



AAC Publications

Hvannadalshnjúkur, West Face, Hnjúkaþeyr

Iceland, Öräfajökull

Matteo Mucci hiking below the rime-ice towers of the east face of Hvannadalshnjúkur after descending from a new route on the west face, headed toward the saddle between the summit and the square-shaped Dyrhamar (the Gate). The approach to Hvannadalshnjúkur from Hnappavellir climbs the low-angled glacier slopes of the caldera on the left. Photo by Bjartur Týr Ólafsson

Hvannadalshnjúkur (2,110m), located on the northwest edge of the Öräfajökull caldera, is Iceland's highest summit. The west face had four existing lines, the first climbed in 1986. The face is seldom visited: The approach is outrageously long, and it is generally in good condition during October when the ice climbing season is just around the corner.

In October 2016, Þorsteinn Cameron, Matteo Meucci, and I had climbed the west face by a partial new route. In October 2020, Matteo and I wanted to try a more direct line up the face—most routes veer right in the upper section. Anticipating a big day, we decided to leave from Hnappavellir [a hamlet on Route 1 to the south-southeast of the mountain, best known for its nearby sport climbing], and use skis to save time on the way down.

On the 13th, after a long approach in the dark, we reached the saddle between Dyrhamar (the Gate) and the summit cone of Hvannadalshnjúkur, where we left the skis, dropped down the west side, traversed north, and began climbing over bergschrunds and up steep snowfields that form the lower part of the face. After a long spell of simul-climbing 55° snow, we spotted what we had been hoping to see: a beautiful, 110m blue-ice line straight up the middle of the uppermost face. We stopped for a minute to discuss whether the route was too ambitious and steep for our off-season form, but concluded by saying to each other, "Who are we kidding? This is the line we came to climb!"

An 80m section of WI3 took us to the base of the ice fall. I led the first steep pitch of brittle alpine ice; after 55m of sustained climbing at WI5-, I eventually got a rest and belay on a ledge. The next pitch provided similarly sustained climbing (WI4/4+) up to the summit plateau. From here, a 10-minute walk got us to the top. We had stunning views in all directions and enjoyed the moment before descending to our skis. We named the route Hnjúkaþeyr, after the warm, dry wind that descends from the mountains, similar to the Föhn in the Alps.

– Bjartur Týr Ólafsson, Iceland

Historical Notes on Hvannadalshnjúkur: There are two ways to approach the west face of Hvannadalshnjúkur: from the southwest via the upper Svínafellsjökull Glacier, which leads to the face, or from the southeast to the saddle north of Dyrhamar (1,917m), from where it is possible to climb steeply down the far side and traverse into the top section of the easier-angled, first half of the face. (This was the approach used in the report above.) Climbing from the bottom, as on the approach from the southwest, the face is around 350m high.

The first ascent of this face took place on March 28, 1986, when Helgi Benediktsson soloed Vesturhlíð, a route that starts directly below the summit and then follows the line of least resistance up and left across the face, exiting below final headwall.

The second known route was not completed until September 22, 2010, when Björgvin Hilmarsson and

Leifur Örn Svavarsson tried to climb directly up the center. More or less following the first half of the 1986 route, the pair then headed up and right over steep snow and ice before finishing up a 60m icefall to the right of a very steep rock barrier. Named Beina Brautin (Direct Route, D WI4), the climb is not considered too difficult, technically. However, the remoteness (a fast party could possibly make the return trip in 12 hours), the approach and descent over crevassed terrain, the very loose rock on the route, and the presence of large serac barriers make this a serious outing.

Approaching from the southeast in the autumn of 2014, Bergur Einarsson and Matteo Meucci, an Italian guide working in Iceland, climbed through the right side of the face following a prominent icefall at D WI4 to create The Italian Job. This is the shortest route on the face but still serious, as it passes through areas of loose rock that have to be well-iced. Meucci returned on October 15, 2016, with Þorsteinn Cameron and Bjartur Týr Ólafsson. After a seven-hour approach to the face via Svínafellsjökull, they re climbed Beina Brautin to below the final 60m icefall, then moved right into an adjacent gully system and climbed it with an exit right (D WI3). The route was named Vinamissir (Lost Friends).

The east side of the summit dome, rising from the glaciated caldera, is much shorter but generally festooned with ice towers. The first known ascent of this face took place in April 1997, when Guðmundur Eyjólfsson and Haraldur Örn Ólafsson climbed a steep couloir at WI5. The center of the face is characterised by a prominent spur, with a couloir on either side. The pair first attempted the left couloir but had to retreat 40m below the top. Later they returned and climbed the right couloir to the summit.

Images



The west face of Hvannadalshnjúkur. (1) Vesturhlíð (1986). (2) Beina Brautin (2010). (3) Hnjúkaþeyr (2020). (4) Vinamissir (2016). (5) The Italian Job (2014).



Matteo Mucci hiking below the rime-ice towers of the east face of Hvannadalshnjúkur after descending from a new route on the west face, headed toward the saddle between the summit and the square-shaped Dyrhamar (the Gate). The approach to Hvannadalshnjúkur from Hnappavellir climbs the low-angled glacier slopes of the caldera on the left.



The west face of Hvannadalshnjúkur from approximately the point where it is possible to traverse onto the top part of the lower face, below the major difficulties.



Climbing a pitch of WI3 on the upper face toward the crux of (1) Hnjúkaþeyr. (2) is the top section of Beina Brautin. The top section of Vinamissir is just off picture to the right.



Matteo Meucci on the first section of the crux of Hnjúkaþeyr, high on the west face of Hvannadalshnjúkur.



Matteo Meucci near the top of the west face of Hvannadalshnjúkur.

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