

Introduction to Mountaineering in Iceland

By Haraldur Guðmundsson

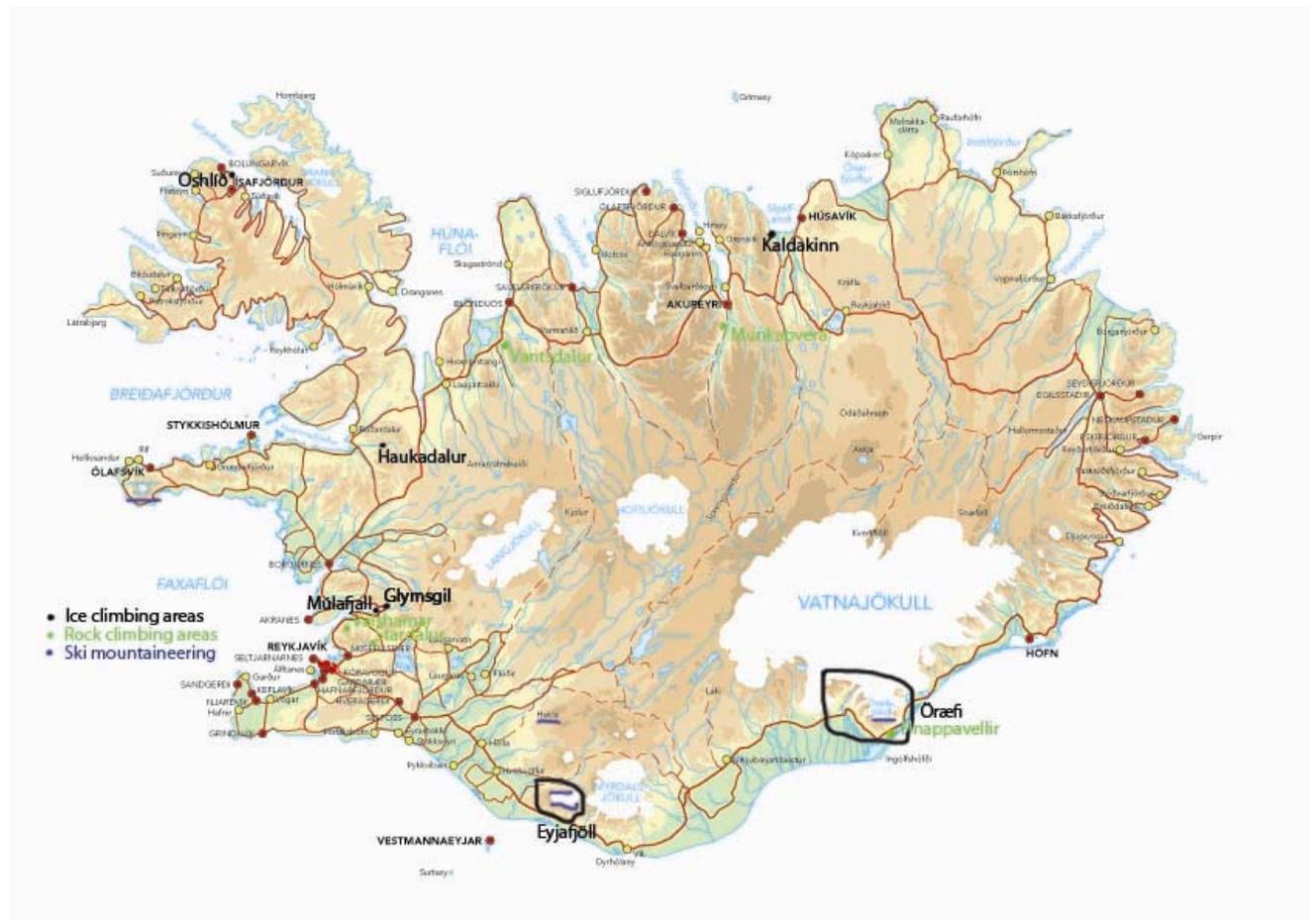
Introduction

The history of mountaineering in Iceland does not stretch far back. It was not until the 1930s that people wandered off to the hills with purposes other than sheep gathering. Until then, they were not considered anything more than odd fellows. Around 1940 a group of enthusiastic hillwalkers and mountaineers formed a club, organising trips and building huts and boothies. Unfortunately this club became inactive around 1955 and interest in mountaineering slackened. It wasn't until 1977 that climbers who had experienced the Alps realized the importance of the role of the Alpine/Mountaineering clubs, and sat down and founded the Icelandic Alpine Club. Since then it has been the backbone of the rapid development of the Icelandic climbing scene.

Weather & Geology

The weather in Iceland is very similar to the Northwest coast of Scotland, but on the average 5-7°C colder. The prevailing winds are the southeasterly gales which bring precipitation to the southern coast and the northeasterly winds at the northern coast. As a rule of thumb, lowpressure fields hitting Scotland from the Atlantic have more or less been around Iceland two days earlier. The northern part tends to be a wee bit dryer. The weather in Iceland should not come as a surprise to Scottish climbers. Ferocious winds, horizontal precipitation and temperatures rocking few degrees overnight can be very frustrating but also help form fantastic climbing conditions.

The volcanic nature of Iceland almost rules out any quality rock buttresses up in the mid-highlands, but on the coastal areas a reasonable solid rock can be found. However, these solid rocklayers tend to be separated by very loose, granular layers.



Map of Iceland

Iceclimbing

Iceclimbing is made favourable in Iceland by its porous rock and the variable temperatures that tease the freezing point. Because groundwater has easy access out of the rock and the temperature swings up and down, these combined factors guarantee soft and very enjoyable ice to climb. The climbs are mostly pure waterfalls; a number of mixed routes increase year by year but nothing compared to the climbs in the Northern Corries of Cairngorms.

The season stretches from mid October through mid May, with December through March as the most reliable period. Though many local climbers complain about harsh conditions if there has been a thaw for a couple of weeks, there is always ice – you may just have to go higher up, or to another part of the country. To be honest one can always all year around go to one of the glaciers and climb sort of hard glacier ice, can be enjoyable to practice technique there.

The grading system originally borrowed Scottish winter grades (Roman numerals), but has evolved into a different system. The grades are called “P”-grades, named after Páll Sveinsson, one of Iceland's most active climbers for the last 25 years. Prefixing the P

began as a joke, as Páll used to stretch the Scottish grades until there was little that connected them to the Scottish winter grades. For comparison, P4 is roughly Scottish Grade V (5+). Some climbers of younger generations started grading their routes by Jeff Lowe's American grades AI and WI, for the sake of easier comparisons with foreign climbers. The M-grade has been used for the mixed climbs. Jeff himself has a couple of routes at various sites at the Snæfellsnes peninsula. It is worthwhile to mention that P-grades reflect more of the technical difficulties in normal conditions, rather than the seriousness.

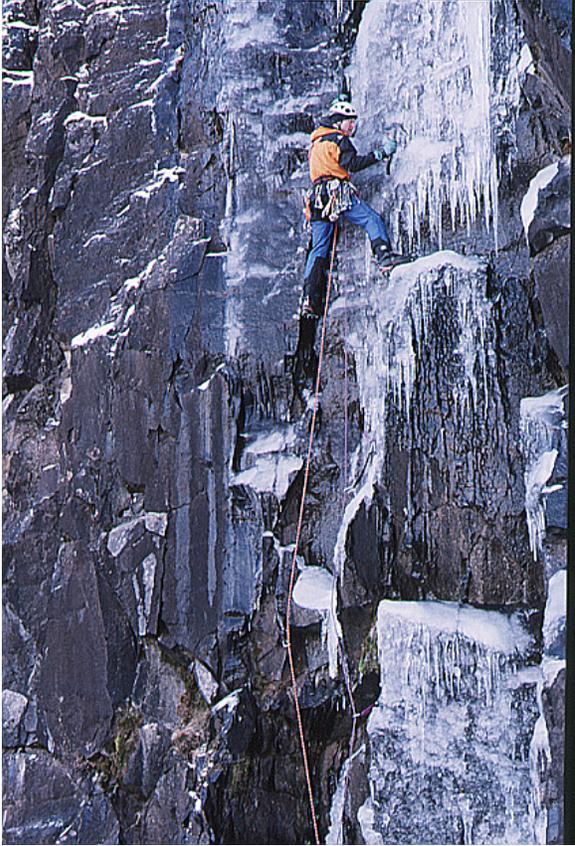
The Icelandic Alpine club has published some guides, 'topos'; more are to come and will probably be in pdf-format available on the club's website, www.isalp.is, only in Icelandic unfortunately. The club has an annual iceclimbing festival, held during the last weekend of February. The organisers try to choose a venue where there are plenty of unclimbed lines, so these festivals have generated many of Iceland's best iceclimbs. Visitors have often attended, and had an enjoyable time climbing and tasting the infamous schnapps *Brennivín*. The Canadian climber Will Gadd even named one route after the cumin flavoured drink, graded M9, Will's most difficult route at the time.

Avalanches are common on the approaches, and there is no formal avalanche safety information on the web or elsewhere, so rely on your judgment and experience. The local climbers will probably have the best gut feeling of the hazard level. Never underestimate the importance of having an avalanche transceiver, shovel and a probe. Help is really far away, so keep that in mind. It may be up to your mates to rescue you.

I will now introduce the most popular and the most highly regarded areas, starting with my favourite.

Múlafjall

Located in the deep end of Hvalfjörður fjord, a 30-45min. drive from Reykjavík, depending on the road conditions, this drive can be dodgy when iced up. From the carpark it is a 15-30min. hike to the routes, 300m elevation. At Múlafjall there is something to satisfy every appetite. Ice routes range from P3-P5, and mixed up to ~M6. There are a couple of multipitch routes, but the majority is single pitched. On a good day out, you should easily meet 10-20 climbers and no one has to race or queue up for a route! All of the most obvious lines have been climbed. There are few mixed lines left unclimbed, but their quality is not very attractive.



Múlafjall. Photo: Páll Sveinsson

Guðmundur Helgi Christiansen on unnamed ca.M6,



climbing Stígandi P5, Múlafjall. Photo: Jón Haukur Steingrímsson

Guðmundur Helgi Christiansen

Glymsgil

Just a wee bit further in Hvalfjörður, Glymsgil gorge offers fantastic multipitch climbs from P3 up to P5+. The most famous route is the 200m vertical route Glymur Direct P5+, this is Iceland's highest waterfall. The approach is 20 min. from the carpark to the mouth of the gorge. It is easy to walk in the gorge if the river is frozen, but walk carefully as it tends to 'eat' the ice itself. At least two weeks of frost are needed for proper conditions in

routes in Glymsgil, because there is a lot of water flowing there. But when the conditions are right the routes can form up as thick ice pillars dominating the gorge.



Olli climbing Draumaleiðin P5, Glymsgil. Photo: Páll Sveinsson



*Haraldur Örn Ólafsson on Hvalur II, P5.
Photo: Ólafur Ragnar Helgason*



At the end of the gorge one can see the 200m waterfall Glymur, various routes go up there. Photo Ólafur Ragnar Helgason

Haukadalur

Located on the western part, a two and a half hour drive from Reykjavík, here there are not many routes in the lower grades but loads of P5's and some WI6's (climbed by Americans). There are also good mixed routes, even up to M9. The local farmer runs a fair priced hostel/bunkhouse/B&B, so this is a good weekend climbing trip, though it is missing out on the good selection of pubs that are located in the Scottish Highlands. There are also potential new routes. Haukadalur is a favourite venue for many climbers and highly

recommended.



I think this is Brennivín M9, going for the roof, in Haukadalur. Photo Páll Sveinsson



Páll Sveinsson climbing a route in Haukadalur. Photo Páll Sveinsson

Óshlíð and vicinity

Just on the doorstep of the largest town in the Vestfirðir fjordy-peninsular is Óshlíð. Getting there by car is not recommended during the winter months, unless you really know the roads (10 hours) so flying is the only practical option and you can rent a car from Ísafjörður at the airport. There are good routes from P3 up to P5 and also alpine routes up to ca. 600m. The gullies here are extremely avalanche prone, so the approach is often really dangerous. On a neighboring mountain I once witnessed an Englishman who was climbing with us get caught by an avalanche and swept down about 300m. He survived miraculously but was, understandably, very shocked. Here there are considerable possibilities for new routes.



Stefán Örn Kristjánsson on a roadside P4 in Óshlíð, with bigger routes in the background. Photo: Haraldur Guðmundsson

Kaldakinn

On the Northern part, about one and a half hour drive from Akureyri, this is the largest town in the region. Driving to Akureyri takes about 4 hours from Reykjavík. Another option is to fly to Akureyri and rent a car there.

Quality routes range from easy up to P5, most are around 200m long. Most of them finish up to a 35° slope which accumulates snow rapidly, so the safest decent is to abseil of a V-thread (Abalakov), a few meters below the top. Again, there is plenty of potential for new routes.



Stekkjastaur P5 in Kaldakinn. Photo Páll Sveinsson.

Öræfi



Vígtönnin P5, in Núpsstaður. Photo: Einar Rúnar Sigurðsson

Consisting of a couple of areas that build up a fantastic collection, these are just next door to the National Park Skaftafell. Driving to Skaftafell takes about 4 hours from Reykjavík.



Testofan, excellent P4-5 routes. Photo: Einar Rúnar Sigurðsson

Einar Sigurðsson, a local mountain guide in Öräfi, has done most of the searching for new areas and did the majority of the first ascents. In good conditions Öräfi is probably the best place to go. With difficulties ranging from easy up to P5 and M6, and this is also the main alpine venue, Einar has the best information about unclimbed lines – and there are couple of good ones just waiting, so interested climbers should contact him.

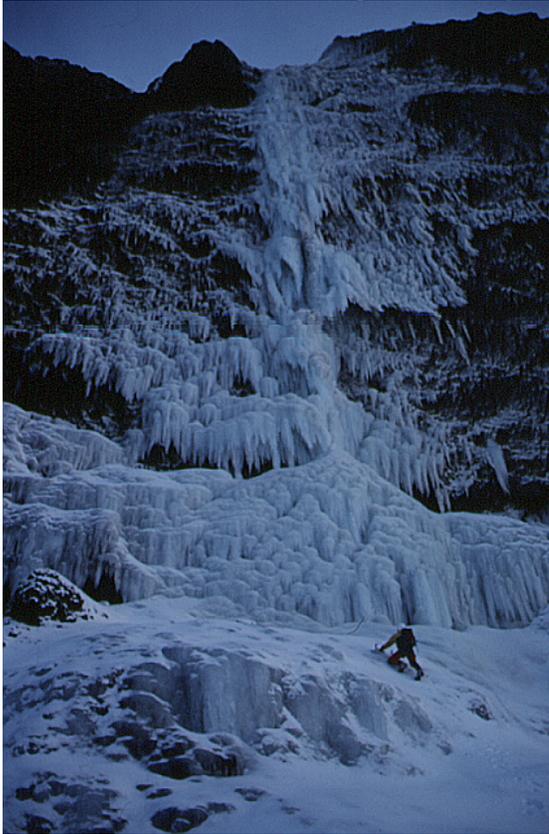


Sléttbjargafoss P5, Öräfi. Photo: Einar Rúnar Sigurðsson

Eyjafjöll

Driving here from Reykjavík takes 1.5-2 hours. Eyjafjöll are on the southern coast, and on the top of Eyjafjöll is the Eyjafjallajökull glacier. For the ice to come into condition it requires a wee bit longer freezing period than e.g. Múlafjall, because Eyjafjöll faces south and the volume of water flowing there is larger than in e.g. Múlfjall. For many climbers

Eyjafjöll is a favourite site. The climbs tend to be in the upper grades, P4 up to P6. The only route in Iceland with a P6 grade is *Brightside*, in Eyjafjöll.



The Brightside P6, Eyjafjöll. Photo: Páll Sveinsson

This is only a very high-level description of the ice climbing scene.

Rock Climbing

The quality of the rock is in general very poor, so do not expect anything near British standards. However there are five crags which the climbers visit during the summer months. The season ranges from mid May to mid September, and the best time to go climbing is mid July. I do not know why the American Yosemite grading system was chosen instead of the French one, but all the routes are graded according to this system.

Two crags are just a 20 min. drive from Reykjavík, Valshamar and Stardalur.

Valshamar

The crag is 25m. high and leans a bit backwards so all the routes are 'slabs'. This started off as a traditionally protected crag, but as the climbing standards pushed higher the need for bolts rose. Today the routes are about 15 and range from 5.3 to 5.11a. On a good summer evening probably 10-20 people are climbing there late in the evening and enjoying the midsummer night.

Stardalur

This is the only crag on which the climbing community agreed to ban bolts and pegs. And it is well justifiable because it is a crackclimb and nuts and friends fit in everywhere you may need protection. The crag faces south and is about 40m high, most of the routes are 30m. The range is from 5.2 up to 5.11a.



Stardalur, rock

crag close by Reykjavík. Photo: Haraldur Guðmundsson

Hnappavellir

The largest climbing area is located in the South-East part, just 20km. east of Skaftafell National Park. The rocks are old sea cliffs and were discovered accidentally in 1990. All the routes are bolted, 5.5 – 5.13d. Now the number of routes has probably reached 100, many of high quality. This is about 4 hours driving from Reykjavík.



Miðskjól one of the crags of Hnappavellir, around 20 m high. Photo: Hermann Sigurðsson

Skinnhúfuklettur, Vatnsdalur

A small crag with around 10 routes, 5.6-5.13a, all bolted. Located in the western part of the Northern side and 2.5 hours from Reykjavík.

Munkaþverá, Akureyri

A river gorge with some potential, this is the local crag of the climbers in Akureyri, the largest town outside the capital. On the northern side, it has 15 routes, 5.8-5.12a, bolted. Driving to Akureyri takes about 4 hours from Reykjavík and from Akureyri to Munkaþverá takes 20 min.

Alpine-Climbing

Mountaineers in Iceland opened their eyes to possible alpine routes when Doug Scott came in 1985. He and three local climbers did a route called Scotts-leið, which Doug Scott graded as TD+, so far unrepeated. After his visit a couple of routes have been established in Skaftafell national park and in Öraefi. These routes are ~1500m and most are TD+ or even more difficult.



Einar R. Sigurðsson high up Postulínsleiðinni TD+ 1500m, Hróttfjallstindar, Öraefi. Photo: Örvar Atli Þorgeirsson.



*Camping before climbing the arête on Heljargnípa, D-D+, high up on Vatnajökull glacier. It is a whole day ski-in. Many of the alpine climbs are fairly remote.
Photo: Stefán Örn Kristjánsson*



Asturveggur Þverártindseggjar TD+-ED 400m, Þverártindsegg little further east than Örafi. Route opened by Ívar Finnbogason and Einar Rúnar Sigurðsson in May 2003. Very impressive climb by two mountain guides.

Ski Mountaineering

This is an increasingly growing sport and can be practiced the whole year round on the glaciers. The best season is from April through June.



Haraldur Guðmundsson and Stefán Magnússon telemarking on Eyjafjallajökull, good powder conditions. Photo: Stefán Örn Kristjánsson

My favourite mountains to skin-up are Hekla, Eyjafjallajökull glacier, Snæfellsjökull glacier and Hvannadalshnjúkur in Öræfajökull, the highest one in Iceland. The majority of ski mountaineers are telemarkers, the old Norse way of skiing with your heels loose.

Please note that there are many other excellent mountains to ski, I just mentioned the ones that I tend to do every spring.



Stefán Örn Kristjánsson telemarks in Svarfaðardalur. Spring is normally the best time for ski mountaineering because of long daylight and more settled weather. Photo: Sigurður Skarphéðinsson.

Additional Information

As this was supposed to be a brief introduction to mountaineering in Iceland, I am fully aware of that this might go a wee bit short for those who are planning going to Iceland for mountaineering. So here are some good links:

Einar Rúnar Sigurðsson, mountain guide in Öraefi
<http://www.hofsnes.com/tours/index.htm> and
<http://www.oraefi.is/mountaineering/index.htm> for detailed information on mountaineering in Öraefi.

Icelandic Mountain Guides
<http://www.mountainguide.is/> offer custom mountaineering trips in Iceland, experts in iceclimbing.

The Icelandic Alpine Club
<http://www.isalp.is>

The Icelandic Search and Rescue Association (volunteers, run on similar concept as the British Mountain Rescue Teams are)
<http://www.landsbjorg.is>

Emergency telephone number – co-ordinate search & rescue.
112

The Icelandic Meteorological Office
<http://www.vedur.is/english/>

Icelandair, the traditional carrier. Flying from Glasgow Int., London Heathrow and Manchester (I think)
<http://www.icelandair.co.uk>

Iceland Express, a budget carrier operating from London Stansted.
<http://www.icelandexpress.co.uk>

British Airways fly from London, Gatwick
<http://www.ba.com>

And please do not hesitate to email me with any questions regarding mountaineering/hillwalking in Iceland, just put Edinburgh JMCS in the subject line, and I will happily answer and try to help you out. My email is [hg at askur.org](mailto:hg@askur.org)