



# FALL LINE

## HOPE IN THE HORN-STRANDIR

SKIERS BUILD A CASE FOR PROTECTING ICELAND'S WEST FJORDS

In the few minutes we'd stopped to nibble some chocolate-covered biscuits, the clouds cloaking Iceland's Hornstrandir had morphed into a howling blizzard. Barely able to feel our way to the edge of a ravine that would lead us safely down to sea level, we'd lost sight of our friend, Ken. We prayed that he and his kite would be waiting there for us. He wasn't.

We skied into a similar ravine the day before. A snow-filled ramp off the highland plateau had led us into a playful drainage flanked by 1,200-foot cliff bands and the occasional tempting couloir. If Ken didn't come this way, he would be forced to negotiate uncharted steeps in a blinding storm, or somehow retreat back to where we anchored our sailboat last night. Ken is a world-class skier, but despite knowing this, we were unnerved at the thought of leaving him at the mercy of the cold North Atlantic. Unable to dig a shelter or search for him, we let gravity carry us to the sea.

Down in the fjord, we spotted Captain "Sigi" Jonsson setting anchor after sailing the *Aurora* around the mountain headland over which we had spent the day skiing. A comfortable 56-foot sloop with room for 12, heat and hot showers, the *Aurora* is the ultimate floating base camp. We radioed Sigi. Still, there was no sign of Ken.

Skiing with us was Sigi's longtime friend, Runar Oli Karlson. Like Sigi, Runar was born and raised here in Iceland's West Fjords, and is co-owner of the *Aurora* and Borea Adventures, which specializes in sailboat-based backcountry tours to the Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. It was late May, and our missing friend Ken Lucas, my wife, Emily Johnson, skier Paolo Foggini and I were in Iceland for a week of sailing, kiting and skiing. Once home of several Norwegian whaling stations—the crumbling remains of which still exist—the 250-square-mile Hornstrandir is now one of Iceland's most isolated corners.

After being settled in the ninth century, it was all but abandoned in the 1950s. Winters were long, and the farming and fishing were tough. Beyond Jokulfirdir Bay to the south, several towns offered jobs, better weather and electricity.

"There has been no farming, no sheep grazing here for 50 years. The landowners gave up many of their rights to make the reserve work," says Runar, who has been guiding trips in the Hornstrandir since the 1990s. "There is no place in Iceland like this."

Today, one still has to travel by boat, on skis or foot to reach the Hornstrandir. Families like Runar's that once settled and farmed here are still entitled to repair and use the old dwellings left behind to fish, relax and enjoy summer. When the snow melts in late June, hikers frequent the region's mountain trails. Giant cliffs, glacial fjords, and summit-to-sea ski descents are in abundance here. And there is now a movement afoot to expand the Hornstrandir Reserve into a 500-square-mile national park incorporating several more fjords and the spectacular Dragnajokull ice cap to the east.

Runar and Sigi's success with their wind- and human-powered trips is helping to build the case for protecting the Hornstrandir region from the four-wheel-drive and snowmobile mania affecting much of Iceland today. And with the regional government pushing for the creation of the park, many locals are optimistic about protecting their heritage and fragile coastal environment.

"There is a certain anarchy, where landowners have been building roads and harbors," says Sigi. "There is no coherent strategy for the region. We need to expand the reserve to protect its nature, the cultural history. And there is little doubt that a national park could be a big boost to the economy."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24