

Dog-sledding in Abisko – or the worst time of the year to visit Sweden?

by Rosie Pritchett,

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An 'elective' is a short period of time, when dental or medical students can stay in their home country or go abroad to experience health care in a different setting. Having previously spent four weeks within a dental clinic in India, I was interested to learn that I could also go abroad on an 'Erasmus exchange' which would last three months, January to April. This exchange was with the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, a university widely known for its research and affiliation with the Nobel Prize. So I applied, and on January 16th boarded a plane to Stockholm with a brand new Didrikson's coat and knee-high faux-fur lined walking boots.

Most of the Swedish students I met were amused that the exchange was January – April; 'the worst time of the year to visit Sweden', and sometimes it was a challenge to wake up in the dark for the 8am starts on clinic. They found it even more amusing when I told them that a group of us exchange students had booked flights up to Kiruna, 145km north of the Arctic Circle, to stay at a hostel in Abisko National Park.

The group met at Stockholm airport and consisted of eight people from the UK, France, Switzerland, Spain and Germany. We joked we had enough thermals to clothe the whole of Abisko, which wouldn't actually be that difficult as the population is only around 80 inhabitants. Arriving into Kiruna airport, I looked out of the window to see miles and miles of white snow interspersed by dark scraggly-looking trees and shrubs. Kiruna is a town which came into existence as a result of iron-mining in the area, a fact we were frequently reminded of as the hostel was situated next to a train track. Every so often, hardy looking trains would stream past with endless carriages filled with iron exports. Apart from a small train station, a couple of hostels and a Coop supermarket there were just a few houses in Abisko town, which borders the edge of the National Park and a large lake. One of the main attractions of Abisko is the lack of light pollution, drawing travellers who hope to catch a glimpse of the *aurora borealis*, Northern Lights. Abisko, unsurprisingly, doesn't have a great public transport system. The passenger train runs twice a day at around 12 and 2pm, which makes a day trip virtually impossible. The really determined visitor can book a taxi but the best way to travel is via snowmobile or dog-sled.

For those staying at the hostel, a morning's dog-sledding is included. I was fairly anxious as we began clicking the dogs into each sled, they were powerful looking and howling with anticipation for the run. The leader of the pack was a large dog on sled 8, which kept trying to attack the other dogs, who would bow down in front of him in a show of submission. I gave him a wide berth, choosing sled 4 which had four smaller looking, calmer dogs.

We set off through the wilderness, a long winding chain of 10 dog-sled beginners with the expert up front leading the way. On downhills it is important to brake so that the sled doesn't catch up with the dogs. This requires some degree of skill, as the brake is a metal bar towards the front. Stepping on this slows the sled but leaves you slightly off-balance. If someone does fall off, it is up to the person in front to try and grab their rope as the dogs run past. Each set of dogs is racing to be at the front of the pack, if they feel no resistance in the sled, they just keep forging onwards. Flying through the blank wilderness at high speed was exhilarating and I found that choosing the smaller dogs was actually an advantage. The larger dogs at the rear became lethargic and less sprightly towards the end, requiring a bit more encouragement.

The next day we put on cross-country skis and went down through the village and onto the large, frozen lake which had an island in the middle. Behind the island, a man from one of the local towns had bored a hole in the ice, using what looked like a cross between a large screwdriver and a chainsaw. The hole showed the depth of the ice to be about 40 cm. He had passed a fishing line through the hole, but had not caught anything yet. He'd travelled to the lake on his snowmobile, and on hearing that we had never driven one before, put the keys in the ignition and let us each take a turn.

Continuing on our journey round the island, we came across a group of people sat around a fire. Earlier in the day we had unsuccessfully attempted to dig a hole in the snow with a view to lighting a fire in the evening. We saw our opportunity and, remembering the spot, went to buy wood and marshmallows. It also happened to be the night predicted to have the clearest sky and a good chance to see the northern lights.

Over dinner at the hostel, we mentioned our plan and a few extra were keen to tag along. This quickly turned into a large group who seemed to think we were leading some kind of 'northern lights viewing' tour. It was nearing 10 pm as we left the hostel and headed across the dark frozen lake to find the fire pit from earlier. With the fire successfully lit, we kept an eye out for a glimpse of the elusive lights. Although cloudy, the lake had an area of clear sky above it. After about an hour we finally saw the white lights

streaked in the sky. This highlight marked the end of our trip to the far north and we returned to Stockholm the following day.

The rest of my time in Stockholm flew by quickly. Aside from attending clinics at the dental school, I spent my time visiting museums, enjoying the outdoor spaces that surround Stockholm and meeting up with friends for a *fika*. I have already booked my next Scandinavian trip!



Abisko hostel with cross country skis in front



Four dogs pulling me along on the dog-sled



The dogs during a more peaceful moment

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