

Loipers Ski Touring in Arctic Sweden and Norway

'How about a trip to Narvik?' was a question that immediately made me prick up my ears. It was voiced by David Thomas at the usual Loipers pub meet in Twin Farms. This set off the process for finding a new skiing venue for our group of telemark skiers who had ventured to the Pyrenees and the Vanoise in previous years. Ideas and requests for lowering the carbon footprint of our travel were in our minds as Alan and David researched train travel through Sweden. Alan found a hotel at Riksgransen on the northern border between Sweden and Norway, which had uplifts to a ski area. This would prove valuable in enabling us to get our ski legs ready, during week 1, before heading to the Lyngen Alps where we would be guided by Wolfgang of 'Mountain Spirit' with assistant guide Pere who was Spanish.

In early April most of our group set off from Edinburgh to fly to Stockholm for an overnight at the Radisson Blu hotel. Our onward train travel to Riksgransen departed early evening the next day which meant we had a chance to explore the old town in Stockholm and visit various attractions. On our first evening we celebrated Tim's 70th birthday at a lovely little restaurant in Gamlastan.

From our hotel it was easy to walk across the city to the different islands which make up Stockholm. David, Tim, Penny and I were struck by the incredible Vasa Museum which housed the almost intact 17th Century warship which had sunk on its maiden voyage. We spent a few hours looking at the amazing artefacts and the wonderfully decorated hull which could be seen from different levels. This is a definite must see if you haven't been to Stockholm before. Afterwards we had to make a hard choice between Abba Museum and the Sprit Museum. We chose the latter because it was close by, and we thought it would be fun. The museum is quite wacky and deals with Sweden's difficult relationship to alcohol and included a room where you could experience a hangover! There was also a bar where we enjoyed a flight of craft beer! Alan had decided to visit other attractions in Stockholm as he had visited the Vasa Museum a year earlier. He went to the Viking Museum and the Swedish National Gallery also had a quick stop at the 'System Bogalet' (a Swedish off-license) to buy wine for later in the week.

We boarded the train from the station concourse and found our 3 person sleeping cabins. Luggage was stowed, with skis going under the seats and large bags distributed on the bunks. We were comfortable although space was at a bit of a premium! The journey to Riksgransen took 19 hours and we woke in the morning to see lots of white stuff on the ground and a changing scenery with the mountains becoming more dramatic the further north we went. I was particularly impressed by the stations at Kiruna, which is the site of iron ore mines and Abisko where the Kungsleden cross-country ski trail begins. The last stage was a bus transfer from Bjorkliden, arriving eventually at our hotel in Riksgransen.



Keith and Peter and Alison had already arrived having flown from Oslo and picking up two hire cars from Narvik Airport. Now we had the ability to access a range of ski areas in the nearby within easy reach from Riksgransen. Tim and Penny decided to do some piste skiing in the afternoon and although the weather was

cloudy they enjoyed finding their ski legs on the slopes above the hotel. The rest of us decided to check out the shop and see if we could find places to eat out.

The next day dawned with flat light and very cold temperatures so it was decided to try touring to the nearest mountain top (Bjornfjell 760m) across the border into Norway. The cold was extreme, with temperatures as low as minus 15 and even putting on our skis meant risking frostbite. We set out as a group and with Keith and Peter navigating the terrain we ascended the mountain and then carefully chose a good descent route. Alison had a fall and wrenched her shoulder badly which affected her chances of skiing on the trip. We also noticed that Tim had warning signs of frostbite on his cheeks. Fortunately, he was able to cover up his face with a buff and the symptoms eased once we were back at the hotel. Peter also had a spectacular fall when he crashed through a small cornice (unseen in the flat light) but got up laughing. We were all glad to get back. We went to a nearby restaurant for Pizza that evening.

Our next adventure started at Bjorkliden which was 30km by car. Alison waited at the hotel to see the doctor about her shoulder. We skied along a gentle incline for 21 km and 767m of ascent to a hut which sold waffles. The route was easy but everyone (apart from Alan) found the going tough. However the waffles and hot chocolate cheered us up and the return to the car was good with nice skiing all the way down. We decided on a buffet meal at the hotel where we received the disappointing news that Alison had most likely torn a tendon in her rotator cuff.

The following day we took an uplift from Riksgransen and then toured to Gattercohkka 1082m. The ascent was quite easy, with good visibility, and the descent back to the ski area was delightful, with good snow and bright sunshine. Alison decided to walk from the car and had reasonable time although she was missing the group's company and skiing. Once down to the ski area, David managed to blag us all another uplift for a cheeky last run.



On our next day we started at Abisko (nearly an hour's drive away). There was a single long chairlift which accessed a large ski area and little in the way of piste markings. The icy conditions, alternately wind-blown sastruggi and frozen rutted areas, with occasional bands of softer snow, made for difficult skiing. When we got back to the lift, we found it closed! The wind had seriously picked up and the lift was too hazardous to run. The stylish Abisko Mountain Lodge offered lovely coffee so we enjoyed a welcome stop and a chance to look at the menu for the next night's meal

It started snowing the next day and it continued to be windy, so we took the day off and enjoyed the hotel's sauna and swimming pool before heading to the local shop. I have never seen so many types of kett! Apparently due to a sugar tax in Sweden the Norwegians often cross the border to buy sweets and snuss (chewing tobacco) at a discount. We availed ourselves of various types of salty liquorice and chocolate foam

bananas but gave the snuss a miss! In the evening we returned to Abisko where we had fine dining at the Abisko Mountain Lodge.

A route to Gohpascorru 1336m was decided upon for the next day and after taking the uplift from Bjorkliden, we climbed a further 400m and with superb views to the gates of Lapland and the surrounding impressive mountains we set off down with good amounts of telemark skiing done where the slopes were favourable (and some tricky stretches of breakable crust too)!



Our first week was at an end so we packed the cars and set off to Tromso to meet Ros who would arrive on a plane from Manchester via Oslo. It was also where we were to meet Wolfgang and Pere for the next exciting part of the trip. Everything worked to plan, and we were soon on the ferry across to Lyngen surrounded by fabulous snow-covered mountains. Our accommodation was in two adjacent houses in a little picturesque fishing harbour. The guides had bought food for the week and encouraged us to help with the cooking.



The first day tour took us to Rundfjellet, 695m and 10km of fast ascent. Then we had a leisurely descent to where Pere had moved the van to pick us up further to the north. Wolfgang found us some wonderful snow conditions for the ski back down to sea level (though with a slightly tedious finish through the trees). This is the most spectacular thing about skiing in the Lyngen Alps – starting and finishing at sea level is amazing!

On other days we climbed Haesa Fjellet. and descended to Russelva. On one particularly big day, we took the ferry towards Tromso to climb Stormheim Fjellet at nearly 1200m. I also had one shorter day with Peter and Alison and started to climb Erikaksla but stopped short of the top and returned to the minibus to ensure

Alison didn't run into problems. She was keeping mobile and had improving shoulder movement but she didn't want to aggravate the injury. The rest of the group continued up to an unnamed top at 745m and enjoyed great skiing on the way down.



On our penultimate day, after an early start, we climbed an imposing peak across the fjord from the lodge. Alison and Peter turned back part way, for a gentle ski down. Tim and Penny followed on hearing that Alan had been taken back to the lodge with an unexplained pain in his right forearm. The rest of us continued uphill with Pere who set a blistering pace to the summit of Olstatinden at 954m which had a very sharp ridgeline. Our group had a well-earned rest and a chance to take in some calories, then regrouped at the col. Daring to look over the edge we were confronted with a steep, narrow descent. With a sharp intake of breath Ros sideslipped after Pere and then turned into a bowl and easier ground. The rest of the group followed suit. The skiing was fantastic from there on, with exhilarating turns and traverses we got back to the lower slopes and the tree-line.



Wolfgang told us we would need boot crampons on the last day and that we would get an early ferry back to Svensby. Those in the lodge with Pere failed to get the message! We drove around to the start of the route to the summit of Langdaltinden 928m. Setting off and skinning up from the minibus we looked ahead to dramatic landscape of steep slopes above the tree-line. Peter and Alison had decided on a different objective and skied up to a lake and Jon joined them on their descent.

Soon we needed to put on ski crampons to get a better grip on the steep slope. Ros, David, Keith, Tim and Penny and I followed Pere and Wolfgang, zig-zagging steadily towards the summit.

It was a great shock when I realised that David had disappeared 200m downhill when he lost grip of his skis. He was shaken but fortunately was unhurt and able to let us know he was ok on his mobile. Wolfgang decided he would check on David and skied back down at this point and they returned to the minibus joined by Tim.

The seriousness of the terrain meant we needed no more accidents trying to get to the summit. Pere decided that Penny and I should carry our skis on our rucksacks and put on boot crampons for extra security on the steep ground, though Ros continued with ski crampons and followed Pere as the terrain eased slightly. We were joined at the summit by another group. Relieved that we had made it without further incident, we skied off downhill on pristine snowy slopes with good opportunities for telemarking. Nearer the bottom of mountain, I clipped a treetop which was sticking out of the snow, knocking me off balance and I found myself careering headfirst down the rather steep slope. Unfortunately, Penny was in my path, and I crashed into her and then carried on further until Pere tried unsuccessfully to stop me with a ski stick but did manage to slow me down before I was brought to an abrupt stop by thicker tree stumps. I was bruised but uninjured but realised that I had hurt Penny in the collision. She had come face to face with one of my skis and sustained a very swollen lip. Luckily the ski hadn't knocked out any teeth which it so easily could have. After regaining our nerve, we set off through the remaining treeline and were relieved to join the others waiting back at the mini-buses.

Pere and Wolfgang drove us back to Tromso where we had our last night's hotel. That evening we went out to a lovely Pizza restaurant for a final meal together. We were booked on an early flight to Oslo on the next day, so we made our farewells to Jon and Ros (who were staying an extra night) before heading to bed.

The trip had been such a great success. The logistics, train, plane and bus tickets, car hire and hotel booking had been shared out by the group which made things seem effortless at times. It's wonderful to be able to go away with such a compatible group of people and spend time doing my favourite hobby!

Neil Waters (April 2024)