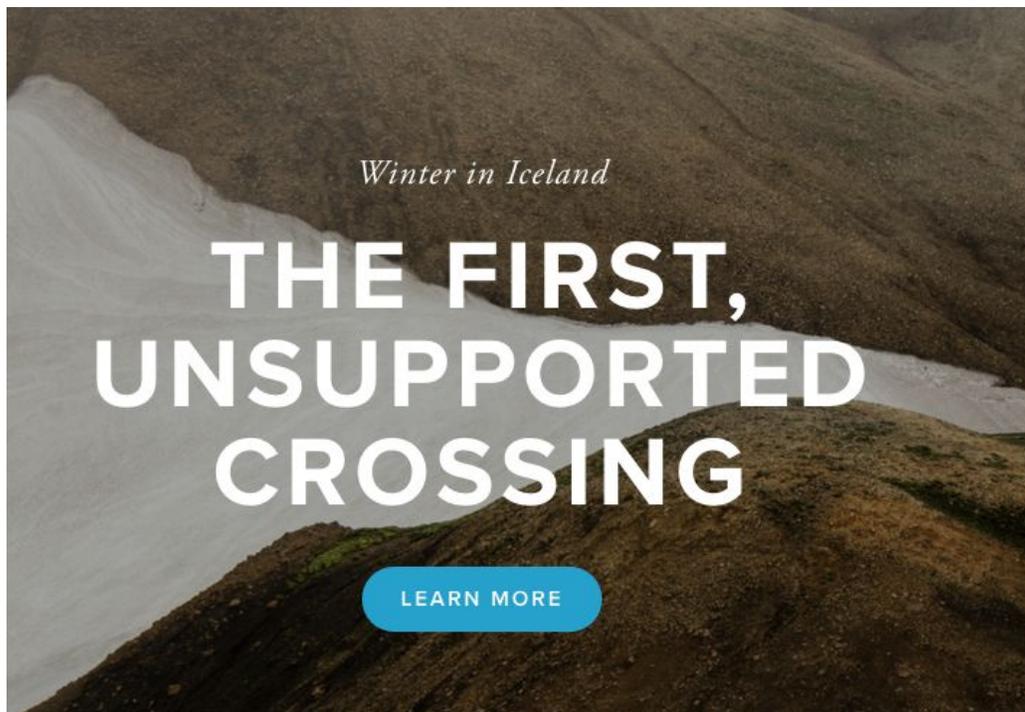


The Coldest Crossing - a few thoughts

First of all. I'm not writing this to be mean. Just to summarize, clear up a few things and I kind of hope the TCC guys read this because I feel they can take really positive stuff out of this whole experience but also some serious learning points, at least some of whom were easily preventable. There might be some errors in here, I apologize in advance if there are.

Strange claims

A couple of months ago or so I got wind of [The Coldest Crossing](#), an ambitious project by four young British guys to cross Iceland unsupported in winter. Me and a few other guys in the climbing scene in Iceland immediately became interested in knowing more because the first thing we saw at their website was a claim that was simply not true.



Not first. Not by a long shot. Iceland has been criss-crossed many times, mostly by Icelanders but also all others, for many years. We have a rich mountaineering culture. Our first mountain club was founded in the 1930's, imported ski and climbing instructors and started building climbing huts. The Icelandic Alpine Club was then formed in 1977.

In 1956 Magnús Hallgrímsson, Leifur Jónsson and members of their team [skied from Gullfoss in the south, north over Hofsjökull glacier and down into Eyjafjörður](#) on the north coast. It took

them a week. They were truly unsupported, no communication and only a compass and a map for navigation. They did the route again 20 years later.

In 1999 Einar Runar Sigurdsson and Florian Piper [crossed Iceland from North to South](#), coast to coast, via Vatnajokull, second largest glacier in Europe after Austfonna in Svalbard.

Another example is that in 1977 a group [crossed the three main glaciers from east to west](#). (Photo: how cool were these guys? Will you look at that equipment? Photo from the linked website).

In 1997 a few people in their early twenties from the ICE-SAR group HSG [did 700 km from NE to SW, coast to coast](#). Absolutely the longest distance you can cover. Mostly on skis.

Some [Polish guys crossed Iceland](#) in 2008.

Hell, they even rode on bikes across the largest glacier in Iceland in 1992. No fatbikes back then, only 26" skinny tires, aluminum frames and really long stems. So you can imagine that it was surprising to see a claim like that.

The older generation of climbers say that the British have come up here through the years claiming a variety of things.

The team obviously caught wind of some of these facts only after arriving in Iceland and it looked like they moved their starting point further Northeast to try to get something first. They did not, however, stop making claims on their social media platforms.

The thing is that in Iceland we are kind of old school in mountaineering and climbing ethics. We just do first, if you need parameter two or three attached to it, it's not a first. And preferably you go out, do your thing and then maybe talk about it. And climbing grades are under graded so you guys can never ever come over here and sandbag anything. We didn't even use WI6 until recently. The top of the scale was just WI5.



I mean, if today's social media climbing, and TCC might be a great example of that, is on one end the other end of the spectrum is this great story about Mugs Stump posted on alpinist.com.

"A well-known story about the late Mugs Stump captures this ideal. Stump had a recurring dream that he had completed, alone, one of the finest lines in the Alaska Range. He'd left nothing behind and kept the experience to himself. One evening in a bar, some climbers arrived, energized by a well-earned first ascent. Others joined in the celebration, hearing stories about the route, the very same line Stump had soloed. In his vision, he quietly joined in, raising a toast to their success."

The Icelandic climbing community used to be very close to that but are a lot closer to the middle now. However it's a great story to think about. What are your motivations? Why are you going out to have adventures?

Questions raised before the expedition

The community here was kind of surprised by a few unusual things with TCC.

- 1) People wondered why the guys were using what appeared to be semi stiff carbon boots and randonee skis. This is very unconventional for horizontal skiing for long distances. I actually [posted this question to TCC's facebook](#) page on 11. November.

a) Q: *"I'm curious, why did you decide on alpine skis rather than nordic skis? "*

b) A: *"It's mainly so we can 'enjoy' the mountain section for the last part of the expedition - we have gone for ultra light ATOMIC SKIING touring skis which will allow us the flexibility of both smile emoticon"*

Icelanders ski this mountain section in spring, the climb is 2-3 hours and the skiing is half an hour. Seems excessive to cross Iceland on Alpine skis just to get in some good 10 turns. With pulkas.

- 2) The time of year. Most ski crossings are done around April-May in Iceland. For a good reason. Long days, good snow base, more stable weather, easier terrain, closed rivers, closed cravasses, firm snow. The list goes on.
- 3) Homemade pulkas. The threads on this forum regarding pulkas are measured in kilometers. I am not kidding. It's a religious matter. Maybe they had some great pulkas, I don't know. I doubt it.
- 4) Very young age for an expedition of this scale
- 5) Apparent inexperience with ski expeditions.
 - a) Whether you are doing ski crossings or climbing mountains you need to follow a learning curve that is not too steep. So people will do a few day tours on skis, then cross a mountain pass, then cross a glacier. Then they might cross Vatnajökull glacier, then Greenland glacier and then ski to the South Pole. This is actually not too far from the schedule a couple of ISALP's members have done.

And note that they were experienced climbers and mountaineers before they started the skiing non-sense.

- b) This whole thing sounded quite familiar and I remembered an [article Andy Kirkpatrick wrote](#) a while back (we like Andy, Dave MacLeod and those guys going all out in sub optimal conditions, if we only wanted to go out in good weather we wouldn't go out at all).
- i) *“The difference between a pro (well let's just call them ‘a Norwegian’) and the classic British hard-man, with his arse hanging out, frostbitten fingers and black nose, is they just have their shit together. They have tested every bit of kit and nothing is new to them. They know their bodies and so have a vast store of coal on which to burn. They have planned out and visualised all aspects of their day, from the smallest detail (such as a flint and steel rather than matches that may get damp, or lighter than my stop working at high Antarctic altitudes), to boiling up all the water each night for breakfast the following day, so they can be away in less than an hour in the morning (the coldest hour). You cannot tough it out in Antarctica, but you can think it out.”*

Expedition starts

OK, so the guys go out to Rifstangi, I think they originally gave a few locations they would pass, Laugafell, Nýidalur, Laugar, Skógar. Or pretty close. So it seemed obvious that they had changed plans. They got their car stuck and had to get a lift with ICE-SAR (1) to their starting point.

Phase 1: From there I think they only moved about 10 km from 3.-6. December. Then one guy had to be picked up by ICE-SAR (2) due to a medical concern and the rest fled into Kópasker, a small village to sit out a storm. It was a pretty bad storm to be honest, no shame in seeking shelter and starting again. By the way, we don't name our storms, there are just not enough letters in the alphabet. Total walked about 25 km?

Phase 2: Then they start quite a bit into the interior south of Eyjafjörður on 10. December. Walk what I'm guessing is about 60 km (+/- 10km?) to Nýidalur hut and seem to stay there for a couple of days. One member has frostbite. Then get [picked up by ICE-SAR Hella](#) (3) by nine people on 4 Ski-Doos and 2 super jeeps on December 17. Total walked about 60 km?

Phase 3: On 23. December they are driven on super jeeps, one visible from a Instagram photo by Renan at least seems not from ICE-SAR, to Landmannalaugar to do the Laugavegur. A popular summer trek, of course quite a bit more serious in winter conditions. Quite a few cabins on the way though. This leg starts quite a bit south of their last location. The then walk to Emstrur, new storm coming in the day after, and get picked up by the Coast Guard Heli (4). Total walked probably around 30 km.

So total walked might be around 115 km (+/-) in 26 days counting stops. For reference, Einar and Florian mentioned above did 250 km in 13 days and the HSG team did 700 km in 17 days. See the below map, the legs are very roughly marked in.



Points to learn from

Well done

- It's absolutely great that these guys went out and had an adventure. They all lived. That's rule number one.

- They obviously prepared and trained.
- They took time off for a month long adventure, that's really great. More people should really do that
- They consulted ICE-SAR / Safetravel.is, had SPOT, had a satellite phone and were to a certain extent well equipped
- They seem to have listened to advice mostly

Could be better

- They should not claim things that isn't true
 - It's not like information isn't available. A single e-mail to the Icelandic Alpine club or a forum post would have cleared that up.
- They might want to think about just having fun adventures for themselves, not somebody else.
 - Among the achievements on their about page it seems to be a lot of "raised this amount for this and that" instead of "just went there and did this. Had fun."
 - Go on trips. Have fun. It's OK.
- Learning curve. Do not take up ice climbing or alpine climbing with this attitude.
 - Start with achievable goals. Learn from your mistakes.
 - Being assisted four times on the same trip is a pretty blunt indication that you were way out of your depth.

Please do one thing

- Be honest with your video. It would actually be really interesting if they show us a journey where they make the mistakes and screw up, get away from it and learn from the experience. A humble video. If they just try to keep up appearances like on the social media platforms, posting stuff after rescues without mentioning them, it's not going to be interesting. A good example is [Cold](#) (2011).

Bottom line

The guys went out, maybe from the wrong reasons, made some mistakes and came back. Could be a lot worse. I hope they learn from this experience and I look forward to reading about a more realistic adventure in the future. Hopefully after they do it, not before.

PS: A few thoughts about ICE-SAR

[ICE-SAR, Icelandic Search and Rescue](#), is a self funded volunteer organisation in Iceland that handles rescue work in Iceland on land, sea and internationally. Only minimal funds come from the state.

Rescue is free in Iceland unless you are breaking the law, i.e. drive into a marked closed area in the winter time or drive off road and damage the land, and you will be fined and have to pay for the extraction of the car.

Other than that most members of the organization are against charging for search and rescue. It would result in people hesitating with calling 1-1-2 and lead to more dangerous missions for the team members. More people would die on both sides. Many rescued [make donations](#) instead.

Just to be absolutely clear, the people coming to rescue you have regular jobs and families they must leave to go on a mission. The equipment for winter travel is many times more expensive to drive and maintain than regular 4x4s. The team members pay for their personal equipment, food etc. If you decide to do something silly don't think that they are in it for this, or that it is fun for them to get out and rescue you. They have plenty to do other than that. It's a very arrogant and silly self justification.

So if you intend to go on an expedition in Iceland, say crossing a glacier or the highlands on skis in the middle of winter, you really should buy insurance. Not because there is any obligation to do so but because it's the prudent thing to do. You should also know how to hole up in a snow cave for a bit, know how to get to the nearest cabin in areas that have A LOT (!) of cabins like the Álftavatn-Emstrur area etc. And if you didn't think of this, which is strange when people will buy insurance to go on a couple of weeks sport climbing trip, you should try to think about a way to donate at least some of the costs incurred back, especially if you go out on multiple occasions and call for a rescue.

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