

# Adventure

All aboard... the ski party travels from the Aurora (seen in background) to the slopes by dinghy



## Storming the slopes

There's more than one way to reach the ski runs. Rupert Mellor tours Iceland's remote Westfjords by yacht to try some hard core ski-hiking... and basic crochet

As the Aurora lurched through the darkness in rising winds and waves, I struggled into heavy-duty waterproofs and life jacket and clambered on deck. Surely, Bob Dylan's Everybody Must Get Stoned boomed from the PA and our captain, Saggi Jonsson, smiled quietly at the invisible horizon as he guided the boat through the stormy void. Clinging to the rigging as he perched on the lip of the cockpit, first mate Rinar Karlsson flashed me a mad grin through the pounding horizontal snow. "Welcome to Mordor! Hahahahaaaaa!"

Ahead of me lay a journey into uninhabited wilderness just 24km shy of the Arctic Circle where, travelling and sleeping on the 18m yacht with eight others, I'd spend four days hiking up snowbound peaks and then snowboarding down to the sea's edge.

It sounded like the ultimate off-piste adventure. Yet earlier that April afternoon, as the 50-seater plane from Reykjavik began its descent between two flat-topped ridges of the minuscule mountains distinctive to Iceland's Westfjords region, I'd wondered if I was up to it. It didn't help that, as he

picked me up at Isafjörður airport, Rinar, a mountain guide who, with Saggi, runs Borea Adventures, the wilderness activities specialist behind the trip, greeted me with: "Great news! The rest of your group are all qualified Icelandic adventure guides!"

The global recession and Iceland's particular fiscal woes mean that these days many of Borea's guests are Icelanders holidaying at home, great for foreign guests wanting to meet locals. In my case they were Sveinborg, a government geologist and, with her knitting bag containing yarn for knitting us each a beanie, the group's mother hen; Kári and Hósi, a Mighty Boosh-quoting double act; Fressi and Gaddi, two wiry, fired-up survival machines with beards usually bristling with icicles; and the almost comically Bond girl-esque Stína, with her wickedly base sense of humour.

"Do you have drugs?" Stína deadpanned as we loaded snowboards and snowshoes onto the yacht, previously the property of sailing deity Sir Robin Knox-Johnston and now the base for Borea's range of itineraries in the Westfjords. "On the last trip we took with Rinar and Saggi, we sailed to Greenland and you couldn't move for people being sick. Today," she beamed,



That's the spirit... the day's escapades get toasted with scotch

"I took so many travel sickness pills I can't feel a thing."

Saggi had more good news: "Right now we should have spring weather - that's why we start the skiing trips in April. But the forecast is very bad. It's been a long time since we had conditions so severe at this time of year. Anyway, on to ship's rules. Number one, don't fall in..."

We motored north past Isafjörður's rust-stained travelers, fish factories and cute clapboard houses beneath the glacier-smoothed slopes of Tungudalur, whose handful of low-altitude pines add up to the most extensive of Iceland's five ski areas. The bitter wind off the north Atlantic drove me below deck. When I joined the rest of the group in the compact galley, they switched effortlessly into excellent English. "Do you know crochet?" asked Fressi enthusiastically. "Sveinborg is going to teach us."

"It's really very cool," said Stína, looking up from the headband she was knitting. "All the snowboarders are doing it in Reykjavik. Want to try?"

Next morning, I woke in one of the 12 narrow bunks lining the Aurora's hull at anchor in Veldleysfjörður ("fjord with no fish", so named for fishermen's consistent lack of luck





## We had hot tea before the final run, a glorious sprint down a plane of silky, virgin snow

show it. But regular breaks, sometimes punctuated with a round of shots from Hósi's hipflask, helped me catch my breath. In the end, it was the biting cold rather than the (substantial, but not extreme) level of fitness required which bothered me most.

And then, as we neared the ridge that would lead us to the 750m peak that was our goal, a miracle. The cloud peeled away, and under a luminous turquoise sky, a vast, crazy, 360-degree jigsaw of perfect white tabletops, soaring, badger-striped cliffs and kinked tongues of blue-black water rolled out to the horizon.

Many hours from the nearest road or human habitation, the scene's raw, elemental might was mesmerizing, and for minutes we stood in satisfied silence. The humpback whale which had waved a fin at us an hour out of Isafjörður harbour was always going to be a hard wildlife act to follow. But the lone arctic fox that peered at us as it picked its way across a huge avalanche scar on a nearby cliff brought home the unimaginable challenge of day-to-day survival when nature is so completely in charge - a challenge that until 60 years ago was met here by a scattering of subsistence farmers and whalers.

Cresting the ridge, we could see the white speck of the Aurora against the inky Lónafjörður ("Lagoon fjord"), where Síggi had sailed ahead while we climbed. Then we chose the lines down to the water for the few minutes of skiing that would reward us for our four-hour climb. Rúnar recommended a 45% drop between jutting columns of black rock and in three minutes flat Sveinborg, Fressi, Kári and Gaddi had bombed the descent and were hiking towards the boat. The rest of us took a wonderful ride down a gentler basin, a pillowy expanse of bumps and dips.

Back on board, after Hósi and Kári proved their mettle by jumping into the sea, we toasted the day's escapade with scotch and vodka from the drinks cabinet sunk into the galley table.

The next day, conditions were so bad we stayed boat-bound. "This is very unusual," said Rúnar. "Last year we lost only two of 60 skiing days on these trips. The previous year only one." Cabin fever was kept in check, though, by the croquet circle, a dice game called Farkle, and Síggi's Thai curry, preceded by fresh mussels he'd gathered at the shore.

On day three, the weather improved enough for a few runs of a 450m high bowl just across the fjord - any higher, and we'd have needed crampons for the thick, wind-burnished ice. And on day four we tackled a precipitous couloir whose powder-choked pitch had been goading the expert skiers since we anchored. This was tough. A layer of ice rendered my snowshoes useless, and I had to edge up and across a 50-degree incline, punching one then another fist into the snow, then ditto with my boots, while doing my best not to think about the rocky outcrops 30m below.

In minutes, Rúnar was at my side. And while his stated preference for "helmet-essential" sports wasn't entirely reassuring, his expertise as a

there). This was one of the five fjords of Hornstrandir, a nature reserve encompassing the ragged peninsula at Iceland's northwesterly tip, and the untamed playground where Rúnar and Síggi grew up sailing, camping, hiking and skiing.

Not that we could see it. Although the fjord's sheltered water was calm, mist and low cloud refused to unwrap the landscapes, glimpses of whose dramatic shapes would occasionally loom into view. We passed a couple of hours looking at photos on the Borea laptop of previous trips blessed with better weather - the scoured curves of the mountains (just tens of metres from where we were sitting) against blue skies, the pond-skimming antics of guests who tried to ski across the water to the boat, breakfast on deck in the sunshine.

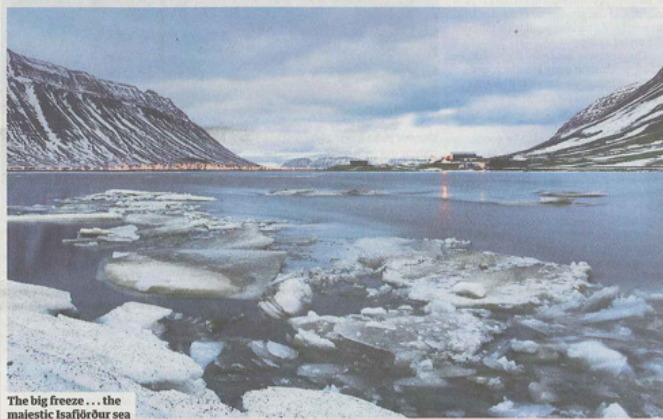
Then a sudden all-clear from Rúnar triggered a frenzy of layering - thermals, avalanche beacons, ski wear, lifejackets and backpacks. Ferried by dinghy to a narrow strand of black and purple seaweed exposed by the low tide, the skiers applied gripping skins to their skis, the snowboarders strapped on snowshoes, and our first ascent began.

There are whiteouts, and there are whiteouts. As we marched single-file up a shallow lower slope, cloud seeped down the mountain to wrap us in a blur of sensory deprivation. Just about able to make out the person in front, we kept together as we traced broad zigzags up the steepening climb with regular yelling, and in the case of the freakishly hale Kári and Sveinborg, karaoke renditions of their favourite Prince songs, punctuated occasionally with Dolly and Kenny's Islands in the Stream.

If anyone but me was feeling the strain of the deep, shifting snow, -15C wind-chill and spinnaker action of a pack-mounted snowboard, they didn't



Cold play... local bands perform at the Aldrei Fór Eg Suður festival



The big freeze... the majestic Isafjörður sea

### Way to go

**Getting there**  
Borea Adventures' (00 354 869 7557, boreaadventures.com) five-day back-country skiing trips on the Aurora costs €1,520, inc all food, but exc flights and ski equipment; the one four-day trip costs €1,390. Iceland Express (0118 321 8384, icelandexpress.com) flies from Gatwick or Stansted to Reykjavik. Air Iceland (+570 3030, airiceland.is) flies Reykjavik-Isafjörður from €96 rtn.

**Where to stay**  
Centerhotel Arnarhvoll in Reykjavik (+595 8540, centerhotels.com), doubles from £56 a night. Hotel Isafjörður in Isafjörður (+456 4111, hotelisafjordur.is), doubles from €66.

mountain guide and one of Iceland's leading avalanche authorities was, and he led me to a more forgiving route. At the top of the couloir, we had hot tea and chocolate before the final run, a glorious looping sprint down a perfect plane of silky virgin snow - exactly the ecstatic sign-off I'd hoped for. Borea runs 10 ski-hiking adventures each season, but only the first ends



**Further information**  
westfjords.is, visiticeland.com, icelandmusic.is

with a day at what is fast becoming the highlight of Isafjörður's cultural calendar. Held in an open-sided warehouse on the edge of town, Aldrei Fór Eg Suður (aldrei.is) - which translates as "I never went south", a reference to Isafjörður's resistance to the lure of Reykjavik's bright lights that have drained younger generations of countless other towns - is a free two-

day music festival with an independent spirit and utter lack of pretension that resonates with both artists and audiences of Iceland's heroically DIY music scene.

Performance fees cover expenses only, sets last just 20 minutes, whether you're the local college band or Sigur Rós, there are no soundchecks and the lighting rig is some fairy lights tossed over a fishing net.

First staged in 2004, it now draws artists from all over the country, as well as a sprinkling of fashion-forward cool-spotters from Europe and the US, who help to almost double the town's 3,000 population for the weekend. After the longest, hottest shower of my life at Hotel Isafjörður, I hooked up with my shipmates to see how young Vikings get down.

That night, rock, electro, folk, hip-hop, lounge and punk shared the stage before a crowd ranging from kids to grandparents, which went nuts for everyone from angsty lone troubadours to theatrical thrash-metal outfits, before partying into the night around the tiny town.

From our corner of the crowd, the biggest cheer of the night came when 1950s Icelandic pop revivalists Kraftlyfting took to the stage, featuring on guitar one Rúnar Karlsson.