

above the floor, and formed the sleeping-place, extending about 6 or 7 feet from the wall. On it was a mass of straw, the only form of mattress. Having lain there all the winter, it did not promise exactly what Professor Blackie would have called 'well air'd beds'. Happily there was a glorious sun burning upon the smooth rocks outside, so we carried it all out and 'made hay' of it for the whole afternoon. At 8 o'clock Schlegel returned with 2 more guides, Peter Baumann and Rudolf Kaufmann. They lit a fire, and cooked us a good supper; and about 10 o'clock we were ready to go to bed. The guides had brought in the straw, and they spread it fairly, in 2 senses, over the entire breadth of our plank-bed, and we all 9 of us prepared ourselves to lie down, as we were, with our heads to the back wall, wrapping ourselves as well as we could, each with his single blanket-rug. But first the elder clerical brother said to us—'I say, why shouldn't we have prayers together before we lie down?' And he suggested to the only German linguist of the party—'Look here, why shouldn't we at least say the Lord's Prayer together?' After some hesitation he agreed, and explained the idea to the guides, and added, 'Lasst uns beten' (Let us pray). So he and the guides began with 'Unser Vater' and the others with 'Our Father', and we ended with the Grace; and then we all lay down with quiet minds to what sleep we could get before our start for the top at 2.30am, after a good breakfast of 'soup, eggs etc', as my diary records.

The diary laconically sums up the rest of the climb:

'Over good hard snow, up a precipitous couloir and rocks to the saddle by 6.30.

Top at 8. Photo. Back at Hut thro' soft, deep snow, at 12.30. Lunch. Photo. Down over instructive rocks, ladders, and the glacier, to Hotel at 5.30. Tub, dinner and bed.'

So ended that stage in our family mountaineering pilgrimages.

#### *Note*

This MS was made available to the *AJ* by the author's son, L. W. Harford, whose help is gratefully acknowledged.

## Mountaineering in Iceland — a personal appraisal

**Roger Smith**

In the summer of 1972 I made 2 brief 'stop-over' visits to Iceland on my way to and from the Cape Farewell district of South Greenland where I was involved in a small climbing expedition. At that stage I was not aware of the incredible nature of the interior of Iceland since I only managed to penetrate as far as Thingvellir, the ancient parliament site of the country. In the summer of 1974 I was fortunate enough to be attached to the Derbyshire Schools' expedition to the Tungnafellsjökull area of Central Iceland with responsibility for the mountaineering interests of the party. This area to the NW of Vatnajökull abounds with shapely hills which are seamed with snow couloirs and gullies reminiscent of Scotland in the late spring. The



mountaineering objectives of this particular expedition were modest but my interest in the mountaineering potential of the country was awakened. Since that time I have made other visits, in 1978, to the Kerlingarfjöll mountains sandwiched between Langjökull and Hofsjökull and in 1980 to the Öraefi district of SE Iceland bordering the vast expanse of Vatnajökull. I have also sifted through numerous expedition reports and relevant articles with a view to collating information in the form of a short guide to mountaineering in Iceland. What follows is the summary of my findings.

Mountaineering in Iceland is largely on the scale of that found in Scotland together with the Alpine features of glaciers, bergschrunds, crevasses, seracs and moraine. Additionally the icecaps present a unique challenge for the mountaineer. The climate of Iceland is such that for a larger part of the year the Central Highlands are impenetrable and only peripheral communication and transport are possible. This in turn has a profound influence upon the mountaineering potential of the country which may for convenience be divided into the 2 distinct categories of Ski-touring and Snow and Ice Climbing. These activities can be practised around the fringes of the country in winter and spring and in the Central Highlands during the summer months when there is constant daylight for a significant period of time. On the whole the rock of the country is so soft that it does not lend itself to rockclimbing.

### **Ski-touring**

There are numerous areas of Iceland that are suitable for ski-touring but only the principal ones are included here. They are taken in anti-clockwise order starting in the N of the country.

The mountainous peninsula to the W of Akureyri, the second largest town of Iceland and capital of the N, is provided with a ski-hotel and piste ski-ing facilities together with many challenging 'off-piste' routes in winter and spring. The mountains Sútur (1144m), Kerling (1538m) and Stryta above the Glerá valley are particularly favourable as are the small glaciers of Glerárdalsjökull (1471m) and Vindheimajökull (1451m). To the W of the Öxnadalur valley are the 3 glaciers Thverárjökull (1384m), Tungnhryggjökull (1382m) and Myrkajökull (1387m) which provide ski-traversing potential in the summer months as well as spring-time.

Moving westwards the NW fjord peninsular has the small icecap of Drangajökull (925m) which although of low altitude affords some excellent ski-ing opportunities more appropriate in the spring and summer months when access is easier.

At the end of the prominent Snaefellsnes peninsular further S is the small glacier peak of Snaefellsjökull (1446m) which provides some excellent ski-traverses in spring and early summer when the snow level extends towards the lowlands that are well served with roads, making the area justly popular.

The area inland of Snaefellsnes and S towards Reykjavik is popular in winter and springtime for it is easily reached and has some fine ski-routes over mountains of low altitude draped in winter raiment. Further inland Langjökull (1355m) with its outliers Eiríksjökull (1675m) to the N and Thorisjökull (1340m) to the SW is another area with endless ski-touring potential. The complete traverse, from end to end, although technically not hard, is a long and serious undertaking. Hofsjökull (1765m), a nearly circular glacier of 20 miles diameter, is not as challenging as Langjökull but is more remote. Close to Hofsjökull are the Kerlingarfjöll mountains which present a different proposition. From the outlying hill Ásgardsfjall (919m) the view S is breathtaking and beneath it lies a well provisioned ski-school with a campsite nearby. The lower flanks of the mountain range are used for piste ski-ing and are provided with tows and other facilities, whilst the mountains Snaekjöllur



52 *Hekla* (Photo: N. E. Grey)

(1477m) and Ögmundur (1300m) together with their neighbours are readily accessible and provide some excellent traverses in the summer months. The couloir on the NW flank of Lodmundur (1432m) was descended on ski (Scottish Grade I/II in ascent) in 1975 and was considered to be one of the last problems of this area. This area also has the additional attraction of hot-springs in the heart of the mountains.

Moving S towards the next principal area one passes close to Hekla (1491m) which presents some short ski-routes around the crater rim in springtime but does not really warrant a special visit in its own right. At the head of the Thórsmörk valley further S is the next area of interest. Here the glaciers Eyjafjallajökull (1666m) and Mýrdalsjökull (1480m) offer some of the best ski-ing potential in Iceland and owing to their relative ease of access are notably popular. The traverse of Eyjafjallajökull from Stórumörk, in the W, over Hámundur (1666m) to Fimmvörduháls in the E is a magnificent route, as are many of the obvious routes on the W fringes of Mýrdalsjökull. Nearby Tindafjallajökull (1462m) although much smaller offers some ski-traverses in spring and early summer.

Some distance to the E is Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Europe, which provides some very fine, serious, ski-touring routes. Opportunities are legion but the remoteness of the icecap adds to the seriousness of the routes undertaken. The mountains on the fringes of Vatnajökull are more suited to conventional mountaineering but also have some long, technically very demanding ski-ing possibilities. Here the true sport of ski-mountaineering may be practised without hindrance whilst in the vast interior of Vatnajökull cross-country ski-ing may be pursued for mile after mile.

The E fjords area of Iceland is not without its ski-ing possibilities but these are only to be snatched by those fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time.

## Snow and ice climbing

Iceland experiences seasonal climatic changes so that the snow and ice climbing possibilities fall into two seasonal categories. Firstly—winter/spring mountaineering, found principally around the fringes of the country when certain mountains come into condition; and secondly—summer mountaineering, primarily on the icecaps of the interior of the country. In consideration of each type of mountaineering a mixture of Scottish and Alpine grading systems is used.

Winter/spring mountaineering is still in its infancy but with the development of Ísalp (Icelandic Alpine Club) it is likely to grow in popularity. The areas commonly explored at this time of year are those nearest to centres of population, especially Reykjavík and Akureyri.

The mountainous peninsula to the W of Akureyri, especially the peaks above the Öxnadalur, Glerá, Svarfadaldalur and Skidadalur valleys, is easily accessible and has an abundance of fine winter climbs to offer. The Akureyri Ski-hotel, at the head of the Glerá valley is a satisfactory base for some of the climbs particularly those on Kerling (1538m), Glerárdalsjökull (1471m) and Vindheimajökull (1451m).

Moving W the NW Fjord peninsula is not noted for its potential, except for the areas close to Drangajökull (925m) in the N, Lambadalsfjall (957m) and Kaldbakur (998m) in the central region. The remainder of the area is of lower altitude and does not provide good conditions.

On the Snaefellsnes peninsular there are many fine routes on Helgrindur (986m) most of which have not yet been attempted but are likely to be Difficile (D) to Très Difficile (TD) in grade. On Snaefellsjökull (1446m) itself there are a few short hard (D) ice-routes on the summit blocks but the area has more attraction for skiing.

Nearer to Reykjavik the mountain ridge sandwiched between Borgarfjörður and Hvalfjörður offers some very fine climbs especially on Skardsheidi (1053m) whose N face has several 700m routes of D to TD standard. Just to the N of Thingvellir is Botnssalur (1095m) which has numerous routes of Scottish Grade III, IV and possibly V on it, and when conditions are favourable is a popular climbing area.

In the S of the country suitable conditions can favour winter/spring climbing on Eyjafjallajökull (1666m) and Öraefajökull (2119m)—on Vatnajökull, both being close to the coastal road. (See later for particular details).

The summer mountaineering potential of Iceland is more of a 'known quantity' since people have been climbing on to icecaps, since time immemorial, as reference to the legendary Icelandic sagas will bear out. It is on the glaciers/icecaps that attention must focus in order to find the true wealth of this facet of the sport, for the summer's sun melts much of the winter snow and leaves only ice behind for the short-lived months of summer. A characteristic feature of Iceland's mountains in summer is their rich colour and the white smears of old snow/ice couloirs that seam their flanks. Couloirs of this nature are abundant and offer straightforward climbing that one might expect of a Scottish Grade I gully—in summer conditions!

Turning our attention to particular areas, in the N of Iceland the mountains to the W of Dalvík and Akureyri are of particular merit and contain some excellent routes especially on the fringes of the glaciers Tungnahryggjökull (1382m), Myrkarjökull (1387m) and Vindheimajökull (1451m), where ice-tongues present many opportunities in the easier grade brackets, (F-PD).

Drangajökull (925m) in the extreme NW, with its three small nunataks Hljodabunga, Reydarbunga and Hrolleifsborg, presents little challenge to the mountaineer, but is very remote, making any undertaking all the more serious. Snaefellsjökull (1446m) likewise presented only minor opportunities at this time of year.

In Central Iceland the story is very different, and the area around Langjökull (1355m) is well worth a visit. Eiríksjökull (1675m), an outlier to the NW of the area is a remarkably abrupt and almost circular glacier that has some long, straightforward routes on to its summit. Thórisjökull (1340m) and Geitlandsjökull (1400m) are two more outliers, in the SW, that are well worth climbing. The views on to Langjökull from the latter are just reward for the ascent. The Hagafell-Jarlettur region on the SE margin of Langjökull presents some very dramatic rock scenery which contrasts well with the gentler ice slopes hereabouts. For the climber however the E margin of Langjökull itself is of more importance. The glaciers that calve icebergs into Hvitávatn lake are magnificent and give many 1000m routes, up to *Peu Difficile* (PD) in standard, on to the icecap. The small E outlier, Hróttfell (1410m) has 6 glaciers that tumble from its summit ice-plateau all of which offer superb 700—1000m routes up to TD in standard. The tourist hut in Thjófadalur is a good base for this mountain and also for the NE fringe of Langjökull which offers numerous long straightforward (*Facile*) routes on to nunataks hereabouts.

Across the Kjölur plain to the E is Hofsjökull (1755m), a nearly circular icecap with disappointing climbing possibilities. However to the S of the Kjölur plain are the Kerlingarfjöll mountains. The N faces of the mountains Lodmundur (1432m), Snaekjöllur (1477m), Fannborg (1420m), Maenir (1360m) and Ögmundur (1300m), that overlook the plain, offer climbing of similar scale to the N corries of the Cairngorms together with the Alpine features of glaciers, bergschrunds, crevasses, seracs and moraine. Numerous climbs of Grade I-II (PD) are to be found in these mountains all about 600—1200m in length. From the summit of Snaekjöllur it is reputed that one can see both the N and S coasts of the country.



53 *Kerlingarfjöll Mountains (Photo: R. Smith)*

About 30 miles E of the Kerlingarfjöll mountains is Tungnafellsjökull (1535m), an outlier of Vatnajökull, which has 3 glacial tongues that yield routes of Facile (F) to Difficile (D) in grade, about 600m in length. The area abounds with climbing possibilities on the mountains that border the Jökuldalur valley mostly in the Grade I-II category. From here approaches can be made on to the Bárðarbunga (2000m) area of Vatnajökull across the Vonarskard valley—see later for particulars.

Turning to the S of the country, Hekla (1491m) presents easy (F) snow routes on to its crater rim and is worthy of a visit on the grounds that it is the most recent volcano to erupt (1970). Eyjafjallajökull (1666m) comes into its own as one of the finest areas for mountaineering in the summer months and the glacier tongue Gigjökull, on its N edge presents one of the most attractive ice-climbing areas in Iceland. There are also numerous routes on to the icecap of F—Assez Difficile (AD) grade, and the complete traverse from E-W, although long, is worth the effort.

If one travels along the coastal road to the E one is soon confronted with the vast expanse of Vatnajökull whose margin provides some excellent climbing possibilities, comparable in size and grade to many Alpine routes. In the N the first area of interest is Kverkfjöll (1920m) which is an area of old volcanoes with a little residual activity. The area is approachable from the Hverdalur valley which is one of the most spectacular hot-spring areas of Iceland. There are numerous long (900m) routes of PD grade in this area. Westwards from here is Bárðarbunga (2000m) which is best approached from the road-head, and tourist hut, at the end of the Jökuldalur valley beneath Tungnafellsjökull. The steep glacier wall hereabouts gives access on to the icecap summit by long and complex routes of about AD standard. South of Bárðarbunga, on the W edge of Vatnajökull are Hamarinn (1573m) and Kerlingar (1339m) which offer little resistance to the mountaineer willing to attack them from the W after a long approach route over the ashen desert. The icecliffs of the Grímvotn crater in the centre of the W end of Vatnajökull would be well worth a visit for the mountaineer but would involve a 'major' undertaking even to reach the area. Back on the fringe of the icecap just N of the Skaftafell National Park are the nunataks Midfellstindur (1430m) and Hrutafjallstindur (1875m) which offer some good, long, routes of mixed climbing (approx AD grade) while the nearby thumb of basalt, Thumall (1279m), is an obvious 'plum' if it is composed of climbable rock!

Further S on Öraefajökull, which is almost a separate icecap at a higher altitude, are 4 distinct peaks. At the centre is a high point, Snaebried (2041m), which although relatively easy in ascent (F) is most rewarding with its panoramic views over sea and ice. Nearby the nunataks Knappar (2044m), Hvannadalshnukur (2119m) and Puridatindur (1741m) give good ascents and magnificent views. In this area it is the route chosen to reach the icecap that is more demanding than the final slopes to the peak in question. There are numerous possibilities from both E and W, some deliberately avoiding difficulties and some eking them out, but all of them major undertakings of about 1500m or more in length.

Further E at the head of the Kálfafellsdalur valley, on the true edge of Vatnajökull are more possibilities on the nunataks Snaefell (1554m), Karl og Kerling (1140m), Birnudalstindur (1230m) and Kálfafellsfjöll (1406m) all in the easier (F-AD) grades. Close to the E end of Vatnajökull are the glacier tongues of Hoffellsjökull and Lambatungujökull around which are further possibilities, especially on Grasgiljatindur (1275m) and Godaborg (1425m). The ridge traverse on the latter is particularly good at PD grade. In the Lonsoraefi area, just E of Vatnajökull, centred on the small icecap Hofsjökull (1190m), are many shorter climbs of easier (F-PD) grade.

Finally mention must be made of the volcanic plug of Herdubreid (1682m) to the north of Vatnajökull which stands alone above the surrounding plain. It has numerous gullies breaking through the rock barrier to the summit snow plateau, many of which yield routes, up to Grade III in standard, when conditions are favourable. The views from the summit are breathtaking and make the climbing all the more rewarding.

Although the country cannot boast large mountain ranges or N faces of repute it does have a considerable amount of mountaineering potential that is at present largely unknown. The area is particularly suitable for those keen to explore and climb in remote mountains at a modest standard. Access to the country is a relatively simple affair even with parties and since tourism is the second industry of the country one is always encouraged to open one's purse! Anyone contemplating a visit to this extraordinary country would be well advised to seek assistance from the Iceland Unit of the Young Explorers' Trust (c/o The Royal Geographic Society, 1, Kensington Gore, London), which has built up a fund of information associated with the country. The Alpine Club Library and the YET/RGS each hold a copy of a Pilot Climbing Guide to Iceland that is compiled from extracts of expedition reports and other relevant sources for which this brief synopsis is the introduction.

## Back in the USSR

### John Town

'Agree Receive Caucasus Camp '79 Payment Stop Schedule Following', read the telegram. Short and informative: very Russian I thought. Two and a half months passed without payment schedule, without a word: also very Russian. By then, however, our financial situation was looking somewhat brighter. More telegrams flashed back and forth and 3 weeks later Shiona and I were in Moscow.

For several years now the Russians have run a series of International Mountaineering Camps in the Caucasus and Pamirs. British participation has been sparse, compared to the regular visits from the USA, Germany and Austria. The tragic 1974 Pamirs Camp attended by strong English and Scots teams saw 13 fatalities and doubts about 'Olympic' gatherings of this kind.<sup>1-3</sup> In Moscow we found ourselves the only Britons in a group of 60 climbers and backpackers from the USA, West Germany, France, Austria, Italy and Mexico. The majority were medium grade alpine climbers from local clubs rather than well-known figures representing their national associations. Like ourselves, a number of groups of 2 or 3 had arranged their trip as individuals direct with the Russians.

Sightseeing tours seem an inescapable part of any visit to the USSR, but after a day which saw my own third reluctant Kremlin circuit we were flown to Mineralni Vodi in the spa area which lies at the N foot of the Caucasus. There followed a 4 hour coach ride up the increasingly impressive Baġsan Valley to our base at Azau. Beyond the depressing mining town of Tyrnyauz the gorge presents a series of 1000 foot walls (attacked briefly by Richard McHardy in 1970<sup>4</sup>).