



2015

Mt. Gunnbjörn, the Highest Peak in Greenland (IMG65)

Snow shoe or Ski ascent of the highest peak in the Greenland Arctic

- Expedition manual -



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Expedition overview

Greenland's highest mountain Mt. Gunnbjörn is also the highest peak located north of the Arctic circle. Therefore it does not just hold the title of being the highest peak in Greenland but is also the highest peak of the Arctic (3694m).

Because of the huge size of Greenland, Mt. Gunnbjörn has been called the 8th continental peak. On the east coast, where massive mountains rise from the Greenland icecap the conditions are pristine, in many ways similar to those in Antarctica. Mt. Gunnbjörn is easily accessible on a ski-plane from Iceland. Once in the Watkins Mountains we set up a comfortable base camp at the foot of the mountain. To make the summit day easier we establish one camp on the way to the summit.

The climb can easily be done on snow shoes with only the last part done on crampons. Snow shoes are easy to use and are good for travelling in the snow. This is planned as a snow shoe expedition, however, if a group wants to go and rather travel on skis, that is of course possible too.

Note that there is a risk of delay of the flight from Greenland cause of weather. This must be considered when participants plan their flight out of Iceland. Book an open ticket!

Start of journey: Reykjavík, June 1st, 2015 (On the 31st of May there is a meeting with the expedition leader)

End of journey: Reykjavík, June 5th, 2015

Elevation: 600-1100m per day snow shoe or alpine ski touring: 5 days

Max. ascent: 1100m (3610')

Accommodation: Tent

Groups size: 3-7 participants

Further information and booking

Please contact us via expeditions@mountainguides.is for further information and bookings.

History of Mt. Gunnbjörn

Exploration and first climbs

The British Arctic Air Route Expedition was the first one to explore the area in 1930-1931 and the mountain range is named after their expedition leader, Henry Watkins.

In the summer of 1935 Augustine Courtauld and Lawrence R. Wager joined forces in the "Anglo-Danish expedition to East Greenland" (often referred to as The Courtauld expedition) with the primary aim of ascending the highest peak of the Watkins Mountains. Augustine Courtauld, Jack Longland, Ebbe Munck, Harold G. Wager and Lawrence Wager stood on the summit on the 16th of August 1935 after man hauling sledge 190 km from the coast. In the continuation L.R. Wager led the "1935-1936 British East Greenland Expedition" that is often wrongly claimed as being the first ascent of Mt. Gunnbjörn.

Mt. Gunnbjörn was not climbed again until 1971 by an Anglo Danish party. When Icelandic Mountain Guides made their first commercial expedition in the area in 1999, it was probably only the 12th ascent of the mountain.

This highest peak of the Watkins mountains was named “Gunnbjörn”, after the first European to sight Greenland. Early in the 10th century, “Gunnbjörn” the son of Úlfur Kráka, was blown off course while sailing from Norway to Iceland. He and his crew sighted land he then named after him self, Gunnbjarnarsker (Gunnbjörn’s skerries). As known, Eric the Red later changed the name to Greenland to make it more appealing to other Norsemen to follow him from Iceland and settle there.

The name of the mountain

Originally the mountain was named “Gunnbjörn” but later got the ending “fjeld” in Danish, “fjell” in Norwegian and “fjall” in Icelandic, meaning “mountain”. The Icelandic letter “ö” is written “ø” in Danish and Norwegian and as “o” in English. In English, Mt. Gunnbjorn is commonly used.

Another name, Hvitserk, has recently been used for the mountain. That name is taken from "Grænlendingaþáttur", a part of the Icelandic Sagas that tells the story of Nordic settlers in Greenland. There, Hvitserk is mentioned as a name of a glacier visited on a late summer hunting trip. Even though it’s unlikely that Hvitserk in this case refers to the Watkins Mountains, the name Hvitserk is now commonly seen and used.

The highest mountains in Greenland

Before the late discovery of the Watkins mountains, Mt. Forel (3.391m) was thought to be Greenland’s highest peak. In 1997, detailed GPS measurements were done on several of the highest mountains showing that the Watkins mountains indeed contain Greenland’s highest summits.

Gunnbjörn’s height was measured as 3.694m, Dome (Qaqqaq Kershaw) as 3.683m and Cone (Qaqqaq Johnson) as 3.669m. The fourth highest mountain was given the name Qaqqaq Paul-Emile Victor (3.606m) but the fifth still only named after it’s height, Peak 3.549.

About the expedition

Expedition members need to be in Reykjavík, Iceland no later than early Sunday, May 31st for a preparation meeting in the morning. NOTE: This meeting is obligatory so that the gear each member has brought can be assessed and advises given if there is a need to replace something. That can then be done in the afternoon of the 31st.

Luggage allowance for the flight from Reykjavík to Akureyri is 20kg (plus 6kg of hand luggage of limited volume). From Akureyri we take a private chartered ski-plane to too the Watkins Mountains area. It is possible to leave something in Akureyri (e.g. fresh clothes, computers or other gadgets) to be retrieved right away after coming back from Greenland.

20kg (plus the 6kg of hand luggage) should be enough in this case. It’s possible to take more weight from Reykjavík to Akureyri if that extra weight is to be left waiting in Akureyri until the group is back to there from Greenland. There airliner charges extra for excess weight.

In the morning of June 1st there is a flight to Akureyri. There the privately chartered ski-plane will be loaded for Greenland. After taking off from Akureyri a brief stop will be made in Ísafjörður, a small fishing village in the Westfjords of Iceland, in order to fuel up to have a completely full tank and the shortest direct distance to destination. Because of limited capacity of the ski-plane, more than one flight might be needed to get the group to Greenland.

Our objective will be to climb Mt. Gunnbjörn, Greenland's highest peak. As the peak is located high in the arctic, the air is thinner than on similar altitude summits elsewhere. We can establish our base camp close to the landing site, right in the middle of the Watkins mountains, but might decide to move a bit higher on the glacier, closer to the mountain to get to more altitude and make the summit day shorter.

Mt. Gunnbjörn will be climbed in one long day from base camp. Gentle slopes lead to the summit ridge where snow shoes will be left behind and the rest climbed using crampons.

From the Watkins Mountains we fly back to Akureyri and from there to Reykjavík where the expedition officially ends.



Itinerary overview

Day 0 (May 31st): Preparation meeting in the morning with the expedition leader. Briefing and gear inspection.

Day 1 (June 1st): Flight from Reykjavík to Akureyri in the morning and from Akureyri to Greenland around noon. We put up our base camp at the landing site or head higher up before setting it up, depending on conditions.

Day 2 (June 2nd): We move our camp up and closer to the summit of Mt. Gunnbjörn.

Day 3 (June 3rd): Ascent of Mt. Gunnbjörn summit and back to the camp.

Day 4 (June 4th): Spare day to climb Mt. Gunnbjörn or to use in sightseeing or to climb other summits in the Watkins Mountains.

Day 5 (June 5th): Flight back to Iceland. Flight from Akureyri to Reykjavík where the trip ends at the domestic airport.

Expedition life

IMG put great effort into making this expedition as comfortable as possible for all members. In base camp we will use strong North Face VE-25 tents for sleeping and have a larger tent for the whole group to gather in for evening meals and breakfast.

The 24 hours daylight makes the temperature inside the tents comfortable, especially if the sun is shining on it. It's different how high the sun is and that affects the temperature. If shadow falls on the tent the temperature gets a lot lower. So the temperature can vary quite a bit.

We will be doing day tours from the base camp, coming back there in the evenings for warm drinks and good food.

Equipment list

A detailed equipment list will be sent to all participants upon confirmation.



The expedition timeframe

When choosing the correct time for this expedition there are always certain advantages as well as disadvantages to consider. IMG has decided that early June is in fact the most opportune. Then the weather is stable, the days are long, the temperature reasonable and avalanche danger is minimal. It's common to find fresh powder snow on the slopes while the 24 hours daylight makes the snow in the bottom of the valleys more settled.

Baggage transport

Passengers are asked to follow the equipment list precisely, take only what is needed. The ski-plane has a limited capacity and the whole base camp could be relocated a couple of times.

Weather

Most of the time, the weather conditions in the Watkins Mountains area are stable, but some variations have to be expected and taken into account. The temperature varies from +5°C in the sun on warm days where we have our base camp but goes down to -25°C on the mountain tops on cold days.

A good sleeping bag is essential. The radiation of the sun during the evening makes the tents reasonably warm and it is not uncommon to see -10 to -15°C on the outside thermometer and between +10 to +20°C inside the tents until shadow falls on them. Then the temperature goes close to or below zero.



Snow conditions

The Watkins mountains are close to the coast so it's a high precipitation area. The cold climate keeps the snow fresh. On ridges and mountain tops it is likely that the wind leaves only hard packed snow but lower on the slopes the snow is .

Daylight hours

In June, continuous daylight is something to look forward to, especially for those who come from regions where there is little or no fluctuation in the daylight hours.

Level of experience of expedition members

Participants in *Mt. Gunnbjörn, the Highest Peak of Greenland* expedition should be prepared for a fairly strenuous experience. The expedition is for those who are physically and mentally prepared for some days out in a remote area where harsh weather and conditions can be expected. One of the keys to a successful expedition is good teamwork and everyone helping out when needed. Expedition members should be ready for challenging conditions. Dealing with the unexpected and unwanted, such as blisters and other bodily aches is also something to be prepared for.

Good level of fitness is certainly an asset for everyone considering this expedition.

Endurance and self motivation works wonders as well. Prior experience in winter travel and glacier crossings is important. A short résumé is required to apply for joining the expedition.

For those who want more experience or are interested in doing a preparatory tour, we recommend climbing the highest peak of Iceland, Hvannadalshnjúkur. That climb is physically harder than climbing Mt. Gunnbjörn, the highest peak of Greenland.

For those interested, a private 4-5 day preparation session can be arranged where we first climb up the crater of Eyjafjallajökull glacier before moving on to Hvannadalshnúkur. Accommodation would be in comfortable hotels.



General preparation

The best preparation for an expedition like this is to engage in long hikes in the mountains or long days of snow shoeing (or alpine skiing if skis will be used). The value of all general exercise in preparation for an expedition of this kind should not be underestimated. The more we prepare ourselves the better.

It is important that participants are familiar with all their personal gear and equipment such as boots and skis (if used) and clothes from the bottom up. The more comfortable you are with your gear the easier everything becomes when adjusting to the communal gear and the expedition as a whole.

Booking and payment

Expedition members will have to confirm their participation by paying a confirmation fee of 250.000 ISK. This fee is not refundable unless Icelandic Mountain Guides need to abort the expedition. Expedition members are required to send in a résumé of their mountaineering experience for prior assessment by the expedition leader. **Full payment needs to be paid by Feb. 24th 2015 the deadline for signing up for the 2015 expedition.**



Included in the price

- Privately chartered ski-plane from Akureyri to the Watkins mountains and back.
- Icelandic expert guide.
- Flight from Reykjavík to Akureyri and back with 20 kg of personal luggage (and 6 kg of hand luggage of limited volume).
- Expedition permits and all other permits needed for the expedition.
- Emergency evacuation insurance for all expedition members.
- All common gear and equipment such as glacier travel gear, pulkas/sleds to transport bags, satellite phone for security, solar panel with 12V charger to charge the satellite phone (priority) and other gadgets, tents, stoves and all food in Greenland with one week emergency supplies.

Not included in the price

- Cost of excess weight of personal luggage on the flights between Reykjavík and Akureyri.
- Cost due to delay of flights.
- Hotel in Iceland before departure to Greenland and after the return from Greenland.
- Personal travel insurance.
- Personal mountaineering equipment and skis (if used).
- Personal use of satellite phone (approx. 5\$/min).
- Everything else not mentioned in the “Included in the price” section.

Permits and insurances

There are quite a few permits needed for this expedition. All necessary permits as well as a Search and Rescue (SAR) and Evacuation insurance is included in the expedition price, however we recommend that all participants also have their own travel insurance. The included insurances cover evacuation costs from the area to the nearest town or hospital in case of emergency. Personal travel insurance should cover the loss of equipment due to evacuation and any medical costs in hospitals and towns. Most regular travel insurances should be sufficient.



All expedition photos by Einar Torfi Finnsson