



AAC Publications

Hvannadalshnúkur, Northwest Face, Póker ásanna

Iceland, Örfajökull

Andrea Fiocca traversing toward the exit from under the serac on the northwest face of Hvannadalshnúkur. The round-trip from the car took 19 hours. Photo by Matteo Meucci Collection.

Located along the rim of the Örfajökull crater, Hvannadalshnúkur (2,110m) is Iceland's highest peak. The northwest face was first climbed in 1986, solo, by Helgi Benediktsson. Various routes have been added over the years, including four lines I've climbed in the past decade, most recently in October 2024.

Because of the shape of the wall, there are only two ways through the lower part, then the routes split off. The approach to the face is very long, limiting its popularity. Over the years, we have tried four different ways, but it always takes about seven hours, involving 10km of travel each way and 2,000m of elevation gain. The window for ascents is very slim, sometimes opening for only a couple of days in the fall, before winter storms plaster the wall with rime. The best conditions are brought by cold days and high-elevation snow, to get the right amount of ice but before the winter storms plaster the wall with rime. The quick shortening of the days also plays an important role. Losing six minutes of sunlight per day, we quickly get into the winter darkness.

I had already bailed on the new line three times, for three different reasons, when Andrea Fiocca and I finally succeeded. On October 22, we chose the Hnappó approach (from the south), which allowed us to drive to 800m in elevation, saving energy for the climb. Using this approach, we would have to descend 200m to reach the base of the wall. After leaving the car, we first followed the obvious moraine ridge. At about 1,200m, the glacier began, but it wasn't complicated, so we smoothly reached the crater in good weather. After crossing it, we dropped our skis at the base of the summit slope, put on our crampons, and crossed the ridge to the northwest side.

We decided to avoid descending all the way down to the base of the wall and chose the upper entrance. After a long running belay (about 180m), we reached the central part of the hanging glacier, from where we scoped the wall. The idea was confirmed. After two more pitches of snow, we reached the foot of the real climbing section. Andrea led the first pitch, and I took the second before stopping at the base of the immense summit serac. Here we decided to traverse 20m to the right and top out. Andrea climbed a very exposed and delicate traverse, and at the end of it, he ascended and topped out on the wall. We called the route Póker ásanna (480m, WI4), meaning "four aces," referring to the four new routes I've climbed here.

As the sun began to set, we rushed toward the regular summit route and then made our way down to the skis. Once we reached them, we started our return by crossing the crater, following our morning tracks.

However, as soon as we descended from the crater, we were met with an unwelcome surprise: the wind and snow were picking up and getting stronger the lower we went. We removed our skis for safer navigation through the crevassed area, and when we thought we were safe on the moraine ridge, the storm intensified, with gusts of 20m/s (about 45 mph), making it impossible to stand with skis on our backpacks. Little by little, we made our way to the car by 11 p.m., 19 hours after starting.

—Matteo Meucci, Iceland

Editor's Note: On October 31, 2023, Bergur Sigurðarson and Kaspar Sólveigarson completed another new line here: Katabatic (WI3+). Finding poor conditions on the rime-plastered face, the two took the path of least resistance with three technical pitches, each 50m to 60m, left of the older route Beina brautin (2010).

Images



Hvannadalshnúkur (2,110m) is the highest peak in Iceland, and the approach to the northwest face involves about 10 kilometers of travel each way and 2,000 meters of elevation change.



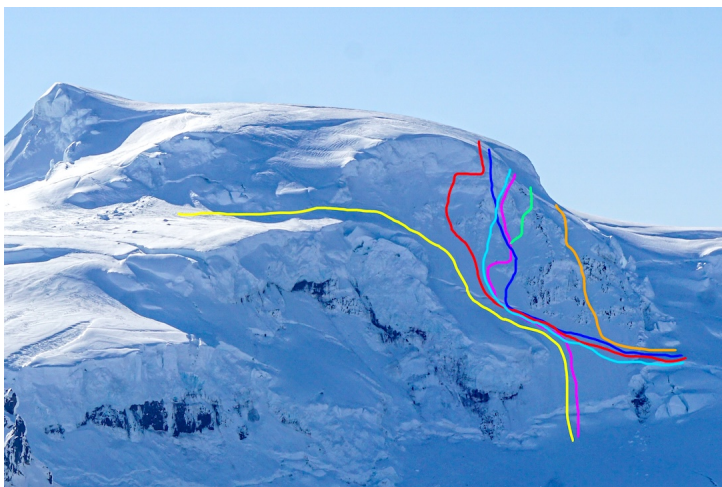
On the lower glacier en route to Hvannadalshnúkur.



Low on Póker ášana, the new route up the northwest face of Hvannadalshnúkur.



Andrea Fiocca traversing toward the exit from under the serac on the northwest face of Hvannadalshnúkur. The round-trip from the car took 19 hours.



The routes on the northwest face of Hvannadalshnúkur: Helgi Benediktson Route (yellow, 1986 solo first ascent), Póker ásanna (red line, 2024), Katabatic (light blue, 2023), Hnúkapeir (dark blue, 2020), Beina brautin (pink, 2010), Vinamissir (green, 2016), and Italian Job (orange, 2014)

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