a new definition of après ski.



BELOW

We landed in Iceland at 6 a.m. after an overnight flight from the United States, so we followed the rest of the tourists to the Blue Lagoon, the country's most popular hot springs. Here, Kerstin Ulf and Darcee Mond enjoy a mud mask to help ease jet-lag.

**RIGHT**

Kerstin Ulf rides loaner skis to the sea. Her skis never made it to Iceland after an airline baggage snafu, but she made it look good on rental gear, nonetheless.

IT NEVER GETS fully dark this close to the Arctic Circle come springtime, and the entire trip feels blissfully time free. "Is it Wednesday or Thursday?" Caroline asks at one point. "Who knows," someone calls back. There is a sense of weightlessness, like we have no limits. When there is full daylight, we ski. When we are tired, we return to the boat and sleep.

There's not as much snow as we'd like, but gorgeous traverses are still possible. And the skiing is rewarding. For two days in a row, we ascend over 2,000 vertical feet to ski down into the neighboring fjord. We lap bowls of perfectly soft corn snow. We ski carefully over snow bridges, listening to the sound of gushing water underneath. Avalanches aren't a problem right now. "Moving water is our biggest concern," Lel says. If you don't believe in climate change, I suggest visiting Iceland in the spring to see the glaciers literally melting unseasonably into the sea.

"I'm running low on water," Kate says at one point during a climb.

Erin pulls over to a tumbling stream and starts filling up her bottle—no filter needed. "We're basically in a water bottle commercial right now," she says.

On our second-to-last night on the boat, Erin calls me into the wheelhouse, where she and Lel have a huge map of the fjords spread out on the table. We have a decision to make and she's hoping I can help decide for the group. We either stay in the current fjord, which we know holds a decent amount of snow. Or we venture to the farthest fjord, home to the highest peak in the area, but a different aspect. It's a gamble.

"The scenery in the other fjord is quite nice," Óli says, his form of subtle encouragement. So, I say, "OK, let's try it."

The next morning, Óli motors us two hours to our destination while we sleep. I roll out of bed to Kate descending the steep ladder from the deck. "It's sunny and there's a lot of snow here," she says. "Oh, and Rebekka made croissants."

Free of distractions, we climb 4,000 vertical feet through multiple laps and top out on the rocky summit of 2,417-foot Bláfell, where we can spot the jet-puffed Drangajökull glacier in the distance and the ocean on both sides. Below us is some of the finest spring corn I've ever skied. We party downslope like a bunch of teenagers and, at the very bottom, find a lone, narrow ribbon of snow to the water's edge. It's the first time we'll end our descent at the ocean, the longest line of the trip.

At dinner that night, we talk to Óli and Rebekka about American politics. They chime in with stories from Iceland's political system. "We don't have just two primary political parties in Iceland," Rebekka says. "We have many. We even have a pirate party."

Apparently, some anarchists and internet activists started Iceland's Pirate Party as a fringe political group in 2012. Since then, the party has become significantly more mainstream, earning 14.5 percent of the votes in the 2016 parliamentary election.

In a way, we can relate: We're a motley crew of women who came together with a greater cause—to rediscover ourselves in an inhospitable place. §

