

A Fabulous Loipers Trip to Arctic Sweden – April 2015

Great snow, great scenery, excellent mountain huts and mostly blue sky weather! That nicely sums up this year's Loipers' hut touring trip in northern Sweden.

Our 2014 trip had given us a taste of Sweden but this year we went further north beyond the arctic circle in search of some better snow. Greg and Alan were joined by David and Lewis who were both newcomers to hut touring. We followed in the footsteps of Chris Ottley who had done a similar trip a couple of years ago, flying in to Kiruna and working our way down the King's Trail (the Kungsleden) towards Kebnekaise (Sweden's highest mountain).

After a hearty breakfast in Kiruna (thank Lewis!) we left some of our gear in the hostel and took the 70-minute train journey to Abisko which is at the northern end of the Kungsleden. The trail starts right outside the station and straightaway we are in the Abisko National Park – quite a scenic area. And the sun was shining (as it did for the next 3 days)! We skied our first half day (15km) initially alongside the river, then gently climbing and following a wide valley, and finally for the last 3km skiing across the lake with our first hut Abiskojaure visible at the far end.

Most of our huts were unserviced (self-catering). They are run by the STF (the Svenska Turistforeningen) which is very similar to the equivalent Norwegian organisation the DNT. Many of the huts have an adequate food store where you can buy basic provisions. Others are completely unprovisioned and we had to carry food supplies from the previous hut. All are wardened – we were greeted by the warden(s) and allocated our beds in one or other of the hut buildings. Often we were offered hot fruit juice on arrival.

Lewis (the only one of us wearing leather boots) already had blisters on both heels part way through our first day. They got worse over the next few days but eventually he found the best treatment was to cover the heels with a stretchy adhesive tape (which Alan had taken to treat his dodgy knee!) Some comfort came from the hot sauna each evening (yes, even the unserviced huts boast a sauna cabin)!

Soon into our second day we had a 300m climb out of the valley up onto a plateau and eventually through to the next hut Alesjaure (20km) in an elevated position at the head of another long lake. Great views (especially from the sauna cabin, which was perched just on the edge)!

We were given the task of filling two 25 litre water containers from a water hole down at river level and hauling them up to



Greg relaxing in the hut at Alesjaure

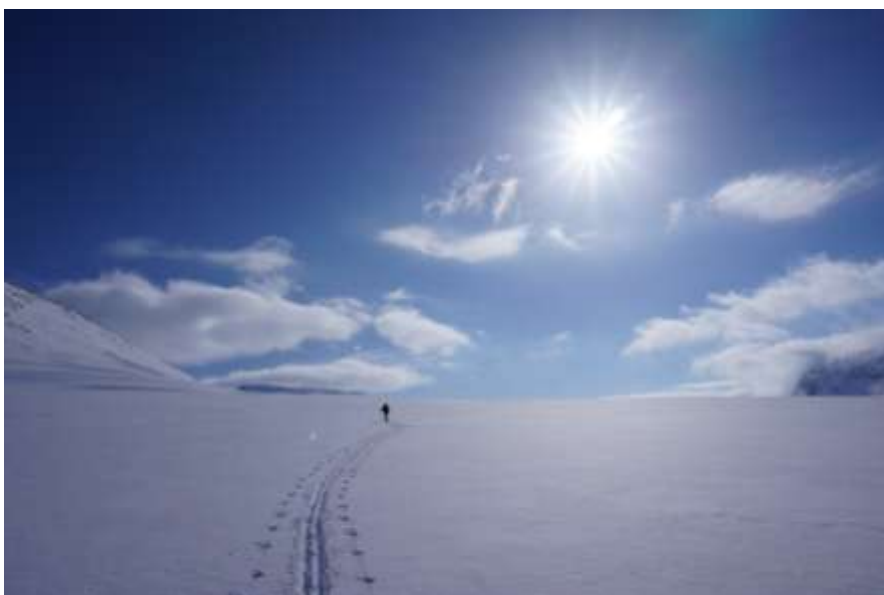
the sauna cabin.

On our third day we decided to divert from the King's Trail to a small unprovisioned hut (Nallo) which was recommended to us by some of the Swedish people we had spoken to over the last two days. This was about 21km of which the last 7km was away from the marked trail. We climbed steadily for about 90 minutes to get to a narrow col and then had a steep descent to the valley and the hut below (normally accessed from the valley to the north). It was indeed a small hut. We had one room shared with a young Swedish couple (a 4-bunk alcove for them and another for us). The other room was taken by a Sami woman who was skiing with her two dogs.

The following morning the predicted storm had arrived and we quickly gave up any thought of doing the remote day-tour which had been recommended to us. Visibility in the blizzard was less than 50 metres. We decided to ski out over the head of the valley to our next hut, Salka. The Sami woman asked if she could ski with us, though subsequently (fortunately) she decided the conditions were too difficult and she stayed for another night at Nallo.

Navigating in the white-out was quite challenging. The terrain was fairly featureless and it was not easy to identify the high point of the col. Eventually, with the aid of the compass and a little help from Greg's GPS mapping system, we were going downhill in about the right direction. But we found ourselves on the wrong side of a stream gulley, which of course was filled with snow and difficult to make out in the flat light with minimal visibility. Once we had successfully negotiated the gulley and a few other obstacles, we were very relieved to come out below the cloud and see the huddle of huts below us.

There was a strong wind blowing right past the hut and Lewis and I were in the coldest corner – I was awake much of the night (my bladder was on high alert)! But next day we braved the wind and skied on to Singi (back on the King's Trail). We took two days worth of food knowing that Singi was an unprovisioned hut (we were hoping to stay for an extra night and use our spare day to climb Kebnekaise). This soon looked unlikely as the wind became even stronger. We spent the evening coming up with various plans for the following day. The ascent of Kebnekaise was Plan A but (to the amusement of others in the hut) we were also working on Plans B, C and D.



In the morning, with the wind still blowing strongly and the tops enveloped in cloud, we went with Plan D and skied through to Kebnekaise Fjallstation. We were leaving the Kungsleden and the last of our unserviced huts. It was an easy day, mostly down a dramatic valley with steep mountains on both sides and with the weather improving during the day. We were treated to a clear skies and a fine sunset.

Kebnekaise Fjallstation is a large and impressive lodge. It was very busy and we were lucky to get a room in the main lodge. We chose to cook for ourselves (the kitchen was in one of the large annexes) but on our second night we went for the special buffet meal was expensive and disappointing.

The Fjallstation was hosting a big international ski mountaineering race The Kebnekaise Classic – a 2-day event for pairs of competitors. The place was heaving with fit-looking athletes. The main (alpine) ski race involved about 2000 metres of ascent including the top of Kebnekaise and some very severe descents and also a short abseil! Finishing close to 4 hours would be good enough to be in the medals. We didn't consider participating (though we did watch the start of the Nordic ski race on the morning that we left!

Ironically the weather was now just about perfect. We had blown our chances of summiting on Kebnekaise – the ascent from here is much more technical and is only done on alpine (or telemark) skis. We nevertheless had a wonderful 1-day ski tour up to another STF hut, Tarfala, situated at about 1200m above sea level with dramatic peaks and glaciers all around us. We



skied to the base of one of the glaciers where it terminates in a stunning little lake and we talked to the warden about his favourite summits (most of them skiable). We had heard of a 'four cols' ski tour which crosses some of these glaciers – some challenging skiing (maybe another year)!

On our last day we skied in warm sunshine from the fjallstation all the way down to Nikkaluokta (a hotel and gift shop at the road head at about 480m altitude). Good snow all the way and quite well tracked (used by snowmobiles). Greg and Alan skate skied most of the way and we covered the 19km in next to no time, which left us two and a half hours to kill in the cafe (waiting for the bus back to Kiruna).

It was a superb 8 days of skiing. The huts were very good and the Swedish people exceedingly friendly. It helped a bit that Lewis spoke to them in Norwegian (which they of course understood perfectly) and Lewis seemed to have no problem understanding their Swedish. For us it didn't matter because they spoke good English too! I would be easily persuaded to ski again in that part of Sweden. There is plenty more to do – and of course Kebnekaise summit remains to be conquered.

An interesting note... the very skiable south peak of Kebnekaise is shown on my map as 2106m altitude. Apparently it is now down to 2104m and with further melting on the summit it is likely to become lower than the much more daunting north peak (at 2097m). It had better be climbed soon!

Alan Mitcham