



Skarðatindur, Southeast Face, End of the Line

Iceland, Öræfajökull

Rory Harrison on the upper traverse of End of the Line, southeast face of Skarðatindur. Below and to the left is the vast Skaftafellsjökull. Photo by Bjartur Týr Ólafsson

Bjartur Týr Ólafsson writes:

The southeast face of Skarðatindur (Skardhatindur, 1,381m, 64°5'26.88"N, 16°51'22.79"W) is the ultimate goal for many Icelandic alpinists. This peak is near the southern edge of the Vatnajökull ice cap, northwest of Hof, and the southeast face was first climbed in 1988 after several unsuccessful attempts, then again by a new line in 2007 (AAJ 2008). These routes have only seen a handful of repeats over the last three decades. I spent countless hours looking at the face with the thought of climbing a new line, collected photos from different seasons and decades, and even hiked there one fall to see what it looked like when dry, trying to find wet streaks that might turn into climbable ice during the winter.

In February I was guiding in Vatnajökull National Park and conditions appeared good, so I called my friend Rory Harrison. We decided to attempt the face in a single push from the Hafrafell car park. With snow down to the lowlands, we approached up the Skaftafellsjökull (glacier) on skis. We reached a point a few hundred meters from the base of the wall, where we left our skis and gained the foot of the route around dawn.

The first part consisted of a 180m icefall that we thought would be the hardest section of the route. We were so wrong. Four pitches of WI4 and 4+ brought us to the first snowfield, which was easy, so we simul-climbed to the rimed rocks above. A route through these cliffs would hopefully lead us to the second snowfield, but this was where the real difficulties began. After two pitches we were unsure about continuing. The rock towering above looked unclimbable, and with bad weather approaching, we grabbed the opportunity to bail from a solid Abalakov anchor.

For the next couple of weeks we debated on whether this line could be climbed. Then came another weather window....

Rory Harrison continues:

On March 9, now familiar with the first half of the route, we climbed quickly to our high point, then elected to traverse to the upper snowfield via a narrow, exposed ledge, with little solid protection. (This might be slower than climbing one more pitch on ice smears and then making a higher traverse.) We crossed the snowfield and arrived at the real difficulties. Bjartur led off with increasingly sparse protection on tenuous blobs of rime, which were splattered randomly on the chossy rock as if a small child had been let loose with a paintbrush. With a northerly storm forecast, bringing winds of more than 100 km/h on the Vatnajökull ice cap that evening, time was of the essence.

Above, a ramp appeared to lead into a chimney/gully between two towers. Accessing this ramp was the technical crux of my pitch. With only psychological protection and no anchor good enough for a rappel in sight, I slowly weighted my right foot on an edge of shattered rock and reached high over the bulge above. My axe found something solid, and doubts were replaced by action. Standing on the ramp, I realized I was as committed as I've ever been. Still unable to find a piece of protection that

would hold a fall, I was able to move around the corner into the gully and arrange a good belay.

Bjartur grabbed some gear and quested up. From my vantage point, it looked fairly simple, but Bjartur took his time, climbing up and down, sniffing around for safety like a cat in a new home. He got two pieces of protection about 10m above me, but I could see they were as much use as a one-legged man at an arse-kicking contest. Suddenly, he committed out right, feet on shattered rock, reaching past an overhang and swinging into blobs of rime. A whoop loud enough to carry over the now gale-force wind told me he'd made it.

Following the pitch, I realized the final meters were much steeper than they had appeared from below, and comprised big blobs of aerated ice often separated from the rock by a centimeter of air. I'd committed to one when there was a loud crack: Suddenly I was hanging on the rope and a blob of rime the size of a microwave was hurtling down the gully. The gravity of the situation hit me, and I thanked my friend for pulling out the lead of his life when it most mattered.

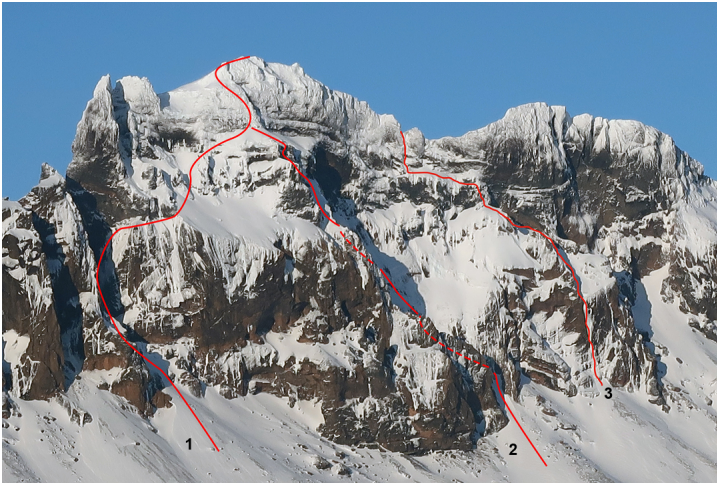
The storm was raging as we hastily began our descent along the ridge to the north, until eventually we could follow a couloir east to the glacier and regain our skis. By the time we reached the car we had been going for 18.5 hours.

We named the route End of the Line (TD+ AI4+ M5). Pitch breakdown is: 60m, AI4; 60 m, AI4; 50m, AI4+; 200m first snowfield; 40m, AI3+/4; 50m, sketchy traverse; 120m, second snowfield; 40m AI4; 40m, M4; 20m, M5.

— Rory Harrison and Bjartur Týr Ólafsson, Iceland

Editor's Note: In the spring of 1988, Jón Geirsson and Snævarr Guðmundsson made the first ascent of the ca 500m southeast face of Skarðatindur, starting on the far left before working up right toward the summit. The ascent took five hours and was graded TD+ WI5. A second route, climbing directly to the last section of the 1988 line, was added in 2007 by Stéphane Benoist, Jean-Baptist Deraeck, Sébastien Ibanez, and Sébastien Ratel to give Jökullélé (TD+ M5 WI4; AAJ 2008). Due to the lengthy approach, which can take between three and eight hours, depending on snow cover and glacial conditions, some parties have camped below the face before making their ascent. It is possible to descend to the east or west (to Morsárdalur), but neither is straightforward.

Images



The southeast face of Skarðatindur with (1) the 1988 Original Route, (2) Jökullélé, and (3) End of the Line.



The initial icefall of End of the Line, southeast face of Skarðatindur.



Rory Harrison making tricky moves along the ramp of seventh and penultimate pitch of End of the Line to gain the gully system up to his right.



Rory Harrison on the upper traverse of End of the Line, southeast face of Skarðatindur. Below and to the left is the vast Skaftafellsjökull.



Bjartur Tyr Ólafsson on the first pitch (AI4) above the second snowfield of End of the Line on the southeast face of Skarðatindur, moving up tenuous blobs of rime splattered randomly on choss.



The sketchy traverse to the second snowfield of End of the Line, southeast face of Skarðatindur.



Rory Harrison on the last pitch of the initial 180m icefall on End of the Line, southeast face of Skarðatindur.



Bjartur Tyr Ólafsson on the second pitch of End of the Line, southeast face of Skarðatindur.

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