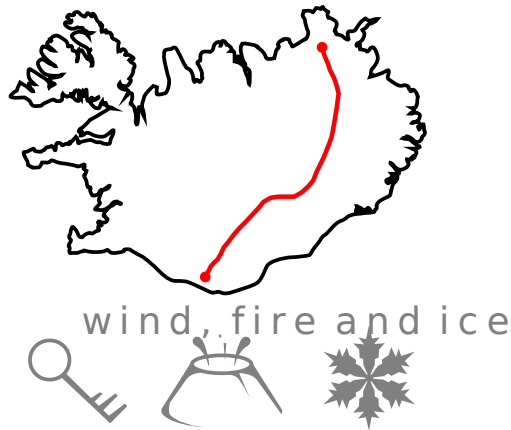


'THE ELEMENTS'



a kite - ski
crossing of Iceland !
02 & 03 2010

A tough start

February 20 at lunchtime we hit the ice on Skálafelljökull at an elevation of 700m in crystal clear light on this beautiful day. In the north-west low clouds extend over the icecap ; far in the east, nothing but the sea crowned by foamy wavelets due to the wind. In between, the dark rocky foremountains of the Vatnajökull, intersected by the white streams of the glaciers flowing down from the icecap. Behind us: a landscape bare of snow, and the sea. Ahead: the glacier that we lead us up on the icecap. The wind is violently blowing in our face.



We make a few kilometers uphill on foot in this huge glacial amphitheatre delimited by the rocky summits around: In the north-west, the steep slopes of Litlafell and Snjofell emerge from the icefield. To the south, the ridge ranging from Grjotbotstindur to Kaldarnupur detaches itself from the blue sky.



But late in the afternoon, low clouds coming from the icecap start to invade the Skalafelljokull and high winds of 55 kts force us to make camp at a place that is cruelly lacking snow. We struggle for one hour to erect a ridiculously small wall of snow in our attempt to protect our tent... In the next morning, the clouds have again taken their place over the icecap, The sun is again shining on our camp and the NNW wind is blowing at 25 kts. We hope to go upwind to gain altitude, but the surface absolutely doesn't really help the use of our kites, not even of the smallest ones. On the bar of our Beringer 5m2 we easily get our first kilometer behind us in a jerky rhythm, not suspecting, that it would be the last time that we see a blue sky for the next 7 days...



Do the clouds get lower, or do we go into the clouds during our fast ascent on the icecap? No matter, we are in a thick layer of low clouds now, not suspecting that we would only leave it once more on February 28 ! The wind has picked up and we are now fighting to keep the correct heading without being blown away, while the edges of our skis are still biting hard, windpacked, icy snow. A bit further on the southmost extension of the Breidabunga dome, the remaining visibility starts to degrade rapidly. The driving snow starts to be so thick and dense, that beyond 70-80 m the outline of the other of the two of us disappears in the white. These are tense moments, and we try to avoid to fall back on our two way radios to mutually communicate our respective position to each other...

Progression in white out conditions

The progression is with eyes fixed to our wrist mounted gps - our only way to know where we have been, where we actually are and where we are heading, while our kites drag us fast through an invisible landscape. Because in a storm or in white out all spatial references, ground and sky, close and far, north and south dissolve into one continuous space of white infinity. At this moment of extreme conditions we nearly blindly obey the simple rule : match heading and bearing. In this moment we have neither the time to think about the itinerary, nor the possibility to enter new points without the shelter of our tent. If we dare to blindly trust the gps, its because we have meticulously prepared our itinerary and alternative routes beforehand. This includes the detailed study of high-resolution topographic maps, satellite images, and most importantly the discussion of the projected itinerary with local skiers and guides.

Now the challenge is a different one : The one in the front, who is breaking trail has to concentrate on the heading and the position of his skis and kite with respect to the wind in an environment lacking any visual reference where the equilibrium could get hold. At the same time he has to be constantly aware of the second following behind, to avoid getting separated. The challenge for the second is to keep the pace of the first at reasonable distance, always ready to react and follow any of his manoeuvres. But its much less strenuous behind, nothing but having the outline of the first gives a spatial reference the equilibrium can hold on, takes away the anticipation of the unexpected. And so we are happy to change position frequently to relax in the back.





In the late afternoon our progression approaches the limit of being dangerous. In sidewinds flying the wing requires maximum muscular tension and extreme concentration at all times. The gusts of the northerly wind exceed 35 knots and we decide to call it a day. At 35 km from our first camp we erect our second wall of snow, then our tent in its modest shelter, in anticipation of a rough night. Fortunately this time the snow is abundant. But our humble comfort comes at a price: one more hour of effort and light frostbite for both of us. When we finally crawl in our tent, the thermometer has plummeted to -20 C while the wind peaks 55 knots.

In the afternoon of February 22, the cloud cover gets thinner, the wind drops below 20 kts at times, and the visibility gets slightly better. We kite with our Beringer 8m² in an atmosphere that we like a lot : nearly tailwind, a lot of drifting snow, parhelic in the sky and speed up to 50 km/h. Those conditions wouldn't last for long. Approaching Grimsvötn, the wind takes up speed, and the surface shows again a lack of snow and hard ice. We switch to the Beringer 5m². As we get closer to the caldera and a bit higher up the wind gets more and more turbulent and the surface degrades. At the same time, the visibility doesn't even allow to discern the limits of the caldera forming a huge precipice to the west. With this perspective, we decide to take the kites down about 1km short of the summit and finish on foot. At the top the gusts once more exceed 55 kts.

Grimsvötn, hot oasis in a rough place

Grimsvötn is the name of both, the lake occupying the bottom of the caldera, and the volcano's summit on which we are standing. Located above a system of subglacial faults that extends under most of the western Vatnajökull icecap, the region is rather active : its last eruption dates only back to 2004. The Icelandic glaciologists had the crazy and marvelous idea to construct a hut right here. Crazy, because it dominates the icecap by about two hundred meters on the eastern side whereas the caldera forms a huge precipice on its western side. An awesome and probably the windiest place up here. Marvelous, because the geothermal activity, was harnessed to good use : hot steam emerging from the fissures is condensed in an ingenious system to heat the hut, and believe it : to construct a sauna right here ! A comfortable and cosy oasis in a rough place.

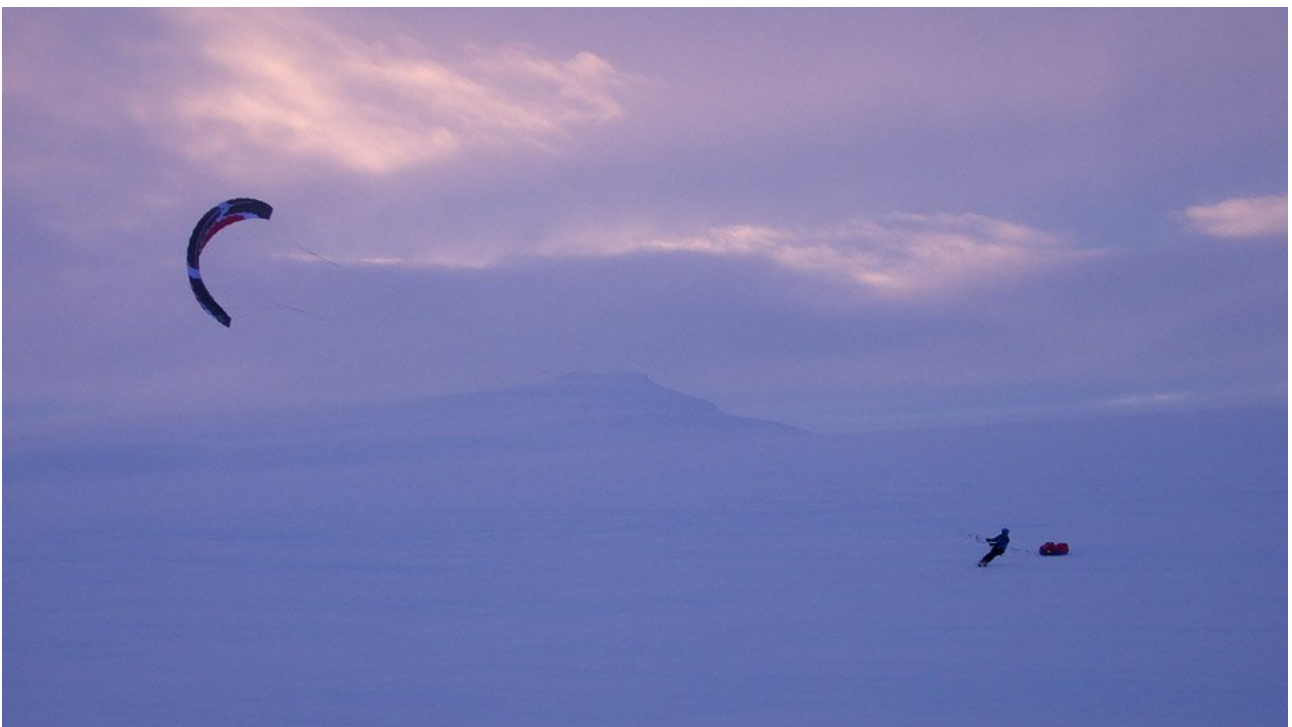


Sylvie daily relays us the current weather on our satellite phone : wind directions and speeds at different places and times, along with a forecast for the next days to come. This is our best chance to optimize our strategy despite the rapidly changing conditions. As the lack of snow in the highlands confines us to the Vatnajökull for the moment being, we have plenty of time to roam this icecap as we like... But even here we run into constraints. We know that southwest of the icecap is badly covered with snow with its lower part nothing but bare ice. And if we dream of a visit to the magnificent mountainous south east part, we also know that the crevasse fields on the way there, are a risky place in bad conditions. So, what about heading north east to the hot springs in the Kverkfjöll area ? We just got the weather forecast for today. Now guess where the wind is blowing from at the moment : Right. North-east. Exactly.

Its going to be laborious

We spend the 24th and 25th of February going upwind, in the hope to reach the solfatara and the small hut of Kverkfjöll, about 45 kms north east. On the positive side, the wind has dropped and finally allows us to get the kites out of our sleds. Still in a universe exclusively made of uniform grey, we fight to make some ground, alternating long sections of NNW and ESE courses. We are happy with the performances of our new Manta M3 10 m² and Frenzy FYX 7 m², and appreciate the incredible gain in performance with respect to our old trustworthy Aceso II kites that we had along with us on our last long trip through Greenland. In winds of 17 to 22 kts, we manage gain laboriously kilometer by kilometer. In particular the M3 proved to be our friend in this game, even though there is no room for mistakes in winds beyond 20 kts with a kite pulling on one side while the sled opposes its resistance on the other side... Concentration !

On the 26th, we are still 12 kms short of Kverkfjöll. We hesitate. We agree on going further upwind, crevasses and terrain permitting. But the NNE wind suddenly drops and the idea to walk the last few kms does not really appeal to us... We decide to give it a try with the Yakuza 12, the ultimate weapon in low winds. The time to set them up with their long lines, the NNE wind picks up again. Enough. We decide to take advantage of the wind and kite back to Grimsvötn, its just too tempting to get back to this incredible place and dry out our wet equipment. It doesn't take long to get back there. This time there is some visibility and we dare to kite right up to the hut on its exposed place... Once more : Sauna time...!



New hope, and an unforgettable ride in snowkiters paradise

In the morning of february 26 we call Maxime, a french guide living in Iceland, on our satellite phone. His frequent outings and close collaboration with fellow guides provide him with an excellent overview over the conditions in different regions of the island. He is formal : the last few days of bad weather have brought a lot of snow to southern Iceland. Good news for us, it now seems reasonable to attempt crossing further south ! Good weather takes finally control over Grimsvötn and we get ready in the beginning of the afternoon with the goal to reach the hut of Jökulheimar 50 kms SW of us.



Time to take a few pictures at the caldera ! We get the Manta 10 m² out for an amazing ride down to the Tugznaarjökull glacier in an ideal NNE 3/4 backwind. While the NE of the glacier is still covered by in clouds, we enjoy perfect weather here. The sight reaches from the 'Bardabunga' in the NNW to Iceland's highest mountain, Kvannadalsnukur, an enormous volcano, which is topping the light fog in the SE of the icecap. We go round the southmost branches of Grimsfjall, leave the magnificent domes of Haabunga and Thordahyrna to our left, to take a vast pass on the glacier before going down at top speed to the south west of the Vatnajökull icecap. Its a fantastic sight, the mountains, domes, vast galciers and far away the mountainous massifs and the Hofsjökull icecap dominating the central highlands. And its an enormous pleasure to kite down the slopes to Tugnnarjökull at speeds exceeding 50 km/h at times in a perfect NE wind !





The wind only dropped when we reached the lower border of Tugnaarjökuull, first sign of an upcoming change in the weather pattern. We store our kites away and trade our skis for crampons. In the absence of snow, we first progress on the bare ice of the glacier, then on the frozen river Tungnaa. An enormous full moon is rising on our east, and at 20h we reach the hut of Jökulheimar in the light of our headlamps after this beautiful day.

Big frustration

The first three days of March we make our way down south on river Tugnaa. The near total absence of snow on its upper part obliges us to progress with our crampons. The landscape, light and the ice by itself are incredibly beautiful, but our way between the hills mountains and islands delimiting the river is long and laborious. 2 of March the weather is back to grey again, with a south easterly wind. Turbulent, sometimes helpful, sometimes opposite depending on the mountains defining the shore of the river, there is no positive solution despite the many attempts to use our kites. We finally keep on walking to get further south.





March 3 the wind turns SW, perfectly opposite to our intended direction of progress. Frustration, because with the return of sunshine the light and the landscape here are incredibly beautiful. If only we could kite the river Tungnaa in easterly or northerly winds, it wouldn't take long to make the 60 kms separating Jökulheimar and Landmannalaugar without any effort in this beautiful landscape decorated by enormous snowdrifts. Instead we are laboriously hauling our pulks slowly southwards...



Iceland, union of the extremes

March 4 in the morning : we enjoy a relaxing bath in the hot waters (39C - 43 °C) of the river originating at the foot of the Laugahraun lave field at the site of Landmannalaugar. We enjoy the exceptional solitude in a place so busy during summertime. Lacking the time to continue or crossing further south, we head in north westerly direction, mainly across vaste lave fields whose treacherous monotony is only broken by some moderate hills. The South westerly wind brings along mild temperatures and dreadful sleet and rain. We can literally watch the snow melting away while liters of accumulated water have transformed our sleds in moving bathtubs. A bit south of the the barrages of Sigalda the Land Rover of Gabbi is waiting for us. March 5, time to get back.

Text : Michael Charavin. Translation : Cornelius Strohm.

Special thanks to Matt Taggart for his support. Many thanks to Ozone for their partnership!

The Element Expedition in a nutshell:

- East west crossing of the Vatnjökull Icecap from Jöklasel to Jökulheimar
- North south descent of the frozen river Tugnaa from Jökulheimar to Landmannalaugar
- 235 km from camp to camp, quite a few more on ground
- 92 m2 of kites
- 2 weeks of autonomy

Our kites : Ozone Access XT 4 / Ozone Frenzy FYX 7 / Ozone Manta M3 10 / Ozone Yakuza 12 /
Parawing Beringer 5S / Parawing Beringer 8S



Cornelius Strohm & Mika Charavin
Good and bad mood !

