

ODYSSEY OF LOPPA

A self-sufficient, multi-day ski mission in search of exciting descents inside the Arctic circle. Could this be ski touring in its purest form? Rab athletes **Lisen Strøm** and **Thea Kopala Røhme** find out for themselves

PHOTOS **ANDERS VESTERGAARD**

Ski touring can mean many different things. It could mean skinning up the side of a slope before sunrise to get first tracks on a freshly groomed piste. It could mean a single push to claim the steepest line after a season of scouting the conditions. It could mean a leisurely day linking low-angled terrain and clocking miles. Or it could mean a self-sufficient, multi-day mission, crossing contours and covering ground in search of new, exciting descents. Could this last one, perhaps, be ski touring in its purest form?

"I guess that was the whole exciting part about this trip, we didn't actually know if any of our route, or any of the couloirs would work," says Rab athlete Lisen Strøm. "I had been to Tverrfjord and Bergsfjord in Loppa before, on separate occasions, but I looked at the map and I thought it would be really fun if you could connect those two places in some way by crossing the ridges and fjords."

Loppa is a municipality in Finnmark, Norway's most northern county. It's made up of mountainous peninsulas, tumbling glaciers and deep fjords, and while Loppa is known for its wild terrain, its remote location makes it much less popular for ski touring than other parts of Norway. Firmly within the Arctic circle, Loppa has a population of less than 900 people and is accessible only by boat. Its highest summits stretch almost 1,200m from the sea to the sky and are a treasure trove for adventurous backcountry skiers. "On a trip like this, the umbilical cord is cut. We were far away from everyone, and you could really feel it," says Lisen.

After examining maps and speaking to local guides, Lisen settled on taking a route that traversed Loppa, covering around 32km and 4,500 vertical metres. It crossed multiple mountain passes and linked several challenging descents that could reasonably be assumed to be previously unskied. Incredibly, there is no official ski touring guidebook for the area, and while it could be considered the jewel in the crown of summit-to-sea skiing, sail and ski groups visiting Loppa don't tend to venture quite so deep into its backcountry. This trip would be a real expedition into the unknown, with many of the descents somewhat of a mystery.

"I knew that it was going to be a seriously Type 2 kind of fun," says Lisen. "You need strong people with you, because you do push the limits of the group. You see people at their best and at their worst. You can't hide how tired you are when you're really drained on day three and you still have a 400m climb before you can pitch the tent."

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The Dream Team: Lisen (right) and Thea (left) embark on their biggest adventure yet

PUSHING LIMITS

Lisen Strøm and Thea Kopala Røhme knew of each other before they knew each other. Lisen was well known in the ski community in Norway as a hard-charging, big mountain freerider with a ski style shaped by her childhood as a ski racer. Thea was also making a name for herself as an extremely capable climb and ski guide in Lofoten. "We were hearing about her in Oslo because people were like, she's a badass, she knows her stuff," says Lisen. On a visit to see a friend in Tromsø, Lisen found herself staying in the house where Thea lived, even borrowing her bedroom when Thea was away. Looking at pictures of adventures pinned to the walls, she thought that Thea would probably make a great adventure partner.

The two finally met in person at the Norwegian ski film festival, Fri Flyt, a couple of years ago. "When I thought about who I wanted on this trip, I was like... Pretty obvious choice," says Lisen. "We work well together and we sort of have different skill sets where we excel in the mountains." Where Lisen is the determined big mountain skier, Thea brings the calculated approach of a



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they would have been waiting for a long time for a rescue. “When we started to ski that first descent we suddenly thought, OK we need to be a bit careful here, it’s getting dark and if you break a leg nobody’s here to help you,” says Lisen. If the worst did happen, they had everything they needed to keep themselves comfortable, but with temperatures reaching -30 degrees overnight, staying in one piece was their highest priority.

GETTING THE LINE

While self-preservation was key, the team were not shy of tackling some seriously steep and committing descents. On day three, they ditched the heavy packs to ski a particularly stunning line on Storjfellet mountain. The north-east-facing couloir looks like it has been hollowed out by a giant’s ice cream scoop and is almost completely hidden from some angles. Due to its remote location, it’s rarely skied, but the women had come across it in near-perfect conditions. “This was without a doubt the best skiing on the trip,” explains Lisen. “Thea’s husband, Krister, told us to look into this line. There was this Finnish guy, Miikka Hast, who did it a couple of years ago and there’s a small part in a film on YouTube about it. We decided if it was possible we should give it a try. And since showing our film, a lot of guys have come up to me being like, ‘You got that line! I’ve been looking at that line for so long!’”

By the end of the odyssey, Thea and Lisen covered a whopping 62km and a total of 4,208m ascent. Although they lucked out with a good forecast and stable snow conditions, navigating this isolated terrain came with a wealth of difficulties. “It’s such a challenging area to ski tour in,” says Lisen. “We were basically walking in terrain traps for two whole days up and down valleys, and we were constantly looking at the snow or looking at how the terrain would change and having to make decisions all the time.”

So, what kind of advice would they give to someone looking to replicate a remote ski touring adventure? “Try to get as much information as you can about the area. Use maps, talk to locals, and I guess the most important part in planning a ski trip is that you need to know how steep things are,” explains Thea. “And if this style of trip is new to you, then I’d recommend doing one night outside in the winter in an area that you know that’s close to home. And then you can progress. You don’t need to go for four days and 60km on your first trip!” *Fall Line*

• *Odyssey of Loppa* was screened at Fri Flyt in 2024, exactly two years after the women first met there. This season, they will be back together again for another ski touring project in Northern Norway for Lisen’s new YouTube series, *Girl Up North*, while Thea will also be collaborating with her husband, and fellow Rab athlete, Krister Kopala. *Odyssey of Loppa* will be released by the end of January 2025, keep an eye on m.youtube.com/c/rabequipment.

seasoned mountain guide. “When Lisen introduced me to the idea I knew it was something I’d be really interested in doing,” Thea says. “It matched the way I like to be outside – self-sufficient in technical terrain. You really have to draw on all your mountain skills.”

To document their adventure, Lisen and Thea enlisted the help of outdoor photographer and videographer, Anders Vestergaard. Between the three of them, they would not only have to carry their gear, camping equipment, and supplies for four days in sub-zero temperatures, they would have to ensure they had enough power to keep Anders’ cameras switched on.

“We were always worried about the batteries!” says Thea. “It just added this whole extra layer of complication. We had to be really conscious about not using them up and figuring out when we wanted to film and when we didn’t... And we had to carry a lot of heavy chargers too.”

Carrying 50-litre backpacks with 30kg of kit meant that they had to be conservative with their skiing. Reception was patchy and although the fjords offered a relatively easy exit by boat if needed,

“A seriously Type 2 kind of fun” – as adventures go, this is epic



Watch *Odyssey of Loppa* when it’s released on YouTube end of January 2025