JOHANNA MERZ

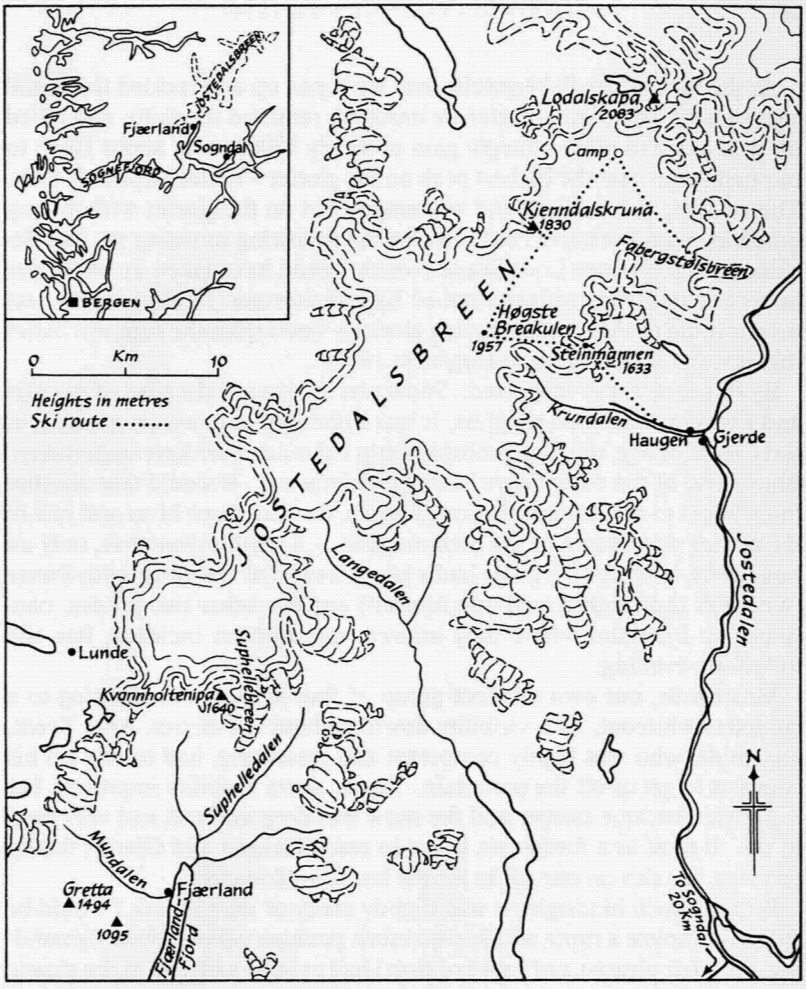
Skiing the Jostedalsbreen

(*Plates 62, 63*)

In August 1990 I joined a party for two weeks' hill walking near Fjærland, a remote hamlet at the far end of the Sognefjord in Norway. The name of the village caught my eye, since I knew that this was one of the favourite haunts of W C Slingsby, who achieved many first ascents in the area. It turned out that we were based on the very same Hotel Mundal where Slingsby used to stay and that Dr Olav Orheim, part-owner of the hotel and leader of our trip, was a descendant of the original Mikkel Mundal who used to accompany Slingsby on his mountain explorations.

Norway in the summer seemed a very different place from the snow-covered wilderness I had experienced on several cross-country ski excursions. We spent many glorious days exploring the hills around Fjærland, wandering up Mundalen along a swift-running river to the hanging valley at its head and climbing up to the summit above Nesehaugen, with superb views of the fjord. We explored the Supphellebreen and the beautiful Supphelledalen – remote, unspoilt and full of wild flowers. On a memorable day, we climbed up from Lunde onto the Jostedalsbreen, crossing it at its narrowest point in three ropes with about ten people on each. This excursion was led by Dr Orheim, who encouraged us to make fast progress down the other side of the glacier towards Fjærland by using our waterproof overtrousers to slide on – the speed we built up was remarkable. We had an exhilarating time navigating between several small rocky outcrops to reach the run-out at the bottom. On another day we went up to the Flatbrehytta and climbed Kvannholtenipa at 1640m, following this, the next day, with Gretta at 1494m.

One of these excursions was led by a local farmer called Sverre Mundal, who happened to mention that it was possible to ski the whole length of the Jostedalsbreen in the late spring. He himself had skied part of it, he told me, and his description of this exciting adventure fired my enthusiasm to ski the glacier myself. On my return to England I tried to find out whether there were any commercially organised parties available. Eventually I found out the names of two local guides, Steinar Bruheim and Arve Tvedt, who arrange ski tours of the glacier under the name 'Jostedals Breførlag'. Information from them revealed that the crossing would be a three-day trip involving very heavy back-packing. I knew I could not manage it without help, so I wrote to Sverre, the farmer, to invite him to accompany me.



Being strong as a result of his outdoor life, he could easily carry the tent and cooking gear for both of us. After a long interval, I received a message via the Hotel Mundal that Sverre would be delighted to join me.

In May 1991 I travelled again up the Sognefjord from Bergen, staying overnight at the Hotel Mundal at Fjærland, and then, with Sverre, journeyed round by ferry and bus to Sogndal and Gjerde where we met the other participants at a well-appointed climbing hut. There were about twelve clients in the party and three guides. Most of the others were young Norwegians in their twenties and thirties, all of them very fit, together with a Scotsman in his forties. I was definitely going to be tail-end Charlie. As arranged, Sverre carried the tent and cooking gear but I still had a heavy pack as it was necessary, of course, to carry climbing skins, a sleeping-bag, warm clothing and provisions for at least four days in case we were held up by bad weather.



62. Fjærland and the Hotel Mundal. (*Johanna Merz*) (p204)



63. Camping on the Jostedalsbreen. (*Johanna Merz*) (p204)

At the foot of the Fabergstølsbreen we roped up and tackled the initial steep ascent using skins. Later we unroped, removed the skins, and relied on wax alone to make a height gain of nearly 1800m over about 10km to our first camp near the highest peak on the glacier – Lodalskapa at 2083m. The weather was brilliant and we camped out on the glacier without any problems with excessive cold. But by the following morning we had decided not to attempt Lodalskapa (which would have taken an extra five hours to climb); instead we climbed Kjenndalskruna (1830m), which was on our route to Fjærland, enjoying glorious views from the summit. After that it was a long slog up to Høgste at 1957m.

By this time I was exhausted. Snow was sticking to the base of my skis and I was making slow progress. It was beginning to dawn on me that, at sixty years of age, this was probably a trip I should never have undertaken. But several of the others were having problems too. It would take another three hours to reach our next campsite; so, instead, three of us and one of the guides skied down to the Steinmannen – a small private hut, only an hour away, to which the guide had a key. The rest of the party, with Sverre (who was thoroughly enjoying himself) and the other two guides, continued to Fjærland where they arrived, not without incident, late the following evening.

Meanwhile, our own offshoot group of four awoke next morning to a complete whiteout, with visibility down to about ten metres. Arve Tvedt, our guide, who was highly competent and reassuring, had to rely on his compass to get us off the mountain. Lower down visibility improved, but the terrain became steeper and the snow was deep and soft and very hard to ski. It took us a further six hours to reach Haugen and Gjerde, finally carrying our skis on our packs for the last few kilometres.

Perhaps, with hindsight, it was slightly crazy of me to think I would be able to complete a route which even much younger people found demanding, but I felt pleased and satisfied that I had at least had a go at the classic 'Josten pa Langs' and had managed to reach Høgste, the highest point on the glacier.

Sverre thoroughly enjoyed the trip, arriving back in Fjaerland at 7 o'clock that evening, having navigated by compass most of the way. He told me that his sheep-dog Stella, who had been staying with a friend, went mad with joy and wouldn't let him out of her sight for the rest of the evening. They had scarcely ever been separated before.

I must add a word of praise for the cheerful and capable Norwegian guides who organised this trip. At no time did I feel in the least nervous or doubtful that Arve would get us down safely. He inspired total confidence, which I suppose is one of the most important qualities a guide can have. I can well understand why Slingsby used to return again and again to Fjærland, where he enjoyed the expertise and friendship of his favourite Norwegian guide, Mikkel Mundal.