

# Iceland: Tested

After a season of backcountry skiing, hiking, and climbing everywhere from the Rockies to the Andes, we took the year's best winter gear for a final shakedown in Iceland's remote Glacier Fjords. What we found: awesome ice-carved terrain and the sweetest boat-in camping and skiing on earth.



**INSTANT GRATIFICATION: THE SLOPES START RIGHT AT THE EDGE OF YOUR SHORELINE CAMP IN ICELAND'S GLACIER FJORDS.**



**LIQUID LANDING**  
The Westfjords' maritime climate can be surprisingly warm in April and May, producing the moderate conditions we found above Lónafjörður (pictured). In the first week of May, temperatures ranged from the high 20s to the 40s. Here, contributing editor Kelly Bastone skis with the Pieps Plecotus pack (page 66).

## Explore Sea to Summit

Ski Iceland's Glacier Fjords backcountry, and you'll discover a dreamscape of 2,000-foot slopes that plunge to the shoreline, with ideal conditions for every skill level.

What, exactly, does the term “adventure travel” mean these days? No ice in your post-safari gin and tonic? Let us propose a return-to-the-roots clarification: It ain't adventure travel unless—at some point in your journey—you find yourself engaged in a new activity in a remote and untrammled place where the only ice in your cocktail is a chunk you hacked out of a mountain glacier.

We recently visited just such a place in Iceland's Westfjords, where we skied down 2,000 feet of hero spring corn but had to pull up sharply at the end of the snowfield to avoid launching into the frigid sea, then picked our way carefully over seaweed-slick rocks to a waiting Zodiac, which was moored next to a bed of mussels we couldn't help but harvest. True, someone had packed in garlic and spices for just such an occasion, but that didn't lessen the adventure one bit. We still had to carry our skis across a fresh-from-the-snowfield, knee-deep river to reach camp, which was located mere miles from the spot where a polar bear had swum ashore just days before our arrival (it had crossed from Greenland on pack ice).

Our group—nine BACKPACKER and CLIMBING testers—had traveled to the remote Jökulfirðir (Glacier Fjords), where five postcard-perfect fjords cluster around one large bay. The area is part of Hornstrandir Nature Reserve, where the only human traffic—and there's precious little of it—travels on foot or ski. Why? The only access is by boat. We started the journey near the small town of Ísafjörður (see Plan It on page 22), and a few hours later, established a basecamp at the head of Lónafjörður, on a cushy tundra flat tucked between high tide and snow line. It was early May, which in Iceland means about 20 hours of sunlight a day, so after dinner we skinned up the valley to have a look around.

The mellow grade led to a skier's paradise of choose-your-angle slopes. From beginner-perfect rollers to fall-you-die chutes dropping straight to the sea, we had a week's worth of terrain right out the backdoor. Our guide, Rúnar Karlsson, who was born and raised in the Westfjords, had mapped numerous routes connecting the preserve's ridges, bowls, and valleys. In the subsequent days, we followed Karlsson in whiteout conditions that made for dizzying descents, did laps on a broad slope just a 20-minute skin from camp (perfect for swapping test skis), and watched tundra swans, eider ducks, and seals glide over the shallows of Lónafjörður (Lagoon Fjord).

On our final full day, Karlsson led a Zodiac-assisted, point-to-point traverse to Hrafnfjörður (Raven Fjord). Under bluebird skies so warm we baked in baselayers, we ascended along a river swollen with spring runoff. The climb-drop-climb route led to a high point of 2,362 feet, on a broad summit where we could see north toward the sheer cliffs of Horn and southward to the vast Drangajökull, a glacier so big and white it looked like a lenticular cloud sitting on the mountains. Far below, the waiting boat was just a speck on the glittering water. And the real adventure was still to come.



**ICING ON TOP** (clockwise from top left): Testers climb the final ridge to our 2,362-foot high point on the traverse from Lónafjörður to Hrafnfjörður; pack tools so you can adjust and repair bindings like Dynafit's ST (see our reviews of AT and tele bindings starting on page 82); on a trip with outfitter Borea Adventures, you'll move between fjords and camps with a small boat like this, or sleep on a live-aboard sailboat (see Plan It, page 22).

PHOTOS BY (COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT) GRANT GUNDERSON; STEVE HOWE (2); JACKIE MCCAFFERY; STEVE HOWE. TEXT BY DENNIS LEWON (ICELAND); TRACY ROSS (AMERICAS BEST SKI TOURS)

## Beartooth Pass, Montana

Shred spring corn on three moderate-level, short-hike couloirs.

Late May in the Beartooths is a time local skiers dream about: warmer temps stabilize the snowpack, and MT 212 opens, giving easy access to runs at Beartooth Pass. From the parking lot, 20 miles southwest of Red Lodge, hike 100 feet to reach the Gardner Headwall, a towering, snow-blasted face with three obvious chutes—the Hourglass, Main Chute, and East Chute. Each has butterflies-inducing 50-degree entrances, 1,000-foot drops, and football field-size snowfields. Hit 'em before noon (and boot-pack back to a car shuttle on the third switchback), then spend the afternoon exploring the steeper, tad-bit-longer Rock Creek Headwall, with twisty chutes and soaring views of Yellowstone's rock spires. (Warning: If it gets too warm—above about 40°F—wet slides can occur. Be sure to take shovel, probe, and avalanche beacon—and know how to use them.) **Contact** (406) 446-2103; fs.usda.gov/gallatin **Avalanche info** (406) 587-6981; mtavalanche.com

## Second Creek Drainage to Winter Park Resort, Colorado

Find snowy solitude just 70 miles west of Denver.

With a base elevation of 11,307 feet and 1,200 acres of terrain ranging from gently sloping glades to 45-degree chutes—as well as a notoriously dicey snowpack—Berthoud Pass, on CO 40, is prime training ground for backcountry skiers. Sample a gape-worthy slice with views of the Continental Divide on a five-mile, all-day tour from the Second Creek Drainage to Winter Park Resort. From the Second Creek trailhead (at the second pullout on the left from the top of the pass, going west), hike 3.3 miles through mellow spruce forest to the under-construction Broome Hut. Spin a lap in the low-angle trees you just skinned through, then continue west to the obvious pass on the often-windblown plateau ahead of you. Stay skier's left of the gorgeous-but-slide-prone Second Creek Headwall, visible from any point on your trip, and beeline for the Panorama Lift tower glinting in the distance. Enter Winter Park Resort atop 12,060-foot Parsenn Bowl, then angle right, dropping 2,610 vertical feet down Pary's Peek to Corona Way ski runs to the Mary Jane base area (and your car shuttle). **Contact** berthoudpass.com **Avalanche info** (303) 499-9650; avalanche.state.co.us



**WATERSKIING** (clockwise from top): Our camp above the tidal flats had one tiny inconvenience—an icy ford of the Rangalla River that we had to cross multiple times with gear; pack your own scotch, because the local hooch—Brennivin, a potato-based schnapps flavored with caraway seeds—is an acquired taste that's hard to acquire; La Sportiva's ultralight AT system (page 84).

## Utah Interconnect

Link backcountry stashes between six world-class resorts.

You could spend seasons begging your more-experienced friends to teach you everything they know about backcountry skiing. Or you could sign up for the Utah Interconnect, a 25-mile guided tour that starts at Deer Valley Ski Resort and links Park City, Brighton, Solitude, Alta, and Snowbird ski areas. To maximize shred-time, this route incorporates 12 lifts to nix 16,000 feet of climbing. You'll get real backcountry exposure as you target rock-lined ridges, yawning glades, and powder pockets all scouted by AMGA- and avalanche safety-certified guides who dispense tips and knowledge throughout the trip. Though this isn't a true avalanche course (for that, hit [avtraining.org](http://avtraining.org) for a list of schools), it's a great in-the-field introduction to routefinding, terrain selection, and powder harvesting. Go with three or more friends and your guides will weave in even more tips on snow assessment and avalanche avoidance. **Contact** \$295/person (includes lunch, lift access, shuttle, and finisher's pin), [sk Utah.com/interconnect](http://sk Utah.com/interconnect) **Avalanche info** (888) 999-4019; [utahavalanchecenter.org](http://utahavalanchecenter.org)



**ICELAND'S EXTREMES** We experienced everything from intense sun (top) to bitter cold (bottom). Ascending: Wear pants with vents (page 54) and a hat that shades without insulating (page 58), moderate your pace, and slide your skis forward (don't pick them up high). Crossing water: Wear extra insulation on top (page 50), so you don't get a deep chill from cold bare feet.



## Sugar Bowl to Squaw Valley, California

Follow the spine of the Sierra.

Come winter, the Sierras—best-known for summer backpacking—are blanketed in 500 inches of snow and blessed with solitude. Target Tahoe's High Route, a 12-mile, two-day tour that starts at the base of Sugar Bowl Ski Area (on I-80, 46 miles west of Reno); overnight at a rustic Sierra Club A-frame (sleeps 12, see contact below) and end at the base of Squaw Valley Resort. From Sugar Bowl's base, skin 1,500 feet to the top of Mt. Lincoln on the Pacific Crest Trail; turn southeast, and follow an often-corniced ridgeline (hug the west side for safety) three miles to 8,683-foot-high Anderson Peak, with bowl and chute skiing off the north side. Take the ridge to Tinker Knob the next morning, with views of turquoise Lake Tahoe in the distance. Cruise 2.5 miles to Mountain Meadow Lake before linking turns down a steep, twisting gully that leads to the Solitude chairlift at the base of Squaw Valley.

**Contact** Reservations for the Benson Hut are \$15 per person per night, (530) 426-3632. **Avalanche info** (530) 587-3558; sierraavalanchecenter.org

## Sawtooth Mountains, Idaho

Raise your game in no-crowd couloirs.

With moderate, forested slopes that rise to near-vertical gullies, Idaho's Sawtooths harbor the perfect terrain and conditions for skiers to incrementally test their backcountry skills. Do it on a three-day adventure that hits powdery glades, sun-soaked bowls, and a 1,500-foot-long descent down a twisting couloir on 10,299-foot-high Mt. Heyburn. From the Redfish Lake gate, five miles south of Stanley on ID 75, ski 1.8 miles on flat road to the Bench Lakes trailhead. From here, head six rolling miles to the Bench Lakes Hut, hemmed in by the Sawtooths' granite incisors (\$175/night for five; svtrek.com). Spin laps on The Triangle, a 25- to 38-degree glade that loads up with wind-protected powder. Day two: Skin one mile from the hut to the wide-open bowl above Bench Lake 5. Day three: From the base of Heyburn, boot-pack up the right side of the gully to top out 1,500 feet above Bench Lake 5. Snaking between Heyburn's twin summits, the couloir tips to 55 degrees before dog-legging around a granite finger and then mellowing. Link turns to an apron that terminates at Bench Lake 5. **Contact** (208) 737-3200; fs.usda.gov/sawtooth **Avalanche info** (208) 622-8027; sawtoothavalanche.com



**HIT PAUSE** High above the shore of Hrafnfjörður, skiers stop to plot the route down. Though snow levels were unusually low in May 2011, we were able to ski all the way from this point to the water's edge. Right: Executive editor Dennis Lewon warms his feet after ferrying the last of our duffels across the mouth of the Rangalaá River.



## Catamount Trail from Bolton Valley Nordic Center to the Trapp Family Lodge, Vermont

Ski the East's most untamed tour.

The 300-mile-long Catamount Trail began as a grad student's dream to link two cross-country ski resorts through some of New England's wildest backcountry. Enjoy the fruits of his labor on this 9.4-mile section that goes from the Bolton Valley Nordic Center to the Trapp Family Lodge. You'll climb 1,300 feet before dropping nearly double that through open, often powder-choked spruce forest. The first 6.5 miles are the most rugged, crossing multiple creeks and climbing ungroomed switchbacks. Routefinding can be tricky; travel in groups (for navigation help and safety) and follow CT blazes. After the Raven's Wind intersection (mile 2.1), skirt the east shoulder of Bolton Mountain, a ridge running east from the peak. Lunch in an open area called Windy Ridge before dropping to the north on a series of long, downhill switchbacks. After several switchbacks—and a few stream crossings—the trail drops steeply to another crossing with open water. Parallel the stream until you come to a bridge and a decrepit logging camp (mile 5.4). From Nebraska Valley Road parking lot (mile 6.5), walk 100 yards to Old County Road. Turn right, rejoin the trail through a cluster of seasonal homes, and link to the groomed trail network of the Trapp Family Lodge. **Contact** [catamounttrail.org](http://catamounttrail.org) **Avalanche info** no forecast center



**SLOPES, SUDS, AND SEA** (clockwise from top left): A longer, low-angle route is almost always a better way up than short and steep (see page 25 for tips on backcountry route planning); celebrating like locals; Rocky Mountain editor Steve Howe and Executive editor Dennis Lewon walk the last few feet from snow to boat.

### HOT SPRINGS HIKE

Unmatched fjordland skiing is just the start in Iceland. Trek through the planet's most dynamic landscape—full of bubbling hot springs, steaming geysers, and kaleidoscopic lava flows—on the epic Laugavegur Trail. The 33.5-mile, hut-to-hut hike deserves a place alongside the Annapurna Circuit and Milford Track as one of the world's best trails. Get beta and watch a slideshow at [backpacker.com/icelandssprings](http://backpacker.com/icelandssprings).

PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) STEVE HOWE (2), JONATHAN DORN, COREY HENDRICKSON

## Plan It

**GETTING THERE** Fly to Reykjavík, and get a domestic flight to Ísafjörður. From there, you'll connect with a boat for the ride across the bay to a camp in Glacier Fjords (alternatively, board a 12-bunk sailboat that serves as your floating base-camp, see below). The flight is less than an hour and the boat ride less than two, so with a morning departure from Reykjavík you can be skiing the same day. Icelandair offers direct flights from New York, Boston, Washington D.C., and Seattle, as well as seasonal non-stops from other cities. For accommodations and planning, see [visiticeland.org](http://visiticeland.org). For the Westfjords region, go to [westfjords.is](http://westfjords.is).

**SEASON** April and May are the best months for skiing. Earlier you're likely to have more snow, later, warmer weather. Summer is best for hiking and camping in Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. The sprawling wilderness has miles of trails, and you can arrange a boat drop through Borea Adventures (below).

**WEATHER** Pack for anything. The maritime climate is generally more moderate than Iceland's fierce reputation suggests—we experienced highs in the 30s and 40s, and skied in just a baselayer and shell most of the time—but you're far north, and severe storms can materialize at any time.

**OUTFITTER** Borea Adventures offers two kinds of ski tours. You can basecamp on shore, like we did, and ski right from camp. This option is great for groups with skiers who want to have more flexibility (it's easy to split up), and the ability to hike without arranging a ride to shore. With the sailboat option, you can more easily move around among the fjords, according to snow conditions and skier interest and ability. The sailboat also carries a sea kayak, for paddling excursions between ski tours. Both trips are six days, and prices start at EUR 1190 (ski camp) and EUR 1430 (sailboat) per person. Contact: [boreaadventures.com](http://boreaadventures.com)

GPS DATA: SHANNON DAVIS; CARTOGRAPHY: ANDREW J. MATRANGA.  
MAP PROVIDERS: GOOGLE EARTH; ONES/SPOT; IBCAO; DIGITALGLOBE. INSET MAP: NATURAL EARTH.



**A** Basecamp at head of Lonafjörður

**A** From basecamp, skiers can tour the Rangalaá River drainage or access miles of more terrain on the north side of Rangalaskarð Pass.

**B** This fjord-to-fjord, daylong tour is a must-do route, with life-list skiing and views across glacier fields and over the sea all the way to Greenland.