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LONG WEEKEND

SWEDISH LAPLAND

Just below the Arctic Circle, the Gulf of Bothnia becomes a frozen highway for skis and snowmobiles in winter. Brave the ice and journey to distant camps for an unforgettable taste of Swedish Lapland

WORDS: Mark Rowe.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Lola Akinmade Åkerström

“**T**hat’s completely useless,” says Roger. A pause. “Absolutely useless.” He looks at my attempt at outdoor clothing, sighs gently, then hands me a set of thermal leggings and a pair of giant mittens that could slip easily over an elk’s antlers.

Roger will be our guide as we travel by snowmobile for 37 miles over the frozen waters of the Gulf of Bothnia in the high north of Sweden. And during this time, I will come to learn Roger’s direct, laconic manner is a peculiarly Swedish trait, easily misinterpreted by British visitors who might deploy euphemisms to lessen a crushing blow. He’s not being rude — it’s just that being tactful about my inadequate winter clothing won’t help when the temperature outside is -33C.

Even so, I’m left feeling like the kid who’s hopeless at sport and gets picked on by the PE teacher. I obediently shuffle my feet and silently dress up for the Swedish winter. Roger checks we’ve observed some other basic safety rituals — not to shower, shave or wash that morning as the natural oils in our skin protect against extreme elements. Cosmetics and soaps leave residues that will simply freeze our skin.

We’re starting our long weekend in Swedish Lapland with a journey from Pine Bay Lodge, 18 miles north of Lulea. Furnished, says Goran, the owner, “like a Swedish grandmother’s house”, the lodge boasts those classic Scandinavian design touches that tend to instil an inferiority complex in British visitors. I look around at the gorgeous fittings of honeyed pine floors, tea lights, and backlit lithographs of reindeer. Then I recall the chintz, the Formica and the avocado bathroom that characterised my grandmother’s home in the 1980s.

Lulea, a vibrant university and industrial city perched in the northwest corner of the Gulf of Bothnia, is similarly attractive and cosy. A modern Scandinavian twist on a ►

Left: Ice-covered trees by the Luleå River (Luleälven) on a sunny winter day

pastoral scene by Pieter Bruegel lingers in the memory: the icy ring road that circumnavigates much of the city making for an unusual rush hour (a combination of snowmobiles and speed skaters windmilling their way to work alongside dog-pulled sleighs and skiers).

Attired to Roger's satisfaction, we're off. It's my first time on a Ski-Doo and it takes some getting used to. To begin with it's less Ski-Doo, more a case of Ski-Don't. "You have to be the boss," Roger smiles. "Don't let the Ski-Doo bully you."

As we follow tight turns and hairpins through the woods, it's like being on a Scalextric track. We slither along — a mighty two-foot drop to one side — and I wonder if I'm the first person ever to get vertigo on a snowmobile. Roger advises that to keep my balance on the turns I should keep my tongue in the middle of my mouth. As I settle into the saddle, I'm able to take in the ridiculously distracting scenery. It's a page from the snowy fairytales of childhood. Silver birch trees, laden with ice cream-shaped dollops of snow are often bent double to form arches under which our convoy motors.

Suddenly, like a cork from a Champagne bottle, we burst out of the woods onto the Gulf of Bothnia. It's a euphoric feeling and the elements cooperatively come together to lay on something of a show. The low sun is almost perceptibly scuttling along the horizon. In three directions, the vanishing point where sky meets ice is fringed with conifer trees, like a green decorative trim on an iced birthday cake. Moose prance along the edge of the water like remote-controlled toys.

Out to sea, the landscape slowly dissolves. Yet beyond that, beyond what we can see, we know there's boundless ice and snow. Briefly, we get an inkling of just how vast this icescape

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is. And soon we're out there, snowmobiling across the Gulf, not merely hugging the coastline, but miles out to sea.

Base camp

"I think we need to push on," says Roger. "We must get to camp before dark." Then, airily, he advises we keep a level speed and not slow down. "Sometimes, the ice can be a bit thin, a bit slushy. But if you keep going at speed, you'll be fine." Now and then there's an audible crack, which Roger explains is actually the ice expanding. So it's a reassuring noise — possibly more so if you're not actually on the ice.

After an hour, we leave the Gulf and head up the Råne River. We're Ski-Dooing on a river, I tell myself, as we drive beneath a motorway flyover. Now we're following the Iron Trail — its Swedish name, Malmens Vag, has a tougher ring to it — a winter route for walkers, skiers, snowmobilers and husky-sledders. Yet it has a hideously arduous history. From the 18th century, iron ore was brought down from the remote mines around Gällivare to the open sea along this river. In winter, when the river froze, the ore was transported by reindeers, guided by Lapps. The 130-mile journey took five days, and as we travel up the river, Roger points out some isolated houses — remnants of the villages that grew up to service the benighted souls who trudged their way to the open sea.

I discover Lapps were sometimes coerced into this backbreaking work as a punishment for speaking Lapp rather than Swedish. The most dangerous role of all fell to the reindeer herder at the front of the caravan of sleighs, who, when the river met the open sea, had to walk ahead to determine where the ice had thinned sufficiently to transfer the cargo from sleds to boats.

We lunch at a bothy (an open wooden shelter), stomping our feet on a reindeer skin to take the edge off the cold as Roger rustles up a lunch of stir-fried smoked reindeer, ➤



Clockwise from left: Snowmobiling past Lapland's iconic pine trees; stopping for a break to grill lunch while snowmobiling Norrbotten's backcountry; portrait of a female snowmobiler; cooking reindeer meat in reindeer fat over an open flame





A winter landscape in the Gulf of Bothnia caked with snow and ice

parsnips, mushrooms and potatoes. We defrost our balaclavas by dangling them over the cooking pot.

We're soon journeying on, the sky fading from grey to gloomy to a slightly unsettling half-light. We turn towards a plume of smoke and a clump of trees. Only when we're upon it do I pick out an ice sculpture — startling amid this emptiness — by the edge of the frozen lake. The carved swans and lanterns signify journey's end, the gateway to the Aurora Safari Camp, a collection of high-end tents, set around an upmarket mess tent and a roaring open fire.

It soon becomes clear that although we're camping, we're not exactly roughing it. Our hosts, Pa Kasberg and his daughter Cassandra, welcome us with *kanelbullar* (cinnamon buns) and hot lingonberry juice in the central, social tent where it's a balmy 17C. Dinner is a welcomingly hot medley of pasta, reindeer and mushrooms that lights the proverbial fire in our bellies. In the dark, I leave the camp and walk onto the ice. Big, fat snowflakes are falling from what seems to be a clear sky. You can see why ancient Lapps would've been spooked and thought the stars were falling from the heavens. Icicles are dangling from the shoulder-high tree branches — not to be confused with the moisture forming on my eyelashes.

Tempting as it is to stand around getting poetic about the view, I return to the tent. Linger for too long and Pa and

his daughter will no doubt have to thread a spit through my clothes and thaw me out over the campfire.

One more dram of lingonberry juice and it's bedtime. Our tents are comfy too, but we're not mollicoddled. With just a reindeer canvass to soften winter's bite, we must constantly stoke the wood burner. The lucky ones sleep two to a tent; this means you take turns stoking the log burner every 90 minutes. Those who sleep alone arrive at breakfast early and sink cup after cup of black coffee. It's safe to say we've all slept more fitfully than the brown bears hibernating in the surrounding woods.

Cross country

The next day, we meet up with Eric and his partner, Penny, who run an outdoor guiding company called Pure Lapland. "Let's go cross-country skiing," he suggests. To begin with, it's easy, scooting along a spirit level-flat landscape of soft snow. Then we hit an almost imperceptibly slight incline and it's as though someone has attached lead weights to our ankles. We clamber over an embarrassingly modest summit and career down the other side of the molehill. "Don't worry," shouts Eric. "There's not really a right way to come to a halt on cross-country skis. You just kind of nearly fall over." ►

LAPLAND

I find myself marvelling not just at the scenery, but also at Eric and Penny. They just look, well, so happy and Nordic. Their faces have a translucent texture, as though a life of snow and ice has seeped through their pores. I watch Eric. Now and then he glides to a halt, looks around at the landscape and just smiles, as though it's his first day on Earth.

We ski across a necklace of frozen lakes to our lunch camp, where Penny prepares reindeer in pitta bread — a kind of Arctic doner kebab. Dessert is coffee-cheese, a delicious diced dish of cheese partly made from the colostrum of a new mother reindeer and flavoured over roasted coffee.

Our final night in Swedish Lapland involves a little pampering as a reward for our modest exertions over the long weekend. We stay in the Treehotel, at Harads, an hour's drive north of Luleå. This surreal, eclectic collection of designer pods is perched like incubating eggs amid pine forests. A member of our group quickly claims the eye-popping, saucer-shaped billet, aptly named The UFO. Being a wildlife anorak, I opt for The Dragonfly, which, with its two wing-like blocks tethered by a corridor, makes an impressive, if Cubist, stab at living up to its moniker. That night, we thaw out in the adjacent Brittas Guesthouse, with dinner and a good local beer, Nausta. "The pension is furnished in a simple style, like your grandmother would have," says the owner, Ken Lindvall. Those Swedish grandmothers certainly get around, I tell myself. This time, the theme is the 1960s — although there's still no chintz.

It's as smart in its way as the pods hanging in the woods outside. The house is said to have a friendly ghost. No supernatural intervention is needed in the pods, though; warmed by the refreshing beer, I dream I'm back on the frozen Gulf of Bothnia, finally mastering the Ski-Doo, but being steadily chased down by an oversized Arctic dragonfly.



TreeHotel in Harads, Sweden



ESSENTIALS

Swedish Lapland

GETTING THERE

SAS and Norwegian fly to Luleå from Heathrow and Gatwick respectively, with one stopover. flysas.com norwegian.com/uk
Average flight time: 5h (with stopover).

Aurora Safari Camp.
aurorasafaricamp.com
Treehotel. treehotel.se

MORE INFO

swedishlapland.co.uk

WHEN TO GO

The best months to experience the winter light are January to March, when lengthening days create the 'blue hours' but lakes and seas are still frozen and covered with snow.

NEED TO KNOW

Currency: Swedish krona
£1 = 12.8 krona.
International dial code: 00 46.
Time difference: GMT +1 (in winter).

PLACES MENTIONED

Pine Bay Lodge. pinebaylodge.se

HOW TO DO IT

Simply Sweden offers the three-night Iron Trail – Swedish Lapland (January to March) from £2,240 per person, including two nights at Pine Bay Lodge and one night at Aurora Safari Camp. Nordic winter skills, a hovercraft pack-ice tour and snowshoeing and snowmobile excursions are included. A separate four-night Treehotel & Aurora Safari Camp (December to March) costs from £1,865 per person, including two nights each at Aurora Safari Camp and the Treehotel. simplysweden.co.uk 