

Hope in the Hornstrandir

A Sailing and Skiing Adventure

Text and photos by Brian Mohr



Ken was gone. 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, and Ken and his kite had disappeared. Barely able to feel our way to the edge of a ravine that would lead the rest of us safely down to sea level, we prayed that Ken would turn up. He didn't.

The ravine, a snow-filled drainage that opened to a great fjord and was flanked by towering basalt cliffs, was fast becoming our only safe option. If Ken didn't come this way he would be forced to negotiate uncharted steep slopes in a blinding storm, or somehow retreat back to where we anchored our sailboat last night. Despite knowing that Ken was highly competent in the mountains, we were still unnerved at the thought of leaving him at the mercy of the cold North Atlantic. With the dangerous blizzard preventing us from waiting or going looking for Ken, 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 basecamp. We radioed Sigi. There was still 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 of 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 on the Aurora for a week of sailing and skiing. Once at the mercy 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 since the ninth century, it was all but abandoned by the Icelandic families that lived there through the 1950s. Winters were long and the farming and fishing was 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 by foot to reach the Hornstrandir. Families like Runar's that once settled and farmed here are still entitled to use and repair the old dwellings once left behind—to fish, relax, and enjoy summer. When the snow melts in late June, hikers frequent the region's mountain trails. Giant bird cliffs, glacial fjords, the Arctic fox, 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.

There is no doubt that Runar and Sigi's success with their wind- and human-powered trips is building 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 harbours," says Sigi. "There is no coherent strategy for the region. We need to expand the reserve to protect its nature and the cultural history. And there is little doubt that a national park could be a big boost to the economy here."

Back on the fjord, we spent an hour collecting mussels for dinner. Emily heard an Arctic fox bark. Skuas, terns, and gulls soared and squawked. The storm showed no signs of letting up, and heading back up the mountain to search for Ken didn't make sense.

We pitched a bright tent on shore and stocked it with food, hot tea, a sleeping bag, clothing, and a note: "Ken—We miss you. Stay here. We will be back tonight. See you soon." We hauled anchor. Our best chance of finding our friend was to retrace the coast back to the fjord we'd left that morning.

While scouring the coastline with our binoculars, we rounded the headland separating the two fjords, only to be shoved around by a stiff wind and solid swell. Paolo studied the shoreline. Runar sounded his brass horn. Ken was out there somewhere, all alone. In some ways, I was envious. We spotted the summit-to-sea couloir we had skied for breakfast—an aesthetic line dropping 2,000 feet to the sea. We were back to last night's anchorage. But where was Ken? Thoughts one should never have ran through our minds. The solitude was overwhelming.

Then, amid the silence, we spotted a flash of color. Ken was nestled into some rocks with his orange, Ozone kite. We launched the dinghy. It was nearly midnight. I asked him how he was.

"Awesome," said Ken, with a smile. "It's beautiful out here. Sorry about the hassle."

That evening, with Ken back on the boat and a snowstorm bearing down on us, we sipped wine and feasted not just on Sigi's gourmet fixings, but on something sweeter than usual. The day's events in this remote, wild and beautiful place had left us feeling more alive than ever. ☞

Brian Mohr and his wife, Emily Johnson, live in Moretown. They will bring their multi-media slideshow, Sailing and Skiing Iceland, to several venues throughout the region this winter. For more info, go to their website, www.emberphoto.com.



Clockwise from upper left: Captain "Sigi" Jonsson at the helm of Aurora, en route to the Hornstrandir Peninsula. Coming ashore for a day of skiing after anchoring in a sheltered fjord. Ken Lucas and Emily Johnson, on the approach to the Breakfast Couloir. Emily Johnson skis down to the village of Flateyri (also featured in backdrop photo) in Iceland's West Fjords. The author enjoys a little midnight skiing (Photo: E.Johnson) **Above:** Ken Lucas kite-skis across a gentle pass on the Hornstrandir Peninsula.

For more information on sailing and skiing with Borea Adventures, visit www.boreaadventures.com.

For more about Iceland's West Fjords and Hornstrandir, visit www.westfjords.is.