

STOPOVER



SPIRIT OF ICELAND

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En route up Ama Dablam in the Himalayas, in October 2019.

Next page: Vilborg on the summit ridge during the Everest expedition of 2017.

WHEN THE SKY ISN'T THE LIMIT

In conversation with our cover girl.

BY BRANDON PRESSER.

The first time I met Vilborg Arna Gissurar-dóttir, she came marching toward me in a Hillary Clinton-esque pantsuit, palm extended and eyes full of intent. The global economy had hiccuped, fracturing the Icelandic króna, and I was scurrying around Iceland rewriting the *Lonely Planet* guide in the wake of the financial storm. At the time, Vilborg Arna was starting her MBA coursework and working for a regional development agency. She had caught wind of my project and tracked me down to sell me on the merits of the country's wild Northeast.

Our shared love of the outdoors quickly melted away the business veneer, stoking flames of friendship instead. Vilborg Arna and I have remained in touch ever since, and over the last decade I've watched her pack away her high-flying corporate gear and put on her high-performance fleeces and crampons. After skiing alone across Antarctica, she cemented her reputation as Iceland's premier expeditionist; she's also the country's first woman to summit Everest. And these days when I meet up with Vilborg Arna, I hear her bellowing laugh before I even see her appear.

On Being Kind of a Big Deal

The most recent time I see Vilborg Arna, during the summer of 2019, we meet up for dinner at Íslenska Hamborgarabúðin in the lobby of a glass tower in central Reykjavík, overlooking the fjord. Among the assortment of sandwiches on the menu is the limited edition Vilborgarinn—the “Vilburger”—spiced with South Asian fixings and dedicated to her successful ascent of Mt. Everest.



Vilborg Arna tells me about the next mountain on her to-do list—Ama Dablam (22,349 ft; 6,812 m)—and she shows me an email from 2006 in which she reached out to a tour operator to get more details on how to make the ascent. “It’s not one of the highest peaks on the planet, but it’s been on my mind forever because it’s so beautiful. It just catches you,” she explains. “I’ve passed the mountain thousands of times while leading expeditions in the Himalayas. To me it looks like a heart, but if you ask anyone else I’m sure they see something totally different,” she adds with one of her signature laughs.

Vilborg Arna’s mountaineering pursuits have led to a successful career on the motivational speaking circuit, “but in a country with such a small population, everyone’s a little bit famous for something,” she qualifies with another chuckle. The biggest perk of being Iceland’s all-star alpinist? The free burgers.

On Reaching the South Pole

It was Christmas Day 2012, Vilborg Arna was on the tail end of her two-month journey to the South Pole, and she spotted a small tent in the distance—one of the other solo expeditionists trying to complete the 720-mile (1,130-km) trip from Hercules Inlet. She glided through the infinite white and up to the shivering shelter yelling “ho, ho, ho!” A man poked his head out of the tent: “Am I dreaming? Is this real?”

“He thought he was hallucinating, but then again, I would have too.” It’s Vilborg Arna’s favorite anecdote from her Antarctic adventure—she prefers to recount it instead of dwelling on any of the more trying moments. She doesn’t speak in aphorisms or bumper stickers; when asked how she completed the transit she simply says: “I just kept going!”





On Climbing the Seven Summits

While crossing Antarctica was a test of grit, reaching the roof of each of the seven continents was more about the persistence of spirit. The original plan was to conquer all of the mountains in one calendar year—2014—saving Everest for last. The first six ascents went off without a hitch, but a devastating avalanche en route to Everest curtailed her plans, killing 16 members of the climbing community. A second attempt in 2015 came to an abrupt end as well, when an earthquake launched another avalanche—this time through Everest Base Camp, taking another 19 souls. “Trying a third time was extremely difficult,” Vilborg Arna explained in an interview to the Icelandic newspaper *Morgunblaðið*; “but not trying would have been even harder.” She summited Everest with one sherpa guide in May of 2017. The experience radically changed her perspective on mountaineering, and processing unexpected obstacles, grief and defeat have become important components of her motivational oeuvres.

On Creating an Adventure Club

For Vilborg Arna, every outing is a “workcation” on her relentless endeavor to make the outdoors less daunting and more accessible to the general population. Two years ago she turned her lecture series into an in-the-field practicum for eager followers, Tindar Travel, and began creating coursework for Icelanders keen on getting acquainted with their backyard and beyond. Weekly hikes around Reykjavík are the stepping stones to more arduous adventures like a yearly 14-day circuit in Nepal, which includes a visit to Everest Base Camp and summiting Island Peak (20,305 ft; 6,189 m). Clients have begun to reach out from all over the world; she’s even been asked to train astronauts prepping for space flight.

Her relatability is the secret sauce that gets newbies motivated; she’ll endorse a Snickers bar for an energy jolt instead of the latest fad diet or vitamin supplement. And her packing essential is a high-quality cuppa joe. “You must always pack a treat for every expedition—I bring my favorite coffee from the Icelandic brand Kaffitár—it’s important to make an enjoyable moment when conditions get super demanding all around you.”

On What’s Next

Now that she’s returned from a successful summiting of Ama Dablam, Vilborg Arna has her sights set on what she considers her most nail-biting endeavor yet: starring on *Allir geta dansað*, Iceland’s version of *Dancing with the Stars*. “I feel more nervous about this than any of my expeditions,” she explains; “I can climb exposed mountains without even thinking about it, but I feel way more exposed doing this!”

Her dance partner, Javi Fernández Valiño, thinks she’ll be strongest at ballroom dancing because of the precise footwork needed. “For eight years I’ve been carefully getting myself—or leading others—through very difficult terrain,” Vilborg Arna adds; “I’m excited that this will throw me out of my comfort zone and have me thinking about something completely different.”

Knowing Vilborg Arna, it wouldn’t be a surprise if she crushes the competition—but at the very least we can expect one of her bellowing laughs when she tackles the stage.



Top: Vilborg (fourth from left) with a Tindar Travel group reaching Annapurna Base Camp, October 2019.

Middle: On an expedition to summit Ama Dablam, Nepal, in October 2019, with fellow climber Erlendur Pálsson.

Bottom: Flags flying at the South Pole, January 2013.