

# Scottish Winter Lofoten

EXPEDITION 2001



## EXPEDITION REPORT

SUPPORTED BY:



Scottish Mountaineering  
Trust





### INTRODUCTION

During March 2001, two well known activists on the Scottish winter climbing scene, Pete Benson and Guy Robertson, made a short trip to the Lofoten Islands. Often referred to by Norwegians as the 'Magic Islands', the Lofoten are situated some 100 km inside the Arctic Circle off the north west coast of Norway.



**Guy cranking it out on the first ascent of the Reine Couloir**

Prior to the trip, little was known about winter climbing in Lofoten, so it was difficult to ascertain what had and hadn't been climbed before. This is largely because the small numbers of active winter climbers based in northern Norway are not in the habit of recording winter ascents; the 'oral tradition' ensures adventure for those who follow. Specific objectives for the Scottish team did include the awe-inspiring North Wall of Vagakallen (which, despite being some kilometre wide, had only been climbed previously by a single summer route) and an exploration of the area around Reine village, on the southernmost island of Moskenesøy.

The trip lasted two weeks (the first half of the month) with the team based in the small settlement of Unstad on Vestvågøy. The intention was to make primarily single-day, exploratory ascents in the modern Scottish idiom, although it was expected that some routes would require a multi-day approach. The two climbers really didn't know what to expect, other than potentially extremely large quantities of snow, although what limited information had been obtained through local sources did seem to suggest considerable and exciting winter potential.

On the face of it, as a winter climbing destination the Lofoten Islands have a lot going for them. They catch the moist, warm air of the Gulf Stream, yet they're well inside the Arctic Circle. They're liberally endowed with big, vegetated crags, some comparable with the best in Europe, and many only a stone's throw from

the road. They're easily accessible by sea or by air, have an excellent road network, yet they're still geographically remote. Despite the impressive scale of the cliffs (up to 800m), there are no acclimatisation issues, and there is relatively little in the way of difficult glacial terrain. Finally, a



combination of consistently wet, warm summers and long, cold winters should be expected to build up Nevis-like accumulations of good snow and ice.

### HISTORY

It's too easy to think that the Norwegians have kept the lid on this amazing winter climbing nirvana in the past, but there's more to it than that. The Lofoten in winter simply haven't been explored – by anyone, let alone the locals. In spite of the above attractions, hardly anyone seems to climb there, and the almost limitless winter potential remains more or less untapped.

Only a handful of routes had been climbed prior to the Scottish expedition, almost all of them by local climbers, and most of these are in the area immediately around the town of Svolvær on Austvågøy. Local boy and talented big wall pioneer Odd-Roar Wiik has been almost single-handedly responsible for development to date, although one can't help thinking that the earliest pioneers on the islands, including such redoubtables as Slingsby and Collie, must surely have sneaked in a few winter trips at one time or another. The only known routes identified are the prominent gullies and most of the icefalls on both sides of Vagakallen, for which Odd-Roar is mainly responsible. All details of routes climbed on Lofoten, summer or winter, can be found in the dedicated New Routes book in the Henningsvær 'Climbing Café'.

One of the most impressive past climbing achievements on Lofoten in winter was the ascent of Storpillaren (20 pitches, E3 and A2) over four days (again by Odd-Roar and partners). However, this was climbed in typical 'Big Wall' style, and there appears to have been very little in the way of hard free ice or mixed climbing on the islands to date.

### FLORA AND FAUNA

The Lofoten present a similar habitat mosaic to the west coast of Scotland, but colder and without the 'jungle' regions found between coast and mountain. Indeed, there is invariably a very sudden and sharp contrast between the coastal and arctic montane environment, which is typical of the western Norwegian seaboard. There is also, however, notably less in the way of invasive, non-native plant species such as Rhododendron, ferns and so forth. Most of the open, non-agricultural land being either, quite literally, exposed rock or heather heath. There is very little in the way of woodlands, and this is apparently largely a result of extensive felling in the past to clear for agriculture. Foxes were the only mammal observed during the trip. Birdlife is diverse and varied, again similar to Scotland, with Kittiwakes, Gulliemot, Razorbills, and a wide range of gulls common place around the coasts and less hilly islands. Sea Eagles are found on Lofoten. In the mountains, as in the Cairngorms, the familiar sound of the Ptarmigan, and the Dotteril and Snow Bunting are commonplace.

### SOCIO-ECONOMICS

One can easily imagine that the Lofoten are today what the Hebrides might well have been. Fishing, small-scale agriculture, tourism and public services form the mainstay of the local economy, and the population levels remain relatively high. For example, the island where the team was based, Vestvågøy, occupies an area of only 450 square km (about the size of Rum) yet has population of approximately 11000. The natural resources and culture of these islands have been



sustained and fiercely guarded from over-commercialisation, yet there has still clearly been substantial investment in local infrastructure and services. The road (including bus), air and ferry network is nothing short of amazing, and one is never far from a local shop, petrol station or other service centre of some sort.

Large scale fish farming doesn't seem to have arrived in Lofoten yet, with most (but not all) of the local fisherman still enjoying a healthy living catching and drying cod using traditional techniques. The cod season runs from January through March, and the local 'cod forests' became a common sight (and smell) throughout the duration of the trip. Agriculture, however, doesn't appear too healthy on the islands (unless you're buying up from outside) and there is clearly a problem with retaining the younger generations in farming families.

### ENVIRONMENT

The west coast of Norway is very similar topographically to the west coast of Scotland, but with the mountains being bigger, more impressive and constructed almost exclusively from sound granite. First impressions are of an enlarged Skye.

Despite it's northerly latitude, the Lofoten islands are still influenced by the gulf stream, which keeps the temperature up around freezing for most of the winter. When the winds strike from the North, the temperature can drop to minus 20°C, conversely when they are blowing from the south west, the freezing level rises well above the summits allowing consolidation and therefore providing the potential for splendid snow and ice conditions.

The mountains on Lofoten are not particularly high, with the highest Higravitinden reaching only a modest 1161m. However, the mountain walls, such as that found on the north side of Vagakallen often rise from sea level, providing truly Alpine Scale mountaineering objectives. These walls are also generally highly accessible, the exception being those found in North Austvågøy where a boat access and a 'mini-expedition' approach is required.

The summer light comes in quickly to cast away the gloom of winter. During our trip we had around 12 hours of daylight for climbing, with almost 30 minutes being added each week.

Where the rock is clean and accessible (e.g. Presten) there is fairly well developed rock climbing. However the potential in winter is just staggering. With a 'Scottish' mentality that turf and snowed-up rock is fair game, the potential is almost limitless.

In some ways we were lucky with the conditions, in other ways not. We were certainly very lucky with the weather which was calm, cold and sunny for most of our two weeks. It appears that this may have been slightly unusual, but even if the weather had been a bit ropy, there would be enough road-side 'cragging' (up to 600m) to fill a frontal depression. Due to the very dry summer and autumn of 2000, there was a disappointing lack of ice, and plenty of 'if onlys'. From the number of drewls, dribbles and damp patches seen on the crags, a wet autumn followed by a reasonable winter would provide challenging ice objectives.

### LOGISTICS

#### GETTING THERE

Flying is the only sensible option, as it would take days to drive from Bergen which is the nearest large ferry port accessible from the UK. There are no direct flights from Oslo to Lofoten, but there are direct flights to Bodø on the mainland. We flew SAS to Bodø, then caught a flight to Leknes with Widerøe. It is also possible to catch a ferry from Bodø to Svolvær, which is cheaper and takes about 2 hours.

#### CAR HIRE

When in Lofoten, a car is essential to fully explore the remote parts, although the main populations are well supplied with buses. The usual car hire suspects were going to charge us an arm and a leg for the privilege of a 'small compact', however we managed to get a far better deal from the Lofoten Bruktbilutleie (second hand car hire). For about £21 a day we got a massive Volvo 240, which despite four punctures, was very reliable, and almost enjoyable to drive. Although the day rate was cheap, there was a hefty £350 excess for pranging the beast, which given the state of the icy snowy roads, was always a possibility.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Tourism is one of the major industries in Lofoten, but not in the winter. Most cheap accommodation is likely to be closed from September to May, but we managed to find excellent self-catering in Unstad. For the privilege of a spacious and cosy chalet, with bunks, a scorching shower, and cooking facilities, we 'haggled' a rate of £8 PPPN; most reasonable. It seems likely that most of the villages on Lofoten would have somewhere to stay, even in the depths of winter.

#### FOOD

No problems - large well stocked supermarkets in both Leknes and Svolvær. Prices are 20-40% more than in the UK depending on what you buy. Beer comes in a scorching £2/can, with spirits being unfeasibly expensive.

#### FUEL

Petrol is about the equivalent price as in the UK. Most petrol stations sold EPI gas canisters for about a £5.

#### CLIMBING

Our main objective was to put up a new line on Vagakallen awesome north side, and we did this in the first two days of climbing. The remainder was spent exploring other areas, with a brief sojourn to the mainland with the objective of making the first free winter ascent of the mighty Stetind. Despite rave reports on conditions from the locals, the granite monolith that is Stetind was found to be merely dusted with snow, and the team decided it was 'out of condition'.



The following are brief descriptions of the routes climbed. In common with the Norwegian tradition of winter adventure, overall grades have not been given.

### **Scottish Route, NE Face Vagakallen, 800m, 5/6 March 2001, 1<sup>st</sup> ascent**

Vagakallen is one of Lofoten's most famous and impressive peaks, and is found on Austvågøy next to the 'climbing centre' of Henningsvær. The Scottish Route takes on the challenge of the huge face to the left of the Storpillaren; a logical winter line up a magnificent sweep of steep granite, quite turfy in places, but wholly reliant on a good build-up of snow and ice to allow an ascent. Several Norwegian parties have failed on the same line in the past, seemingly as the result of bad conditions. There are no other routes on the face. The climbing on the crux sections was both thin and serious (Scottish 5) and safe and technical (Scottish 7). There were around 15 pitches of roped climbing and a fair amount of moving together on the easier ground. The route involved several large traverses to catch the line so effecting a retreat would have been an interesting venture.

### **The Reine Couloir, 500m, 8 March 2001, 1<sup>st</sup> ascent**

The Reine Couloir is a massive gully/fault on the big broken face immediately round and right of the Reine Svaet (Reine Slab – described in the Webster guide). Six hard pitches with the crux a very steep 30m ice smear on the left wall of an overhanging culdesac. (See picture on page 1). This a classic route, with an amazing icy through-route under a towering house sized chockstone.

### **Arnliot's Tavern, Cliffs to the NW of Unstad, 100m, 9 March 2001 1<sup>st</sup> ascent**

This climb takes the central of three prominent gullies on the long line of cliffs opposite the road end at Unstad. A pleasant ice-fall with one short vertical section. The other gullies look slightly harder.

### **Harbour Couloir, Eggum, 400m, 10 March 2001, 1<sup>st</sup> ascent**

Just north of Unstad is another beautiful hamlet called Eggum. This route takes the huge slanting gully/fault starting about five minutes walk from the road above the harbour. There are four main pitches, with the crux being (again!) an exciting through route on pleasant mixed ice. Another classic line.

### **Spandalsen Ice Falls**

The valley of Spandalsen is found on the mainland 2.5 hours drive NE of Harstad and is one of the most popular reliable ice climbing venues in the region. In a good winter around 50 ice falls form, up to 8 pitches in length, 30-90 minutes walk from the road. The team climbed the most obvious one in good conditions at Scottish IV, 5.

### **Odd/Halvour Line, First Ascent winter 2000, 120m, 2<sup>nd</sup> ascent**

Within striking distance of Harstad, there are a number of good ice climbing venues, which have been developed by the local activists Halvour Hagen and Odd-Roar Wiik. The Odd/Halvour Line (our name since as with most winter routes in Norway routes are neither recorded, graded or named) is on a North facing crag 45 minutes from Harstad. The first pitch gave some tricky and burley laybacking up a large crack to span out onto an icicle. Above the climbing was easier, although the ice was too thin for anything more than faith.

### **South East Pillar, Moltind, 650m, 17 March 2001, 1<sup>st</sup> ascent**

Despite it's modest height Moltinden is an impressive sight on the road through the island of Flakstadøy. As far as we are aware, this is the first technical climb of any sort recorded on the island. The route follows a prominent line of vegetated groves in the crest defining the vertical east wall and the less steep south/south east face. Both of these faces would provide winter objectives in better conditions. On the South East pillar, the climbing difficulties are sustained for the 300m (lots of Scottish 6 and 7, with one section of 8) which provided excellent turfy mixed climbing although not particularly serious. The upper ridge is much easier and the team moved together.

### **SPONSORSHIP**

The expedition received support from a number of organisations and companies, which are listed below – we thank them all.

#### **Scotland Online [www.scotlandonline.com](http://www.scotlandonline.com)**

Scotland online paid for our flights and in return we provided content for their website, which can be found at [www.scotlandonline.com/outdoors](http://www.scotlandonline.com/outdoors)

#### **Scottish Mountaineering Trust**

The SMT provided the expedition with a grant.

#### **Mountaineering Council of Scotland**

The MCofS provided the expedition with a grant.

#### **Lyon Equipment [www.lyon.co.uk](http://www.lyon.co.uk)**

Lyon equipment provided the expedition with specific equipment as part of their expedition equipment award scheme.



### Scarpa [www.scarpa.co.uk](http://www.scarpa.co.uk)

Scarpa through the UK distributors - the Mountain Boot company - supplied the expedition with technical mountaineering boots and THORLO socks.

### EXPEDITION BUDGET

Norway has a well-deserved reputation for being outrageously expensive. Most things are 20-30% more expensive, but as usual the determined climbing bum will find ways and means to cut down on costs.

There may be cheaper options with flights. Ryan air [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com) fly daily to Oslo from Stanstead for about 50 sheets each way. It would also be possible to save on the flight from Bodø if the ferry was taken to Svolvær.

A major saving can be made by hiring a car from Lofoten Bruktbilutleie tel: +47 76080125. They are about half the cost of the more well known outfits.

### Balance Sheet

Description	Income (£)	Expenditure (£)
Flights		897.18
Car Hire		320
Fuel		142.28
Tolls, ferrys etc.		50
Food and Accommodation		427.20
Photography		100
Miscellaneous		100
Personal Contribution	659.66	
Personal Contribution	659.66	
Scotland Online	877	
SMT	300	
McofS	200	
Total	2036.66	2036.66

### USEFUL INFORMATION

The most useful source of information for climbing in Lofoten is Ed Webster's 'Climbing in the Magic Islands' guidebook although there is no mention of the winter climbing possibilities. It is written in English and is quite widely available in the UK.

As with everything these days, the Internet is a worthy encyclopaedia of information. A reasonable search engine should find plenty of information and pictures to get your juices flowing. Below is a list of some of the more useful sites:



### Flights:

[www.scandinavian.net](http://www.scandinavian.net)

[www.wideroe.com](http://www.wideroe.com)

[www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

### General Lofoten sites:

[www.mtn.co.uk/features/norway1-1.htm](http://www.mtn.co.uk/features/norway1-1.htm)

[www.scotlandonline.com/outdoors](http://www.scotlandonline.com/outdoors)

### Car hire:

[www.avis.com](http://www.avis.com)

[www.hertz.com](http://www.hertz.com)

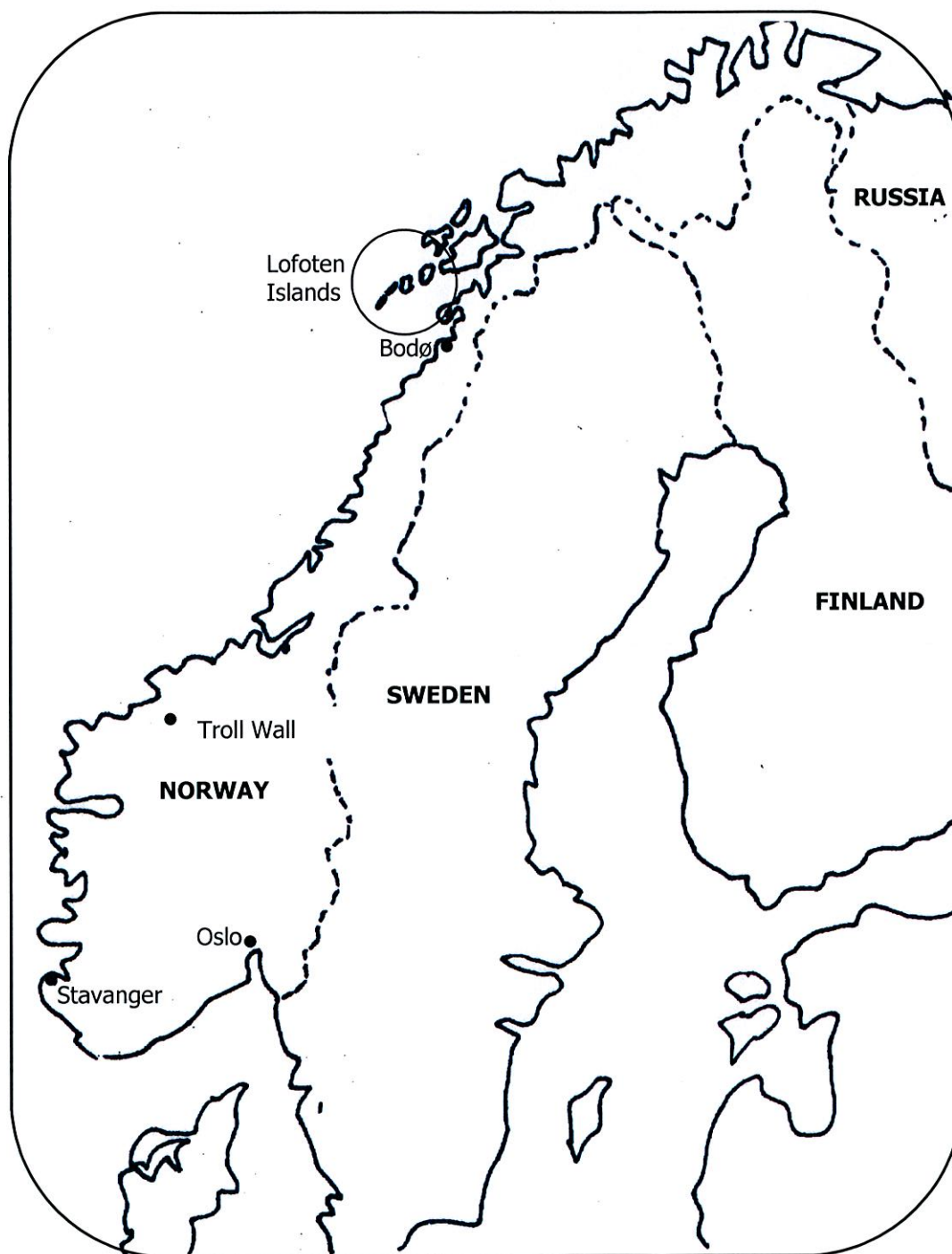
Lofoten Bruktbilutleie tel: +47 76080125 (not web savvy so you will have to speak to them!)

If all else fails, give us a shout!

[peter.benson@dnv.com](mailto:peter.benson@dnv.com)

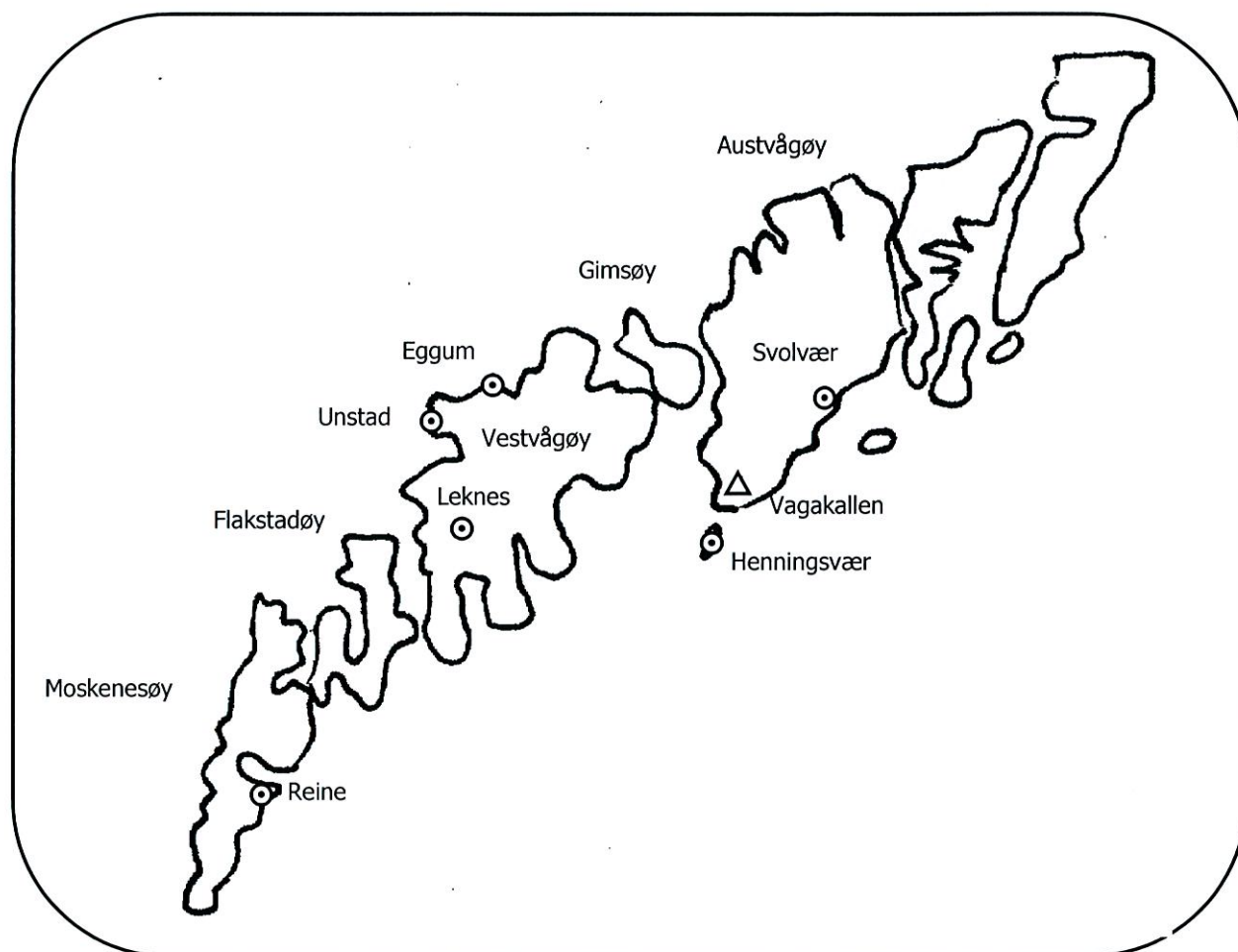
[groberson@envdev.aberdeen.net.uk](mailto:groberson@envdev.aberdeen.net.uk)

{End of Main Text}

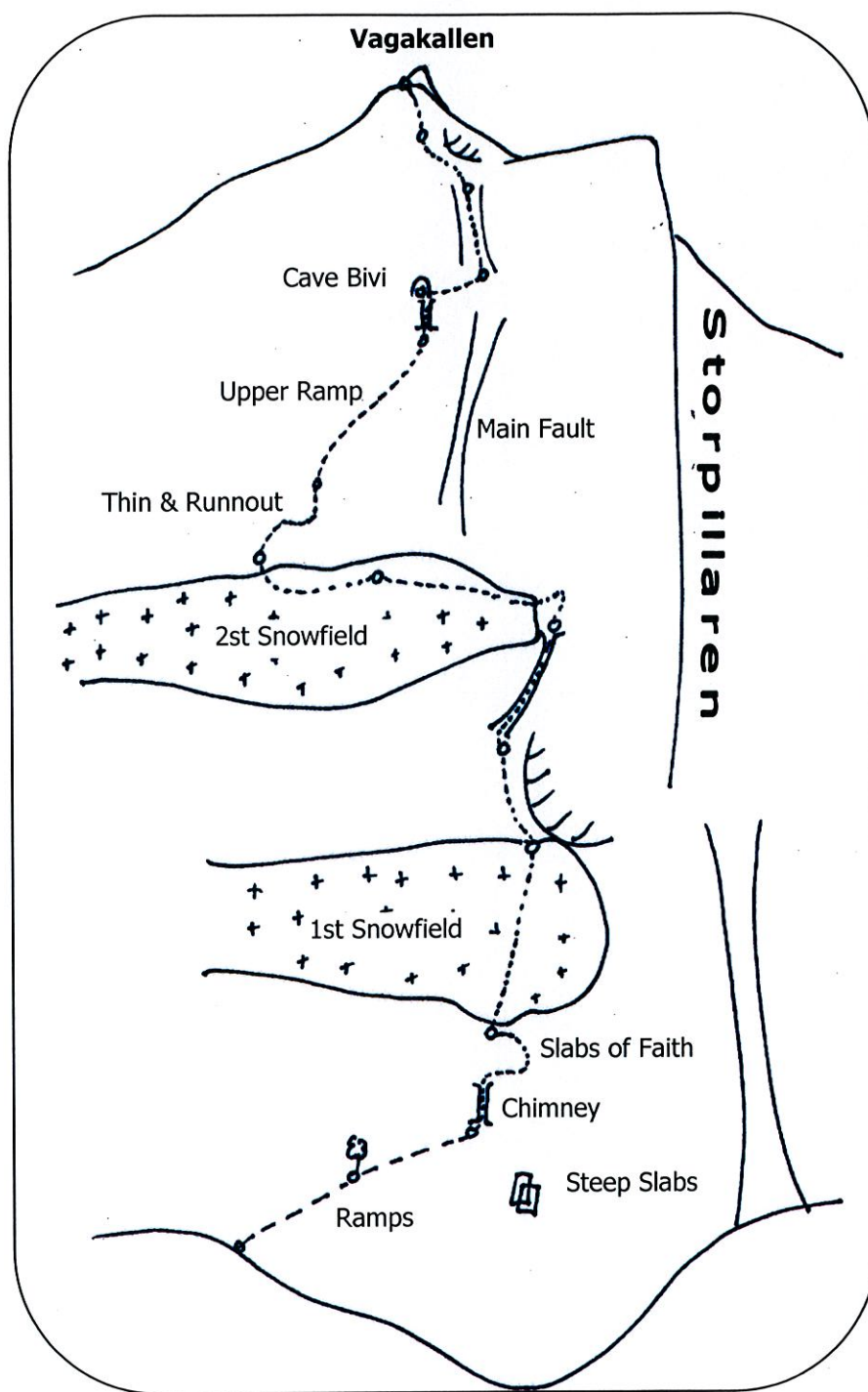


SCANDINAVIA MAP



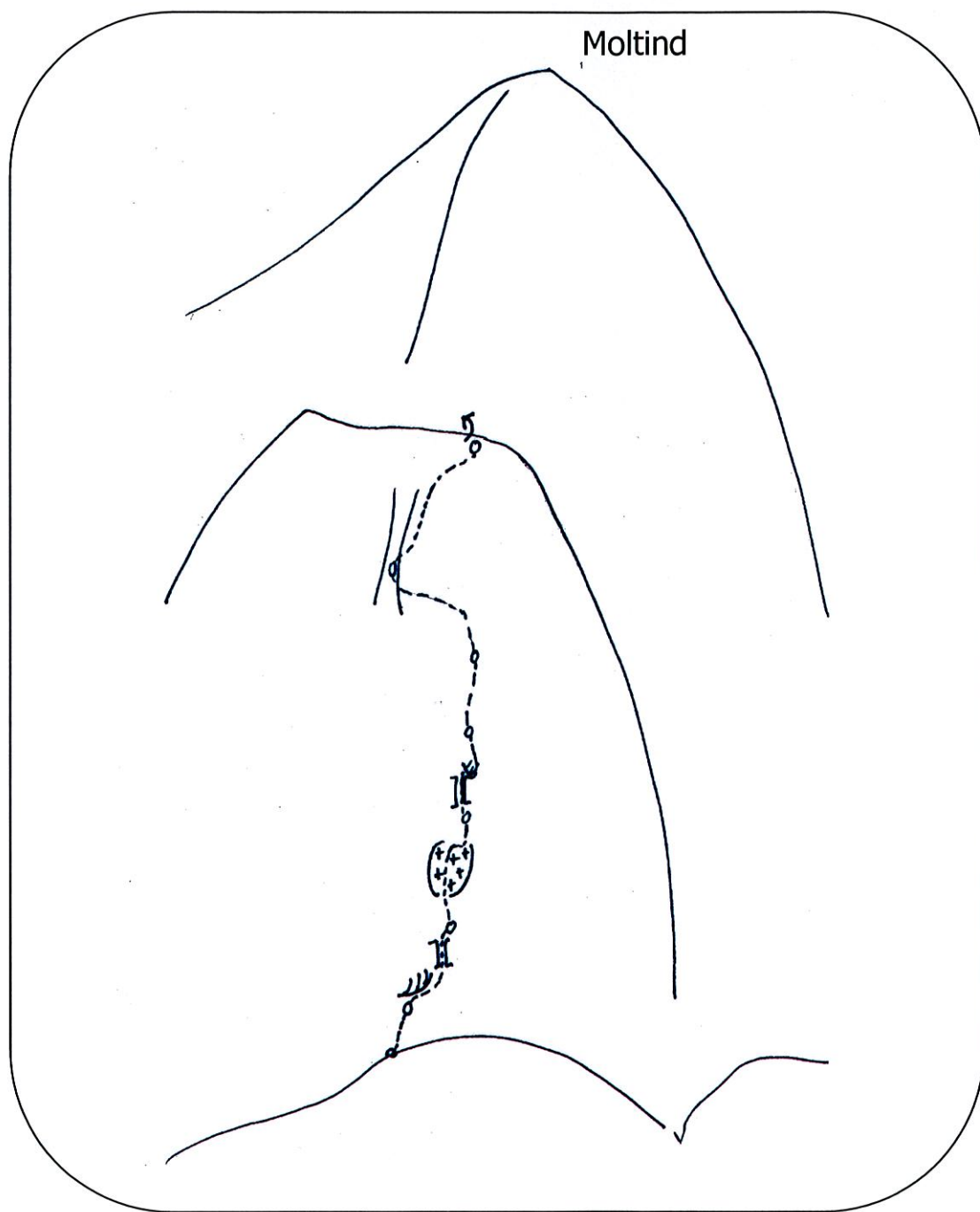


LOFOTEN MAP



VAGAKALLEN TOPO





MOLTIND TOPO