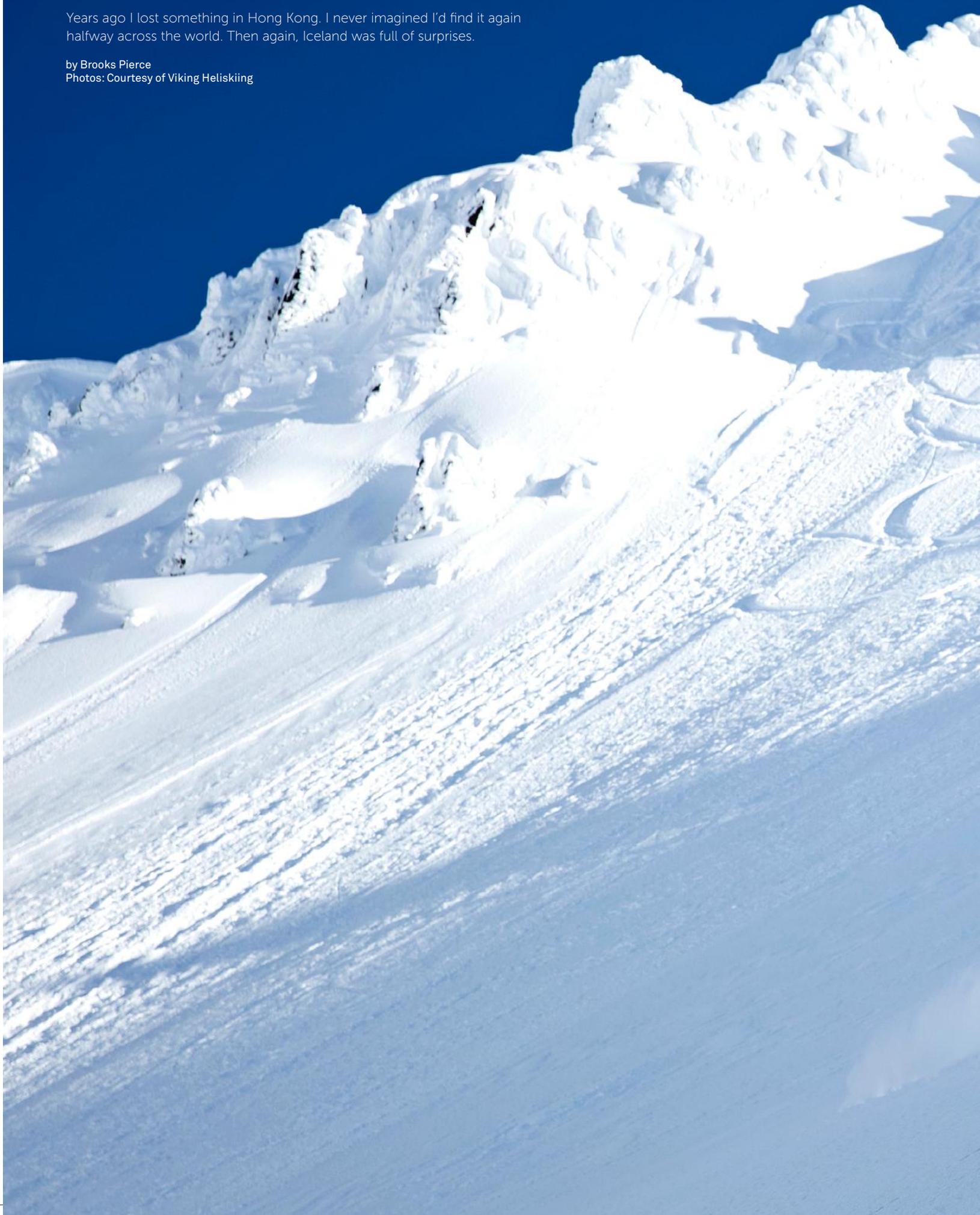


HELI-SKIING
ON THE TROLL
PENINSULA

FROM SUMMIT TO SURF

Years ago I lost something in Hong Kong. I never imagined I'd find it again halfway across the world. Then again, Iceland was full of surprises.

by Brooks Pierce
Photos: Courtesy of Viking Heliskiing







If you lose your edge and start to fall, pull the cord on your avalanche bag—at least the bag will protect you...a bit.” Some comfort. While my new Swiss skiing companion meant to reassure me, along with the three other expert skiers gathered atop one of Iceland’s most challenging skiable mountains, I can’t say his intentions were fulfilled as we waited to test our mettle on a wicked descent.

My leg twitched with nervous energy as I stood, strapped into my skis and trying to hold an edge on “The Diamond”: a gnarly black crag cutting sharply into the crisp Icelandic air. As I peered down the steep pitch, I realized that there was little room for error. This slope surpassed my confidence, even at my most stalwart. Yet I was compelled to that edge, and then over it. How had I gotten there?

A SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

My global hunt for organic experiences—you know, discovering those places where you can still see the dirt, that the locals invite you in for a view, where the rough appearance and possible risk jolts you out of the beige complacency—that life can become—had begun decades earlier. In 1988, as my plane descended toward the old Kai Tak airport in Hong Kong, I had wondered if the 747

that dove sharply over the mountains on approach, had enough runway to land or if we would run right into the bay. But after a safe landing, I was sucked in by the “real”; Kaleidoscopic junks that dotted Victoria Harbor, the smells, the texture and the richness of the city—I loved it all. But upon returning to Hong Kong years later on my honeymoon—eager to introduce my bride to the wonderland I’d described for her countless times—something was lost.

Old Kai Tak had given way to a glamorous new airport on a man-made island far from Hong Kong. The junks were all but absent from the harbor, and Tiffany’s and Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse stood as anchor tenants of the Peninsula Hotel. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, thus began my search for the world’s remaining “Old Hong Kongs.”

WHAT’S MISSING?

Fast forward to March 2016: I had just returned from a family ski vacation in Colorado—the joy of watching my children ski is incomparable. Yet at home, despite just returning from what was by anyone’s account an awesome vacation, I couldn’t shake an itch... a restlessness. I felt somehow unsatisfied. Midlife rumblings were almost certainly at play (Yes, this year I hit the big Five-Ohhhhh—



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what has happened to me!) but it was more than just that...I needed a new discovery, a new adventure.

As luck would have it, the phone rang—it was my friend and colleague Nina Kaufman, a ski consultant in Canada. I told Nina that I needed to mix it up a bit, to ski a new part of the world, to explore something new. As a specialty ski advisor to her organization, I know the thrill and solitude of the vistas and untouched snow that heli- and cat-serviced skiing provides. Don't get me wrong, a fresh foot of powder atop a long bump run is a banana split with extra cherries, and I'll always love it. But having skied for nearly as long as I could walk, I found myself entering my 48th year on the snow and feeling, well, a little bored. Cue Nina who, after a few vetoed locales, offered: “Hey, what about Iceland?”

ICELAND? REALLY?

“Iceland? The place with the volcano that disrupted my transatlantic flights a few years ago? Really?”

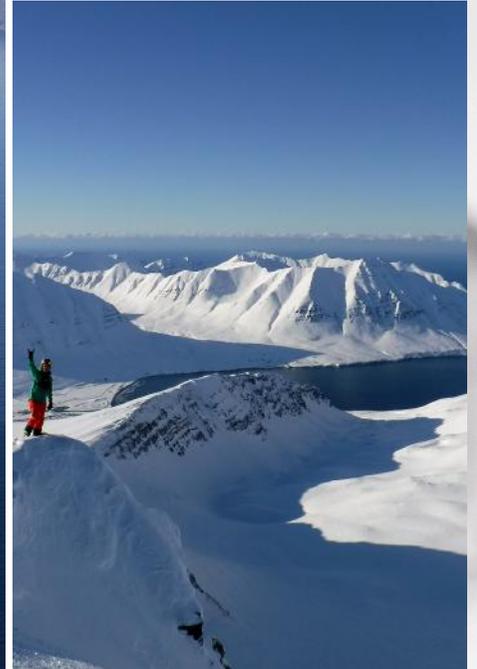
Frankly, the thought hadn't occurred to me before. But as Nina's words painted the background of an Icelandic heli-ski operation called Viking Heliskiing, the idea grew on me. It actually sounded like the adventure I'd been longing for.

Four days later with little idea of what lay ahead, I was nestled into the window seat of a purple Airbus A321 aircraft with “WOW” splashed on the side of the fuselage, on my way to Iceland. After an easy 4 ½ hour flight to Reykjavík from Baltimore-Washington International, and a short connecting flight to Iceland's second largest city, Akureyri, I was picked up at the airport and chauffeured a short 30 minutes to the Viking Heliskiing Lodge, situated in north-central Iceland's jagged Troll Peninsula.

Viking Heliskiing's founders, owners, and lead guides—Björgvin Björvinsson and Jóhann Haukur Hafstein—were there to greet me with smiles, handshakes and a cold beer; not a bad start. Former Olympians and World Cup tour alpine ski racers in their mid-30s, Björgvin and Jóhann clearly love their native Iceland, know the mountains like the back of their hands, and live and breathe skiing. After their retirement from racing, starting a heli-ski operation had seemed a logical choice.

LOOKING FORWARD TO “DOWN DAYS”

And they did it right. While we waited for the other heli-adventurers to arrive, Björgvin took me a short distance to the company's ocean dock (on the Arctic),



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where the Viking Heliskiing boat awaited us. From offshore I could see some of the runs we would later ski from summit to surf; in a word, stunning. But the boat wasn't there just to provide a nice view.

When heli-skiing, one always faces the risk of “down days”; that is, days when weather prevents the helicopter from flying. In some locations, a down day is simply a lost day, a day spent in the lodge waiting to get back out there. Viking anticipates this inherent risk and mitigates the downtime by offering sea fishing, whale watching, horseback riding, or visits to the natural thermal baths for which Iceland is well known.

FIRST DESCENTS

The next day I met my fellow snow riders from Austria, Switzerland and Spain. We underwent a thorough safety briefing from our guide, Jóhann, and then we were on our way to some of the most breathtaking and vast terrain imaginable. Dropped from the sky by Viking Heliskiing's masterfully piloted A-Star B3 helicopter, Jóhann introduced us to slopes ranging from wide open, gentle-pitched bowls to the aforementioned “Diamond.” The sea cut a stark and stunning backdrop for some runs, others descended beautifully into precipitous couloirs (basically mountainside gullies), and still others ran from a mountain's peak all the way down to an Arctic black lava beach.

Our entire crew dominated the hill. As for that dirt and real that I'd been looking for—as if The Diamond were not enough—we even skied first descent runs that, to the best of Jóhann's knowledge, no ski had carved before. I felt alive. And I wasn't alone in that—Jérôme, one of my new companions, so reveled in the experience that he punctuated the end of each run by howling “Moooore!!”

COZY NIGHTS

And at the end of each day, après ski meant a few beers, often leading to the hilarious recounting of the day among a newly close-knit group of skiers and guides. Then, after a soak in the geothermal water of the hot tub and a quick shower, we regrouped for dinner and more conversation. This became one of my favorite parts of the day, with local flavors and classic dishes prepared with care by Chef Anna.

One evening, we enjoyed a prosciutto and cheese appetizer, followed by an entrée of fresh roasted ling fish (a member of the cod family), bathed in curry atop a bed of barley and rounded out with Icelandic pancakes, skyr and fresh berries. Each night a similarly delicious offering greeted us, improved only by freely poured (and lovely) French claret. After our stomachs could hold no more, and our souls bettered by the conversation among new friends, each of us retreated slowly to our cabins, with the otherworldly Northern Lights as a backdrop—a bucket-list item, to be sure. And then, reminded of one's smallness and the fine line we tiptoe between this world and the next, it was time to hit the sack so that we could wake up and do it all again.

REAL AND UNIQUE

I never imagined as I sat on that WOW air flight over the North Atlantic there would be more to find in Iceland than what I had experienced elsewhere in the world. Sure, there are microbreweries in Reykjavik similar to those one could find in hipster neighborhoods almost anywhere in the USA. But then there's The Diamond, and even that's a mere drop in the bucket among the edge-of-truly-living slopes that cover Iceland's volcanic wonderscape from sea-tip to sea-tip. Iceland is real and unique. In the happy accident that led me there, I stumbled upon what I'd lost on my return trip to Hong Kong so many years prior: the confidence that such places still exist and the desire to seek them out.

With this renewed revelation, I have started Adventure 5.0 (www.adventure50.com) for those who share the desire to keep peeling back the onion, one layer at a time, to continue to explore our world and connect with those in it. You're welcome to come along with me. ❖



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Heli-skiing tours are available from March to June each year. For more information on heli-skiing in Iceland go to www.vikingheliskiing.com.

