

By Eoin Fitzgerald

New Year's Day. A pleasant minus 14°C. We went through the usual panic of 12 trying to get breakfast over, with the fossen brothers (James and Peter) moaning away complaining of delays. As Damien put it "There's no need for all this fossen, people rushing trying to get food into them, shit out of them and stress levels going through the roof" Last out that morning, James fossen brother. Couldn't find the safe place where he put his Escort keys. function

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James O'Reilly (fussey brother), Peter Owens (fossen brother No.2), Finbarr Desmond (Langer Dan), Richard Church^ (R. of York), Johnny Rocket Allen*, James * (Mammie Jamsie), Damien O'Sullivan (Langer No.2), Eoin * (Langer No.3), Caroline *(our lovely lassie) Dave monos Ayton, and Eoin Fitzgerald (Fitzy frostnip).

Props : one Escort, one large van, two cosy huts, 9 bottles of fine Scotch single malt, multiple fancy smancy ice tools.

Setting : A long white inland valley with well frozen ice falls

A geansai load of us headed over to Rjukan in central Norway for a week's ice climbing over the New Year. This was all arranged courtesy of chief fussy brother, James O'Reilly, now a resident Norwegian. Cheap Ryanair flights and free overnight accommodation in Preswick airport kept the costs down.

We also had to keep our heads down when we arrived into our lovely log huts in Rjukan. With doors at 5 foot, they must have been built for Hobbits. Walking straight into the outside door beam was a great way to wake up and clear the Scotch from your head.

Rjukan valley was a picture postcard perfect Christmas view. There are several hundred ice falls (foss, fossen in Norwegian) spread along 15km of the valley, single pitch, multipitch, from grade II to grade IX, and a few grade XXX's.

Day 1 : The thermometer outside read minus 10°C. Daylight hours were from 9am to 4pm. After getting our bearings and layering up, we headed up en mass to the upper area of the valley which had several good warm up single pitch routes in the III's and IV's. We had more gear on us than you'd find in Woodstock. The ice was in good nick, if a bit brittle. Amazingly water was

still flowing in some sections . We soon had ropes on half a dozen routes. Lead ropes, top ropes, bottom ropes, all over the shop ropes. It was damn cold but bone dry and not a cloud in site. Us muck savage Paddies (and Richard) weren't long in modifying our climbing techniques. We went from the old hurling school of hack the shite out of it, to the well honed ballet-like flick placement techniques as demonstrated by several Sweeds climbing beside us. Charging up the ice falls or "fossen" like the Munster front row was not the way to go.

The verdict at the end of the day was ;

Monopoints, great, trees for absailing, great, Grivel 360° and espresso screws excellent.

Frozen sandwiches, bad, frozen bananas, bad (possibly good as emergency absail anchors). Cheap Polish ice screws, bad, Johnny and Eoins Fitzes frozen toes, bad.

We went back to the hut for a good dinner which proved a bit tricky. We had one lactose intolerant, one ceoliac and one fish allergy. Beans on no-toast all round. That night we paid homage to Mecca, our small table in the East corner on which sat the nine bottles of malt. The whisky was soon flowing as was the smut. In fact it came on thick and hard, like yer morning glory.

Day 2 : New Years Eve. Temperature down to minus 14°C. Every layer of clothing on. The parties split up. Peter Owens and Kevin Power did Sikehausfossen, a 3 pitch grade IV above the hospital.

From fossen brother No.2 ; "Relying on vague topo and no description we bashed our way up the hill side to the base of the ice fall. Lovely clear skies above and the ice was in good condition. Abbed off trees to return. Met two Swedes who flew up the route taking the central pillar on the left. Great view over the Rjukan valley and over to the Gaustablikk piste area. Long walk back along road to chalet."

James and Finbarr had a go at Swingfoss, a roadside 15m grade IV formation that had 3 variations on it. Although Dave Aton later managed to squeeze no less than 7 different routes

out of it. The wind had picked up and dropped the temperature down to an incredible minus 20°C. As Finbarr said “Jesus, I thought the world had ended”. The rest of the party went back to the upper area and picked off a few more fantastic single pitch ice falls. We asked some local climbers, who were playing around on a heinous looking dry tooling project, how they coped with the cold. “It’s the Norwegian way” they stated.

The cunning plan for New Year’s Eve was to head up to the hotel in the Gaustablikk ski resort. 12 piled into the van, the whiskey piled into us and the van almost piled into the frozen hairpin bends. Thank God/Allah for studded tyres and the skills of Finbarr’s handbrake turns. Scruffy climbers in buftie jackets were not allowed into the hotel. So we gate crashed a large Danish party and looked out of place ringing in 2004 while miming Ulde Langer’s Aisle in Danish. The talent was something to behold, but we didn’t end up holding any of them. We then stood outside to watch thousands of fireworks lighting up the white landscape. Fantastic. Off over to the ski slope with us to toboggan down on shovels, bin lids, bin lines and bare trousers. Back down the valley having the craic, pulling handbrake turns and singing “Fairytale of New York”. Don’t know why people think Norway is expensive. Cheapest New Year’s on record, total cost = zero !

Poor James for Donegal got a terrible slagging when his “wee dear mammy” rang him that night. We Christened him “Mammy Jamsie”.

Day 3 : New Year’s Day. A pleasant minus 14°C. We went through the usual panic of 12 trying to get breakfast over, with the fossen brothers (James and Peter) moaning away complaining of delays. As Damien put it “There’s no need for all this fossen, people rushing trying to get food into them, shit out of them and stress levels going through the roof” Last out that morning, James fossen brother. Couldn’t find the safe place where he put his Escort keys.

The frostbitten Eoin, Mammie Jamsie, Johnny and Richard went skiing. “Ha ! Skiing” cried Kevin, “gays on trays”. Off he and all the others went to the river below the power plant to tackle some single pitch routes on Nerde Swingfoss IV. Again the ice was in great nick but brittle. During WWII the Germans took over that large stone fronted Vermork Power Station to produce heavy water in their search for nuclear weapons. The resilience and cunning of the locals saw them making a raid on the plant and successfully sabotaging the operation, without a single shot going off. It was made into a film called “The Heroes of Telemark”. The power station is now a well preserved museum.

Day 4 : Minus 10-14°C again. James and Desperate Langer Dan (Finbarr) did Sikehausfoss while Peter and Kevin did Trappfoss, at the head of the valley.

From Peter : "Trappfoss , 4 pitches of V, hour to walk in along the base of the gorge. Two Swedes were in front, climbing well and very confident. A ramp leads from the main gully to the base of the steep climbing, Wet in places but otherwise a great pitch in amazing surroundings. Third pitch lead to the trees and the top. Decision to walk out or abseil. The Swedes were abbing so we could use their Abalokov threads. Excellent route".

The others played away at the roadside Swingfoss. By the time they were finished it looked like the foss was the scene of a massive drive by shooting. The three "gays on trays" had a rather pleasant second day's skiing too.

Good food, great whiskey, greater stories and the greatest of smut was had again that night.

Day 5 : Minus 12°C. After the routine fossen and rushing we bailed out once again to tackle the routes under the power heavy water plant. James and Richard of York had a go at the pleasant Bakvien, a 3 pitch grade IV up to the base of the plant. Watch out for the scrap metal frozen into the route. Fantastic for sling belays but deadly for tripping you up and tangling your axes.

Over to Peter. "Having eyed up Sabatuerfossen in the gorge a few times, it was time to have a crack at it . At grade VI in the guide , 4 pitches , it promised to be a full on day. Kev wanted the steep final pitch and I wanted the gully pitch in the middle so we were all happy. First pitch was up ice formed over scrap metal to an overhang. Then the 2nd pitch went out right and lead over more scrap metal that was easy to trap your crampons in, and up to the base of a short but hard looking section. I did this, spending a lot of effort trying to get a wire on the left side . The last pitch was a nice vertical section , topping out just right of the Vermork power station. It wasn't so much of a battle in the end. The walk out proving nearly more difficult, wandering around the disused power station to get back to the access road."

That Saturday evening the beer supplies were empty and the whiskey dangerously low so off to the shop with us. "Sorry but you can't buy alcohol after 6pm on Saturday" said the cute assistant. "Not even for thirsty Irish tourist climbers?" I chanced. "No, sorry". Bloody hell. I never knew Ian Paisley had set up a Presbyo church in Rjukan.

Day 6 : The last day. Minus 7°C. Lads, out with the t-shirts and suntan lotion. We dropped Mammie Jamsie, Johnny Rocket, Damien and Eoin langer No.3, off at the bottom of the valley to pick off a long easy angled route up to the 1st hairpin bend in the Gaustablikk road. They ran several pitches together and had a good day being well up to the climb.

Peter – “Fussy brothers joined forces on the last day to climb Tungtvann ('Heavy water'), a nice 2 pitch grade 5. First pitch was a bit scrappy but was made up for on the 2nd. Lovely vertical section leading up to tree belay which was in the gorge again , Short enough day , but a good one to finish on.”

Myself and Langer Dan thought we were going to do Bakvien the nice grade IV that fossen brother and Richard of York climbed. It wasn't until we topped out in the near dark that we realised it was Sabatuerfossen we were on. No wonder the last pitch felt a lot more than IV. Well done to Finbarr for leading it and thanks to Johnny Rocket for the loan of his Grivel screws. A pure and quick delight to place. A fantastic finish to a great trip.

How to get there :

Flights : Ryanair – Dublin or Shannon to Preswick, then to Oslo/Torp.

Transport :

Car hire needed, check Rent a Wreck for good deals

Accommodation

<http://www.rjukanhytte.com/>

Guide Books for Rjukan:

<http://www.mountain-environment.com/rjukanguide.html>

<http://www.sljus.lu.se/People/Struan/Climb/NordicIce/Rjukan.html>