

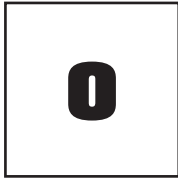
CHALLENGE SAREK SWEDISH ADVENTURE

SWEDISH ADVENTURE



Simon Birch travels 80kms across Sweden's Arctic on skis, through a place most Swedes have never heard of themselves - the Sarek National Park. It's only visited by about 1,000 people a year.





Ok everyone, listen up! shouts Christian our expedition leader who's way upfront, Fifteen minutes break!

Phew. We've been skiing non-stop since lunch two hours earlier and I'm starting to run low on va-va-voom. Diving into my jacket I grab a fistful of chocolate and peanuts and quickly wolf them down.

As I take a breather, I can finally fully get a good look at our surroundings and gosh - what an incredible spot this is. It's day four in a week-long, 80km cross-country ski expedition through the spectacular Sarek National Park in the snowy wilds of Arctic Sweden.

Right now we've stopped in the upper Rappa river valley that slices right through the centre of the park and we're being dwarfed by massive mountains that sweep up from both sides of the broad, flat valley.

It's just a little after three in the afternoon and the late winter sun's starting to slip behind the peaks causing the temperature to plummet and already it's a nippy 13 below. There's not so much as a whisper of wind to break the silence and with civilisation miles away we're totally alone. Awesome.

If you've never heard of Sarek, don't worry as virtually nobody else has either and that includes the Swedes themselves.

Whilst most outdoor types charge south to the overcrowded Alps for their mountain fix, those in the know quietly slip north to Arctic Sweden where they have the vast and empty open spaces all to themselves. And the number one destination for these savvy outdoor adventurers is Sarek. With the most rugged alpine terrain in Sweden, Sarek's glacier-clad mountains rise up to over 2,000m, but what really draws hard-core outdoor obsessives to Sarek is its untamed wilderness: you won't find any helpful signposts, bridges or even mountain huts here. And if this wasn't enough what makes this ski expedition even more extreme and so exciting is the fact that we're pulling all our gear behind us in sledges and camping out every night under icy Arctic skies.

"Fewer than a thousand people visit Sarek every year and they've got to be fully experienced and totally self-sufficient," explained Christian over a dinner of steaming reindeer stew at his base in Jokkmokk, the nearest village to Sarek, where our small group of skiers had met up four days earlier.

Fully carbed-up, My big Arctic adventure began the next day at the isolated mountain hut of Aktse which lies at the very edge of Sarek's southern border.

Here Christian's co-leader Mirja divvied out masses of kit including boxes crammed full of fresh food that included salmon and reindeer steaks (no dreary dehydrated dinners for us then) which we piled onto plastic sledges, or pulkas as they're known up here. "It's far easier to pull weight through the snow rather than carry a backpack," explained Mirja. True enough, when the time came to leave I clipped myself into the pulka's harness, took my first strides through



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the soft snow and found that hey, pulling such a heavy sledge, which by now weighed about 30kgs, wasn't that difficult.

Snow was gently falling and mist hugged the surrounding hills as we ventured onto the frozen lake into which the Rappa river flowed. It was also uncannily warm as given that we were just inside the Arctic circle the temperature was hovering just below freezing, something which made for hot and sweaty skiing.

Whilst Sarek bulges with fearsome-looking mountains, our route would follow the Rappa river north west for four days, sneakily avoiding these beasts as Christian outlined over lunch which we ate under snow-laden birch trees. "The Rappa valley offers the easiest way through Sarek and apart from a short climb on day five there's hardly any steep uphill on the expedition," explained Christian.

Soon we reached the ice-bound Rappa itself and we carefully followed Christian's tracks as he weaved a course through the increasing tangle of trees that grew by the side of the river.

The snow was coming down in big, fat, lazy flakes and as we made the site of our first camp in mid-afternoon there was almost a metre of fresh powder snow.

So just how do you put up a tent in this amount of snow I asked Daniel, my affable tent buddy and veteran of numerous Arctic winter camping trips? "Easy," he replied with a grin. "First you walk up and down stomping down the snow using your skis and then you tie the guy lines to your ski poles and skis which you push firmly into the compacted snow."

With our tent sorted my thoughts turned to dinner and a brew as it had been a long and sweaty first day which had seen us ski over

12kms through deep, sticky snow. This was served up in considerable Swedish style in an eight-man mess tent which Christian and Mirja had magically turned into the ultimate pop-up cafe complete with twinkly lights and chilled beats courtesy of an iPod. Perfect.

Not so perfect was my first night in the tent. With the temperature still barely below freezing, streams of condensation formed on the inner tent which continually rained down on us during the night making everything damp and clammy. "You must expect some level of discomfort on the trip," said Christian as he handed me a mug of reviving fresh coffee the next morning. "But don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Over the next couple of days we pushed on, following the Rappa river north into the mountainous centre of Sarek. And whilst we didn't see anybody else throughout the whole week, as we criss-crossed the river there were signs that we weren't entirely alone. "Look, moose tracks!" said Mirja pointing to the huge, heffalump-like prints in the snow whilst close by were the tracks of lynx and wolverine, Sarek's top predators.

Gradually we gained height and by the fourth day we reached the Upper Rappa valley where the tangle of trees disappeared and the skies finally cleared revealing the magnificent mountains that dominate Sarek's heart. And with the air now flowing directly from the North Pole, the temperature tumbled dramatically, like the doors to some gigantic freezer had suddenly been swung open. This was actually good news as the severe cold meant that not only was the snow easier to ski through, but it also put an end to the nightly downpour in our tents.

That night under a mesmerising full moon, the temperature fell to a toe-tingling 26 degrees below causing the condensation in our tents to turn to ice crystals that sparkled in the light from our head torches which we could simply brush off our sleeping bags.

The skies were still dazzlingly clear the next day when we finally left the Rappa by way of a 200m grunt of a climb out of the valley, the only serious climb of the trip.

Whilst the climb itself was brief, the world that we arrived in was totally different to that which we'd left behind, as this was the tundra, the vast treeless and wind-scoured



Setting up camp on Sarek's frozen high plains behind the shelter of a snow wall.



“Travelling in the Arctic will push you to the limit, be prepared to go out of your comfort zone.”



plateau that was the savage Arctic stripped bare. The weather too was to become more extreme. After we finished putting up our tents on a bleak and exposed plain, Christian told us that the wind would be picking up so he got us to build a windbreak from snow blocks that would help deflect the wind around the camp.

All night the strengthening wind battered and buffeted the tent and we awoke to find not only great snowdrifts piled up outside but that the temperature has risen by a staggering 20 degrees overnight and that the clear skies had been replaced by a thick blanket of mist.

The wind continued to howl all morning whipping up the spindrift in our faces and forcing us to put up the mess tent so we could get some temporary shelter from the maddening wind whilst we had lunch.

And things were to get even more interesting later that evening.

After he'd got the nightly forecast via his satellite phone, Christian announced that one of Sarek's notoriously ferocious storms was brewing and was heading our way. "We don't want to be around when the storm hits," warned Christian, "so tomorrow we've got to try and outrun it."

With the wind screaming and swirling around our ears, the approaching storm was already nipping at our heels by the time we were ready to leave on our final morning. But with 15kms of tough skiing between us and our lunch-time rendezvous with the skidoo team that would whisk us back to the safety of civilisation, there was little option but to fuel up and push on.

I got a measure of just how serious Christian viewed the threat posed by the advancing storm by the cracking pace he set - the fastest of the whole week. The lung-busting effort paid off though as we eventually reached safety having made good our escape from the jaws of the monster storm. Our reward? Our first shower in a week and a long, steamy sauna in the sanctuary of the Saltoluokta mountain lodge. Bliss.

Back in the upper Rappa river valley Christian shouts out that our short break is over: "Time to start moving everybody!" I quickly clip myself into my pulka harness and set off into the fading blue light. The temperature might be sub-zero, but right now this is easily one of the hottest outdoor adventures anywhere on the planet.

Now you do it...

Unlike most Swedes, you don't have to have been cross-country skiing since you were a toddler if you want to have a crack at this trip.

"The skiing is mostly just like walking so all you need are basic cross-country ski skills," says expedition leader Christian. Much more important he says is that you're in shape both physically and mentally.

"Travelling in the Arctic will push you to the limit, be prepared to go out of your comfort zone," adds Christian. "What's vital is that you have a positive attitude and that you're happy to work as a team."

You won't find it difficult developing basic cross-country skills, especially if you're a downhill or boarder. The Swedish Trekking Association runs introductory courses to mountain cross-country skiing from the comfort of a mountain lodge, svenskaturistforeningen.se

Alternatively if you can muster up a group you'll be able to get your own tailor-made introductory course in Arctic Sweden, fjallaktiv.se

It's also crucial that you're prepared for camping out in the middle of an icy Arctic winter. Acclimatise yourself by heading to the more mountainous parts of the UK for a night or two under the stars whenever we get a serious cold snap.

For flights from the UK to Luleå in Sweden you've a choice between Norwegian Airlines (norwegian.com) and SAS (flysas.com).

From Luleå it's a two-hour transfer to Jokkmokk from where the adventure begins.

Cost: The seven-day expedition through the Rappa Valley costs £1,300 with, outdoorlapland.com

More information, swedishlapland.com

KIT

Winter in the Swedish Arctic can be a dangerously extreme environment so it's essential that you've got the right kit for the job. Unlike downhill skiing which is all about heavily insulated clothing, with cross-country skiing since you're generating of a lot heat yourself, you'll need to use the layering system. This uses layers of breathable clothing which you can take off whilst you're skiing or whip out when you stop and start to cool down.

Base layers:

- Páramo Cambia long-sleeved top, paramo.co.uk
- Icebreaker Merino leggings and boxer-briefs, icebreaker.com

Mid-layer:

- Microfleece Regatta Thompson fleece, regatta.com
- Gilet, great for keeping your core warm whilst skiing: Icebreaker Merino Gilet, icebreaker.com
- Ultralight down jacket, patagonia.com

Waterproof + windproof shell:

- Lhotse jacket, mountain-equipment.co.uk
- Condor pant, mountain-equipment.co.uk
- Also consider Páramo's Enduro ski trousers which don't need either, a base layer beneath or outer shell to keep you warm and dry, paramo.co.uk

■ You'll be spending many hours sat down huddled together in the mess tent. As you won't be generating enough heat it's vital that your kit can keep you warm. Páramo's Torres jacket and pants are perfect and will keep you snug and toasty, paramo.co.uk

Finally always bring more warm clothing than you think you'll need – there'll be a kit inspection before the start of the expedition and you can always leave that extra fleece back at base.

■ There's more information online at, <http://bit.ly/1eaKz3t>

GET FIT FOR SAREK

Assuming that you've got a reasonable level of fitness, then according to Roy Young, head coach for the British Cross Country Ski Team (britishnordic.org) you should be able to complete the seven-day Sarek expedition if you follow this 10-week training programme:

Running

One of the best cross-over training disciplines for cross-country skiing is running. Aim for three runs a week consisting of one short 30-minute effort; one medium: 45-minute effort; and one long one-hour effort. Look to include some hill work in your long run and increase these runs every week until your long run is nudging two hours.

Strength training

Aim for two strength sessions a week focussing on compound movements such as squats and pull-ups. Also don't forget to work on your core, so make sure you're doing basic exercises such as planks, Russian twists and V-sit ups.

Mountain biking

At weekends throw in a long mountain bike ride of around 30 miles across hilly terrain. Why? Because it's fun, challenging and according to Young mountain biking is great for cross-country skiing as it combines elements of balance and co-ordination which are vital for good skiing technique. Plus the whizzy downhill sections allow you to get a breather, much like in skiing.

Finally always bring more warm clothing than you think you'll need