

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

PHOTOS BY RYAN HILL, COURTESY OF 66°NORTH

FIRE AND ICE

MOUNTAIN BIKER REBECCA RUSCH MAKES A HISTORIC WINTER CROSSING OF ICELAND BY BIKE.



The bike expedition started and ended with an erupting volcano. It was early April, and pro mountain biker Rebecca Rusch and adventure photographer Chris Burkard were standing near Mount Fagradalsfjall in Iceland, as it erupted. "To look at a volcano up close and feel that heat and know that we're about to go freeze our butts off, it was truly the land of fire and ice," says 53-year-old Rusch, a decorated mountain bike racer, ultra-endurance athlete, and seven-time mountain bike world champion.

A few days later, Rusch, Burkard, and cyclist and filmmaker Gus Morton set off to pioneer a new winter route by bicycle, riding north-to-south through the rugged interior of Iceland, crossing 327 miles and climbing 25,600 vertical feet over mountains and across glaciers and arctic tundra. The route, which would take them about a week, was 90 percent covered in snow. Nobody crosses this way in winter, they were told. Burkard has spent a lot of time in Iceland, including a summertime bicycle circumnavigation of the island, but he hadn't done much winter biking before. Luckily, he knew just the right person to ask to join.

"I thought it'd be really fun to do this trip and I was like, 'Who should I invite?' The first person who came to mind was Rebecca," says Burkard. "A bicycle is super fun to ride, but it's more about the experiences it provides you, the people it allows you to spend time with."

Rusch, for her part, has spent the last few years developing her winter biking skills by competing in the 350-mile Iditarod Trail Invitational, a bike race along the legendary dog-mushing trail across Alaska. She won the event for the second time in 2021, just a few weeks before departing for Iceland, and did so self-supported, carrying her own food and melting snow for drinking water. "That boosted my confidence for winter survival," she says. "So, I went into Iceland having confidence but also knowing that Iceland is a lot different than Alaska."

In Iceland, the winds can rage at 60 miles per hour and temperatures frequently drop to -10 degrees Fahrenheit. "I really don't like being cold," Rusch says. "But I felt like I hadn't challenged myself in a committing expedition in a while, and the winter was something I was really scared of. I was intrigued. So, I dove in."

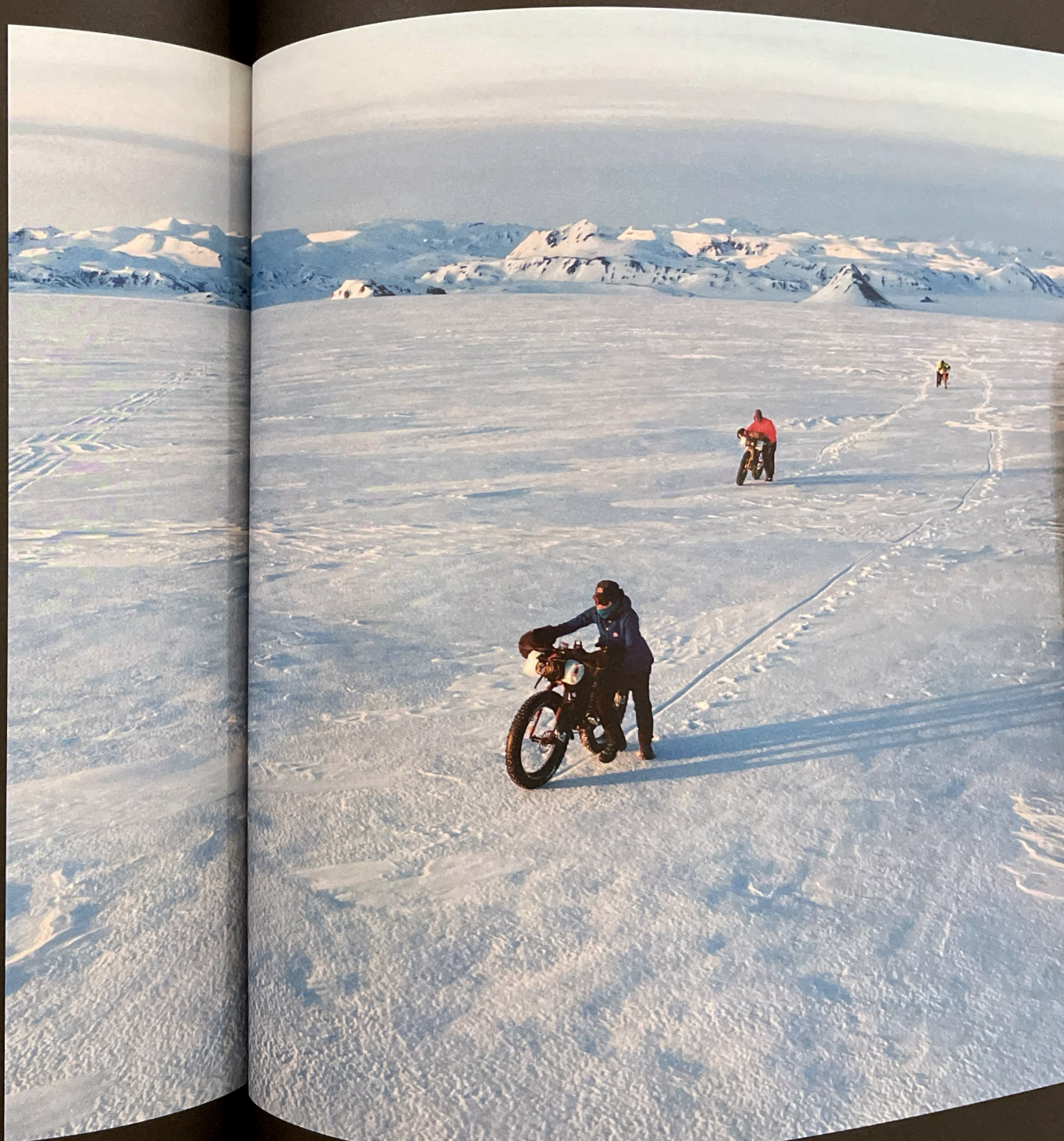
*"AM I GOING TO BE ABLE
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Once in Iceland, the team spent a few days organizing gear, shopping for food, and sorting out logistics. When it was finally go time, they loaded eight days' worth of food on their bikes, as well as winter survival gear like warm clothes, sleeping bag, tent, and a cooking stove. They had metal studs on their wide five-inch tires to help prevent them from slipping. The bikes weighed upwards of 80 pounds.

On the first day of the ride, they traveled on icy paved roads, riding in and out of fjords as a pounding crosswind blew them off their bikes. "I had some crashes and Chris and Gus were going really fast," Rusch says. "The road is not my element, especially with a sidewind. I was thinking, 'Am I going to be able to keep up? Am I good enough?' I was having serious self-doubt."

Then day two arrived. The wind became a headwind. They were on a steep, icy hill in the highlands and Burkard and Morton tried to ride their bikes up the hill. Rusch got off and pushed her bike, eventually passing the two guys pedaling while she was on foot. "You're a machine," Burkard said to her as she passed. "I'm walking my bike because it makes more sense," Rusch hollered back. Later, Burkard would say, "In the most critical moments, when some of us were floundering, Rebecca always seemed to have the answers."

The interminable wind made it tough to hear each other. "You're all bundled up, your face is barely sticking out," Rusch says. "Verbal communication was really hard. You're standing in the wind, yelling at each other. You spend a lot of time in your own head." By day three, they arrived in an area that looked geographically different than anything they'd seen before. Instead of the blank whiteness of snow, this landscape was covered in inky black volcanic rock, mixed with snow. It reminded Rusch of her home in Idaho.





Rusch, in her own head, started envisioning the team dynamics of the three cyclists, who barely knew each other before this expedition. Morton, she thought, was like water; he was really flowing with the team, sensing what each other's needs were. Burkard was fire—intense, energetic, motivating. Which meant Rusch was the grounding element. "I realized, I'm good. I got this. I'm ground," Rusch says.

They pedaled 50 to 70 miles a day and slept in rustic backpacker huts along the route each night. Though they were accompanied by a car-traveling film crew, who captured their journey for an upcoming film project, the trio did the route completely self-supported, meaning they carried their own food and gear and traveled only by human power. That often meant they'd be in a hut as the film crew cooked hot, aromatic curries while the cyclists ate dehydrated food out of a bag.

At the end of the journey, they crossed the Myrdalsjökull Glacier, one of the toughest sections of the route. They dealt with flat tires, mechanical issues, and frostbite. "The physical suffering is familiar to me. I know how to deal with it," Rusch says. "But the elements were a really big challenge to me. It's hard to explain the intensity of the wind. Even when it's at your back, it's dictating everything."

The next morning, amidst sleeting wind and a mounting storm, they pedaled ceremoniously to a lighthouse on the southern shore of Iceland to mark the finale of their journey. "I looked at the ocean, with seagulls flying around and ice hitting us in the face," Rusch says. "It was perfect."

"I REALIZED, I'M GOOD.
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They drove back to Iceland's capital city of Reykjavik, and the next morning, as if they hadn't had enough time in the saddle, they decided to pedal their bikes one last time back to that still-erupting volcano. It made it feel like a full-circle journey. "It was far more than a cool bike expedition in a beautiful place," Rusch says. "It was an emotional transition, a reinforcement for me of where I want to be going and what I want to be doing."

Rusch says she hopes their ride helps convince others to step outside their comfort zone. "Not everyone is going to ride across Iceland, but I do hope that by us doing this and sharing the experience that people realize there is adventure everywhere and there are lessons and gifts that come on the other side of something hard," she says. "All the hard things are the things you remember, the moments where you learn. Get uncomfortable. That's where you grow and evolve."



Burkard couldn't agree more. Though Rusch has the nickname "Queen of Pain," Burkard says she's in it for far more than that. "From the outside looking in, these expeditions look painful, but the motive isn't to feel pain," he says. "When things get hard, the line between you and the landscape becomes blurred and you feel connected. That's the beautiful thing."