

Arctic Circle

DECEMBER 2002

Sunday

Two things struck me as we stepped off the plane at Kiruna airport. Firstly, that despite it being only just after 2pm, the sun light for the day was almost gone and secondly that after all of the planning and aborted attempts to arrange this trip over the previous three or four years, the opportunity to dog sled (or mush as it is known) had finally arrived.

Myself, Pete and Floody had all signed up to a 6 day/5 night dog sledding trip, which was to include skidooring, snow shoeing, ice fishing and just about anything else that our guide could throw at us. The trip was to be loosely based in Kiruna; a town located approximately 200 kilometres inside the Arctic Circle and 'famous' solely for a social housing experiment that eventually fizzled out in the 1960s. Until recently rarely visited, unless on business to the local iron-ore factory, the town's airport is now used as the transit hub for all those visiting the world famous ice hotel in Jukkasjärvi.



Aged 28, our guide (Peter) had lived in Kiruna all of his life, and had developed a love of the wilderness during the years he had spent growing up with the Sami people (also known as 'Laplanders'). Having been weaned on the outdoors during his youth, it was therefore an obvious move for him to become a guide when he left school. Now, when the weather and demand permit, he leads mushing trips during the winter and fishing and hunting trips in the summer. Interestingly because the tourist industry is still a fledgling business in Kiruna, he still has to supplement his income periodically by working in the mine.

Although we had arrived with a loose idea of what we were to be doing, it had been stressed by our agent in the UK that the prevailing weather conditions would almost certainly shape the exact itinerary of the trip. So it proved to be as, somewhat surprisingly, Kiruna and the surrounding area had not received nearly as much snow as they might normally have expected. This meant that the trails were far icier than would ideally be the case and therefore much faster and challenging. With this in mind, it was decided that we would each need only four dogs each to pull our masses over the trails.

From the airport we were bundled into a VW camper van and driven to the company's HQ, a rambling place on the outskirts of Kiruna which housed all of the kennels and machinery. On arrival we were shown into something of a boot room and issued with the outer kit that we would all need for the journey. Boots, jackets, trousers, inner and outer gloves were all required together with a hat that any Russian border guard would have happily given his last pair of Levi 501s to own.

Once sorted, we started out on our trip to 'Matt's Lodge'. The riverside lodge, which is owned by Matt – the company's managing director - was to be our accommodation for the next three nights and although someone had preceded our visit to drop off our food and supplies, no one had used the cabin in the last six weeks. The wooden lodge was built about 150 yards up the side of the slope overlooking the river. With an open plan kitchen, sitting room and bedroom downstairs and a couple of rooms upstairs, the lodge was made to house about eight people. As we would not be using all of the rooms and to make heating the place easier, we boarded up the top of the staircase to help insulate our living quarters and only used the downstairs rooms.

My preconceptions and, I presumed, simple logic all suggested that the lodge would be a warm refuge pre and post each day's events. I had even rung our agent asking whether there would be a washing machine and other facilities.

The reality could not have been more different. The lodge, picturesquely set amongst pine trees and a few small out buildings had no electricity, central heating, gas or running water. It did not even have an inside toilet! Instead we would have to use candles, firewood and lanterns for heat and light, while all of the water would need to be fetched from the river.

I clearly remember the shock when the reality replaced the imaginary. Having fought with its padlock, we finally jiggered open the door to reveal an interior that was at least as cold and uninviting as the bleak landscape outside. A thick layer of frost lay over everything and as we flashed our torches around the interior, the room glittered as the light reflected off the frozen surfaces.

Having got our bearings, we all set to work. Whether it was making a cup of tea to warm us up or lighting the stove and fire, the key aim was to get warm and to try and thaw out the walls, floor and furnishings.



As mentioned before, all of our water supply had to be extracted and then shuttled up from the river in the valley below and, as the room began to warm, Pete and Peter went down to the lake, walked to a mid point and then carved a hole through the foot deep layer of ice with an axe.

Amongst the outbuildings dotted around the lodge were a wood store, a multi-purpose shed and a sauna, which also used a log fire to heat the room and sauna blocks.

As the lodge continued to warm and as Peter continued to sort things out, the three of us went down to the river's edge to explore. We had all commented on how we had heard the ice crack below both the skidoo and sledge during our arrival and as we examined the ice we discovered that at the river's periphery the surface was actually made up of number of layers of ice, each 2 – 3 inches thick. Each seemingly being formed as the weather grew colder and the height of the river started to drop.

It was this that gave us the idea of creating our very own igloo. By collecting the broken slabs of ice, we began to build a circular wall of perhaps 6ft by 6ft. As the walls grew higher, Pete and Floody's plans became more sophisticated until we were all minded to build a fully-roofed paradise to match the ice hotel at Jukkasjärvi. A number of hours later the walls had grown to about 3 foot high and it was decided to return to the lodge to warm up and get supper.

During our absence, Peter had sorted out the various provisions we had been left and had started cooking supper, which was to be a form of smoked Reindeer casserole with Dauphinoise potatoes and mushrooms. This was served up with a bottle of Lingonberry sauce, which loosely resembles redcurrant sauce and is something that locals seem to add to almost everything.



After a suitable period of time to recover from the culinary extravaganza, the three of us decided to take in our first sauna and so started its fire, regularly replenishing it with fresh logs. With temperatures now sitting at close to -15C the sauna provided welcome warmth.

Having spent a luxurious 30 minutes thawing out we thought about returning. However, before calling it a day, Swedish custom required us to perform the unthinkable. Despite being happy and even cosy inside the warm and secure sauna, decree proclaimed that we had to run outside into the minus-something-horrid and throw ourselves into the snow. Just writing it makes me shiver, but following a quick count to three, we all raced out to the cold, found a suitable area of foot deep snow and lay down amongst it making 'angels' wings' as we shivered.

Suffice to say, a immediate 50 degree temperature drop woke you up! Whether the heat from the sauna had initially dulled the senses or whether the contrast of severe cold now brought on an element of intense shock to the body's system, we were all wide, wide awake when we arose and hot (or should that be cold?) footed it back into the sauna to warm up. It felt like being hit around the head with a (frozen) frying pan whilst having an extensive session of acupuncture with a sadist. How we all avoided heart attacks is a mystery.

Later that night we all slumped around the fire with glasses of Whisky or Vodka in hand. Floody provided the ice, bringing a large chunk up from the lake, and we all lost track of time amongst Peter's stories of mushing, both in Sweden and Alaska.



Monday

Monday morning began with a start. The fires had gone out, the temperature had dropped and I had just exposed bare flesh from inside the safety of my sleeping bag. By God, it was cold.

As I quickly grabbed my thermals from beside my bed and shoved them down my sleeping bag to warm up, I was greeted with a smiling Peter who was pottering about in the kitchen trying to light the stove again.

"17 degrees this morning", he commented.

That was odd I thought, the last time I had knowingly felt 17 degrees C, it had felt perfectly pleasant. Shorts weather in fact.

"Are you sure? It's a bit bloody cold for 17 degrees isn't it?"

Peter then explained the confusion. Because the temperatures are so rarely above freezing, locals just drop the 'minus' and on the rare occasions that the climate does approach 'clement' people just pop a 'plus' in front of their readings.

Hardly enthused by what was waiting for me when I finally plucked up the courage to leave my current altogether more hospitable surroundings, I added my shirt, trousers and sweaters to the items situated in the bottom of my sleeping bag.

Today was the day we would meet the dogs and after breakfast, we boarded the skidoo again and travelled to the kennels. We were met by the incredible noise that upwards of 60 sled dogs make when they get excited. With each straining at the chains that restricted their movements around their huts, the dogs were literally begging us to choose them for the trip that they all seemed to know lay ahead.

As Peter read out the list and then pointed out the location of each of the dogs we were going to use, it really began to hit home that this was it. Finally. As we moved the sleds into place, lay out the pull ropes and neck attachments, Peter explained the procedure for securing the anchor rope and snow anchor. Once ready, we then started to harness the dogs up and attach them to our sleds.

Each dog was identified as a 'leader' or a 'follower'. Those that lead tend to be smaller and brighter, while the others tend to be the power houses and hence are located closer to the sled. My team was made up of Eba and Storm (the brains of the operation) and Fia and Hellus (the poor souls tasked with lugging me around for the next few days).

With Pete, Peter and Floody also now ready, Peter led us off by unleashing his securing rope and then shooting off up the path. Pete and Floody followed, but at the key moment, my rope tangled and became tightly taut around the metal pole I had used. As the dogs barked and howled their frustration at not being able to follow, I fumbled with gloves, inner gloves and over sized hat as I frantically tried to loosen the rope.



Finally after much swearing and yanking, the rope came loose and finally the dogs were able to run. The bedlam and the noise that had characterized my predicament immediately stopped, to be replaced by the serenity of movement, the quiet breathing of the dogs and the 'shhhh' of the runners on the snow.

While, I fortunately managed to avoid screwing up the start like that again, each start was characterized by the exhilaration of having the bedlam and noise of the pre-start being immediately replaced by the speed of the sled and the comparative sound of silence.

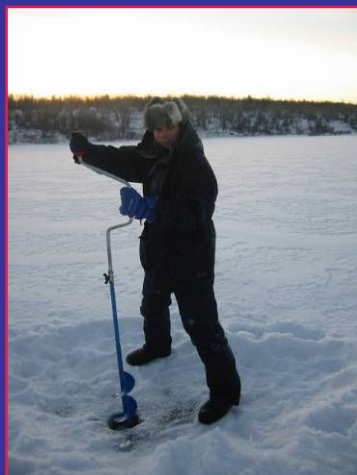
We travelled along the paths that radiate out across this land for perhaps one and a half hours until we stopped beside a lake. Next to the path stood an old tee-pee, which the firm uses in the summer and for lunch stops like this. Inside was a fireplace made from a circle of large stones. Around the side were various cushions, covered with reindeer skins that help retain the warmth, while also slowing the onset of piles.



As Peter started to cook, the three of us equipped ourselves with the ice cutter and set off to the centre of the lake in an attempt to 'catch us some fish'. The cutter was about 5 foot long and shaped like a giant cork screw.

After much labouring, we managed to cut a hole in the ice and then attached a (long since frozen) maggot to the end of the fishing line and slowly lowered it through the already re-freezing water. Patiently we waited. Slowly jigging it up and down as we had been taught, we paused from time to time to give the fish the opportunity to locate it. After ten minutes or so of patience, Floody began to make another hole about 15 feet away. More patience and more waiting followed, but if it had all be action above the surface, little was stirring below.

As we raised the lines again, breaking the newly formed pane of ice that had formed in the hole, it was noticeable that as the line appeared from the lake, the water on it immediately froze. Perhaps that is as good an illustration as any to demonstrate just how cold it was.





Defeated (but not broken!) we went back to the tee-pee for lunch and enjoyed what I imagined to be a Swedish version of 'Betty's hotpot'. Warm, wet and nourishing, the food was met with the same enthusiasm that meets the real thing in the 'Rovers Return' every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday evening!

After lunch, we completed our trip back to Matt's Lodge, honing our skills as 'mushers' as we went. Two falls later and having broken the golden rule of 'not letting go of the sled if you fall off' both times, we arrived and began to un-

harness the dogs, stake out the line to which the dogs would be attached during the evening, attach them to this and finally divide the straw amongst them in order that they could fashion some sort of bed to sleep in. Remarkably the dogs are more than happy with the concept of sleeping out in these temperatures and literally roll up into a ball of fur to keep themselves warm. Interestingly, when the weather does warm up it causes great discomfort to them as they are simply not designed for temperate, let alone warm, climates.

With the lodge cold, but not freezing as it had been yesterday, we soon had the fires and stoves lit and we busied ourselves by preparing to feed the dogs. This requires plenty of water to help them avoid dehydration and a mind boggling amount of calories and fatty meat to provide them with their energy.

The feed is bought pre-frozen and in blocks and creating their favourite cuisine seems to revolve around mixing plenty of boiling water with one of these blocks in an insulated 'cool box'. Looking like the sort of thing that you were once served in the school canteen and are still too scared to try again, the food is then served up hot to the dogs.

Once completed and with it now being dark and with a further two hours before our supper, we decided to try out the snow-shoes and explore further up the river. During this walk, we briefly saw what we thought were the Northern Lights and found a number of Moose tracks.

Disappointingly, this was the closest we got to seeing any wild animals around the hut, despite the fact that due to recent protection measures the local authorities had helped the number of wild wolves in existence rise from just 7 a few years ago to about 150 now.

We returned to the lodge to find the thermometer showing the temperature at minus 21 degrees. A new personal best for us all!

Tuesday

The day started much the same as it had done on Monday, i.e. with me grabbing my thermals and stuffing them down my sleeping bag followed by Peter informing me of the temperature, while he busily tried to light the stove and fire to warm us up.



Having fed both the dogs and ourselves, we finally got underway. Today we were to explore the various lakes that surrounded the lodge, an area that was to see us cover about 20 kilometres before lunch.

With the light slowly getting stronger, the sky began to take on the majesty of a rainbow, but without the order. It was a staggering mix of greens, blues, pinks and yellows that almost shimmered above us. It reminded me of the colour that petrol makes when mixed with water.



With a low mist sitting on the lake's surface, the feeling of isolation was strong. One was touched with a feeling that almost resembled pride, to be here witnessing the wonder of nature and to be participating in something so different, something so unusual.

The dogs, now more accustomed to their drivers, belted along as we swept on to our lunch stop. We passed no one, with the only evidence of civilization being one or two other lodges that also sat on the bank of the lakes.

Eventually we arrived at a suitable area to eat. A little protected from the elements, Peter slowed the dogs up, instructed them to stop and fastened his snow anchor. We followed his example and when convinced the sleds were all secure, released the dogs from their neck harnesses, leaving just their 'pull ropes' attached to the rig. This allowed the dogs an element of movement without the risk that they run off into the distance with or without the sleds.

The fire was soon lit and Peter started on the reindeer soup. Despite a spillage (!) the food was soon served and we all began to thaw out.

Travelling on the sleds is cold work and despite the layers of thermals (1), Shirt (1), Jumpers (2) and thick jacket, the cold can quickly permeate. It is an interesting quirk of nature that turns a key rule of physics upside down so that despite the theory that the air gets colder as one ascends from a valley (due to altitude), in these conditions the opposite is true. What actually tends to happen is that the warmer air rises leaving the really cold stuff on the valley floor. This, as we were finding out, was indeed very cold!

After lunch we started our return and so completed about 40 kilometres that day. To say that the dogs weren't a little tired at the end is probably exaggerating things, but the pace certainly never dropped and by all accounts a fit, well fed dog can often travel as much as 80 kilometres a day at a push.

That night, having fed the dogs their evening serving of warm brown 'sludge', Pete and Floody's attention moved towards roofing the igloo. After a number of attempts to find, move and elevate a sheet of ice suitable enough, they struck upon the idea of using one of the sleds to help with the manoeuvring. Having lowered the ice onto the structure, the pair then got to work engraving the name on the front. Titled 'Tonsley Towers', the igloo stood tall and proud against the clear moon-lit backdrop.





Following another excellent dinner and before the 'de-rigueur' evening around the fire with whiskies and vodkas, the three of us took another sauna (a Laplander's bath).

As we sat in the warmth, the toils of the day evaporating from us, someone started to sing. Before long we were all singing. Hymns, Carols and old favourites – we sang them all and at the end even the dogs were joining in.

Following a few wee drams, we all made for our beds only to be stopped by Peter who pointed out that the Northern Lights had started. The three of us raced outside to catch our first glance of what should be added to the list of 'Wonders of the World'. As we all stood and wondered, it became apparent that one of us had been more eager to get outside than the others. Pete was stood there, with just his boxers, jacket, boots and hat on. The phrase 'from the sublime to the ridiculous' jumps to mind.



Wednesday

Another morning, another failed attempt to get dressed without losing all of my sleeping bag's retained heat.

Today was to be the last day with the dogs. The lack of snow, we were told, had left the trails too hard and as a result too fast for us to try and tackle the usual circuit. Instead, we were going to mush the 'long way' back to Kiruna where there were rumours of a surprise waiting for us.

I confess that I was disappointed that the sledding part of the trip seemed to be coming to an end. Pete and Floody seemed reasonably sanguine about the decision, but for me, having waited so long to get there, it seemed that fate had conspired against me and that the real experience of being self sufficient whilst travelling across this haunting land from lodge to lodge was now being denied.

We all packed our things, allocated the other essentials amongst our sleds, fastened the dogs and revelled in the pre-start excitement. Then with a pull on the anchor rope we were off. Leaving behind some happy memories, the 'Tonsley Towers' igloo (that I am convinced will still be standing when the spring arrives) and the staggeringly serene surroundings.

The route that we used for the return trip was the most challenging yet. It featured many fast corners, rising banks and tight turns and yet, as mightily experienced mushers (well not complete novices anyway!), we all made the trip without a problem. Experience soon taught us how to jump off the sled before the hills to help push without letting go of your sole source of transport; how to recover from a slight mistake and regain one's balance and poise on the sled and how to anticipate the bumps and turns that the route often threw at you.

We returned to Kiruna and the starting point much quicker than had been anticipated, an illustration of how we had all matured as mushers (well we would like to think so anyway!).

Saying goodbye was an emotional moment. It is odd that in just a few days each of us had become quite attached to our respective dogs, but when you consider how my four had tirelessly pulled both myself and my sled over 100 kilometres in three days being fed just twice daily and then having to sleep outside in minus 15 to 20 temperatures, you cannot help but feel an enormous amount of respect for these creatures.

With photos taken, goodbyes spoken (in doggy language of course!) and warm handshakes all round, we all headed for the showers to get cleaned up.



That evening we stayed in a small little cabin a hundred yards or so away from the 'base', run by Ulf and Anna, two friends of Matt and Peter. Equipped with two bunk beds (and a dodgy heater), the cabin was certainly 'compact and bijoux', but the mattresses were welcome and the idea of your eyelids not being frozen to your eyeballs when you awoke did have its attractions!

After dinner, we had arranged to meet up with Peter and sample a little of the Kiruna nightlife. Instead when he arrived, he announced that we were all going to take a trip out to the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi. Having read about it and seen it on TV, the idea appealed and although the outside disappointingly resembled a radar dome with dodgy grey-pebble dashing, the inside was inspirational with its ice 'chandeliers', intricate ice carvings and (of course) the infamous ice bar, which sells nothing but vodka.



We all ordered and received our drinks in highly suitable ice glasses, stood around an ice table and generally had an 'ice' time. We soon got chatting, through chattering teeth, to an English couple who were visiting as part of their honeymoon. Kitted out in our skiing jackets, scarves and woolly hats, we all swapped stories and opinions on the mushing, Kiruna and the general concept of having a honeymoon (and everything that a honeymoon generally entails!) in an environment that never rises above -4 degrees at *best*. I admit, the idea of going somewhere with a valid excuse for not getting out of bed appeals (especially with a loved one!), but bearing in mind that you will have to 'begin the day' at some point and that your

body's temperature will never rise above 'cold' for whole of the honeymoon, I really struggled to grasp why anyone, let alone these two aging heavy metal fans, would book themselves into an ice hotel for a week's R & R.

After all, the cold hardly has a particularly complimentary effect on the very thing that one's wife should be most interested in on a honeymoon!

Thursday

Before we had all turned in the previous night, Peter had told us what the secret he had been keeping was. Following a couple of phone calls and having pulled a few strings, Matt and Peter between them had arranged for us to visit a local 'Sami' village and witness the annual reindeer herding event. This event is a key traditional event where each village reclaims the reindeer that



belong to them from the large herd that is driven back from Norway before the winter. Dating back hundreds of years, foreigners (let alone three mugs from London on an 'off the wall adrenaline sports trip') almost never get to witness this traditional event, with even locals rarely invited – Peter had never been. One could tell from both Peter and Matt's enthusiasm that this would be something truly unique and special. Following on from the views, the dogs and the environment, it would once again be something that would prove to be a privilege to witness.

To get to the village where we would meet our hosts and spend the night, we would have to skidoo along the 400 year old Tobak trail. Rarely used and marked only by the occasional fluorescent orange marker attached to a pole, the route crosses lakes, marsh land, woods and other harsh terrain. The weather was good, but it was cold and getting colder.

Armed with a few extra items of clothing, sufficient food for the trip and various pots and pans with which to cook it, we set off at the crack of dawn in two 4 wheel drive trucks with the skidoos on trailers behind. After an hour's drive on roads sealed with a thick layer of snow and ice, we stopped beside a wood and started to prepare. We were to be using 3 skidoos. Two were of a larger variety, the sort that are designed to carry two people at a time, the third a smaller one man version. We loaded them up with our kit, decided on who would drive what and got started.

Although Peter led on his bigger machine, we still found making headway on the almost unused paths very hard work. Much of the path seemed rutted with tree roots or clumps of marsh fern and one could hardly hear oneself think above the noise of constantly revving engines. Interspersed with the trickier terrain however, were numerous lakes and they presented the drivers with a break from the constant start, break and stop. The lakes were almost dead flat and having seen Peter disappear into distance as he accelerated away, we were all soon screaming along at speeds topping 40 miles an hour.



At this speed the cold really burns the face and despite the scarves that we tied around our faces, the hats and jacket hoods, from time to time you had to stop and literally 'knead' the warmth back into your cheeks, ears and nose. After 90 minutes driving, we stopped beside one of the trail's emergency cabins and started to prepare lunch. When we stopped I remember feeling *really* cold for the first time in the trip and complaining about how my hands hurt as soon as I took my outer and inner gloves off to try and make the fire.

The lunch of smoked mackerel and warmed tortillas lasted 40 minutes and by the end we were all keen to get going once again. When we returned to the machines, Peter told us that the temperature had fallen to a new 'Personal Best' of minus 27 degrees.

The route after lunch was much the same as before. More marshes, woods and rivers and it was while flying up another frozen river that we finally approached the village. It was now dark and the village's lights lit our route in. With the wind blowing against our faces, our enthusiasm building about the following day's activities and the feeling that we were getting further and further off the beaten track, the exhilaration of driving into town was almost comparable to arriving at an eagerly anticipated party. As we pulled outside the building we were going to sleep in, I just felt like shouting "Ok folks, we're here!"





I am not sure what I was expecting a Sami (or Laplander) village to resemble. I didn't imagine row after row of igloos, but likewise, I am not sure I really imagined street lights illuminating tarmaced roads with the odd pick-up truck driving along. Everything seemed reasonably old and although electricity and petrol were obviously available, one could also see that inter-dependence within the community was also a necessity.

Besides our 'accommodation', the villagers had built a sauna and having taken our daily 'medicine' (heating the room up so hot that it was a challenge to just sit on the top row of seats and breath!), all four of us rustled up

some food and sat down to play cards before eventually retiring to bed ahead of an early start the following morning. It was a clear crisp night and the weather conditions combined to produce yet another extraordinary natural visual rarity, a moon with a halo surrounding it. Apparently the previous night the halo had been a gold colour, but even in black and white, it was an awe inspiring sight.

Friday

The previous night, Per Nils, the head of the village, his wife Britt-Marie and their young son Mikka had visited to explain the proceedings for the following day.

Per Nils obviously played an important part in the village community, although he was quick to explain that most decisions were made by consensus rather than as a result of anyone's specific instruction. He explained that the reindeer had all been moved back from their Norwegian grazing pasturelands in time for the winter and that they now had to be divided according to whom owned what. This was the final and biggest part of this ages old custom and something that few people outside of the community had witnessed.



We were to be met by Britt Marie early in the morning, who would then drive us to the fields that were temporarily being used as a giant enclosure. The three of us sat nervously in the back of her beaten up Saab as she drove at speed along roads that hadn't seen a salting lorry for years, if ever. With chains on her wheels, she took the corners and hills as if driving a lap of Brands Hatch, with the brakes (if she had any) hardly being used. As she drove, she talked about the history of the Laps and how, as a semi-nomadic people, they recognized no geographical borders until the establishment of both Norway and Sweden drew abstract lines through a land that few people other than Laplanders travelled.

She was a proud lady, not only of her people's history but also of the event and the tradition that it represented. She was also extremely entertaining and hospitable to us, and mixed her polite 'mickey-taking' with an interest in what we all did in England. While telling us the history of the people, she would often comment on how Laplanders were often undervalued and misjudged by outsiders. Her pride obviously burned fiercely.

One of the reasons that so few people have witnessed the event is its unpredictable timing. The event's date is generally only set one week beforehand and as many of the organisers are travelling with the herd,

only locals tend to find out about it. Another reason for the event alluding the attention of non-locals is that the location is simply miles from anywhere through atrocious conditions. After all, having flown to what we considered the middle of nowhere, then skidooned to an even more remote village over an ancient tobacco trail, we were now driving to a spot so inaccessible that we were close to Sweden's Tundra edge.



On arriving we walked slowly up to the large enclosure within which the herd (which numbered over 6,000 reindeer) had been held the previous night. The enclosure served two purposes. Firstly, and most obviously, it stops the herd from fleeing and secondly it allows those reindeer young that might have become separated from their mothers in the final part of the journey, to find each other again. As well as this being a lovely 'ahhhh' fact, it also means that the owners of the female deer can 'claim' ownership over the young offspring.

Once the herd has settled into its new surroundings, the men-folk then work their way around the field marking the young with the relevant family identifying mark. This is done by cutting and scaring the ear of the animal. Each family has its own series of marks, with approximately 150 being registered in the area around this particular village. With marks being hereditary, they tend to evolve as they get passed down through the next family generations.

With the marking completed, the villagers then set about moving the herd into a smaller corral. This packed them tight together and to ensure that they did not break for the fence, the herd was then forced to collectively run around the corral in a circular movement. To move them into the corral, the locals used their skidoos like shepherds use their sheep dogs, collectively trying to usher the flock down the slope and through the corral's gates. With some of the herd panicking each time and splintering off back up the hill for the temporary sanctuary that the enclosure's far corner offered them however, it took some time. To see the line of skidoos working the field methodically, it is amazing to consider that all of this was being



completed without a nominated leader orchestrating each driver's movement. As the herd moved this way and that, I caught myself musing over the fun that the late Phil Drabble would have had describing the scene. Oh to have had a few white picket fences, a couple of red posts and a whistle... it would have made a wonderful Swedish version of 'One Man and his Dog'.

With the majority now moved, we wandered back to Per Nils' cabin, which was a few miles down the road, to rest and eat ahead of the evening's big event. While the herd's nerves calmed in the corral, we tucked into a lunch of reindeer meatballs and swapped stories while huddled around the cabin's fire.

As phase two's kick off time of six o'clock approached, cars began to pass by the cabin on their way back up to the corral. We collected our things, calmed our nerves and made our own excited way back to the pens.

As we approached, we could see that large flood lights had been switched on and amid the brightness, one could now make out the vivid oranges, yellows and reds of the traditional clothes and hats that many of the men and women were now wearing.

We were invited to step into the corral and chat to the few herdsman who could speak a little English. As we climbed over the fence and started to walk directly across, one nervously watched the herd as they charged past you. Before long, as you moved towards the centre of the swirling mass, movement and noise surrounded you.

The constant ringing of each reindeer's bell mixed with the thud of charging hooves and the calls and whistles of the attending herdsman all competed to overawe the senses. Faces and antlers, large and small, darted into your eyesight, before swerving to avoid you and merging back into the pack. The herd's warm breath rose into the night's sky before turning into steam, while kicked up iced snow particles hung in the air all around giving the light a strange grey-ish quality.

Having patched up a fence and enhanced Anglo-Swedish relations by helping with a small bit of further herding, we were told that the main sorting of the herd was about to start.

The herd is sorted in order that each village or family can identify their live stock, capture it and then move it back to their homes for protection from the cruellest part of winter. It is achieved by moving about 50 to 100 animals at a time into a small corral. Around the side of this pen were gates which opened into segregated fields that radiate out from the hub. As the animals are moved into the small corral, the locals attempt to catch them, identify them (by feeling the marking on the reindeer's ear) and then wrestle them to their respective gate where they are tagged and weighed if necessary before being released into that particular village's field.

'Our' particular gate was being manned by Britt-Marie's elderly parents, who were sitting next to raging log fire.

As we moved into the small pen, it became obvious that we would need eyes in the back of our heads as the mixture of human activity and closer confines was inducing greater panic amongst the animals. This need for additional eyes was multiplied still further when it became clear that we were expected to help with the catching and wrestling.





After about thirty minutes, the corral was clear and the locals prepared to let the next hundred animals in. To a man, we were all wired and very reluctant indeed to leave, however Peter pointed out the time and the importance of getting to the rendez-vous near Kiruna in time to meet our transport back into town. As the driver of the pick-up truck was unlikely to wait for long at the agreed point at the end of the tobacco trail due to the weather risk, it was vital that the four of us returned to our accommodation of the previous night, collected our things and set off on the return leg on the skidoos as quickly as possible so as not to get any further behind schedule.

Having said our goodbyes and failed to find suitable words with which to describe our gratitude, the race home began. With Brit Marie lending us her Saab, we began the first leg of the trip retracing our journey of the morning.

One hour later and we finally reached the village. We collected our clothes, bedding and cooking implements and loaded them all onto the skidoos. Just as we were about to take off though, we hit a snag... and a big one at that! It seemed that in all of the too-ing and fro-ing, Peter had dropped one of the skidoo's keys somewhere in or around the house and hence our plans were in turmoil. We didn't dare undertake the trip on two machines (if one of them had broken down, we wouldn't have all been able to fit on the sole remaining machine), so we all started a frantic search. Forget the pointless aim of trying to find needles in haystacks (I mean who sews perched on the top of a haystack anyway?), if you want a challenge just try finding the starter keys to a skidoo in an area full of foot deep snow!

After parting with more than our fair share of expletives, Pete found it and, now very belatedly, we got underway.



Peter was in a rush and we would also need to be if we stood any chance of keeping up with him. Yesterday's slow-and-steady approach to skidooring needed to be replaced by seats-of-your-pants stuff as, judging by Peter's speed and urgency from the outset, we would need to cover the same ground as yesterday at a far greater speed.

In fact the stats were daunting. We would need to cover the same distance as yesterday but in only 60% of the time. And where as yesterday's drive was in daylight, this trip would be under a clear moonlight sky. Visually stunning, but hardly conducive for driving like a 'nutter'!

Within minutes of the start my face was colder than it had ever been before. My scarf seemed to refuse to take the brunt of the cold as I flew alone, preferring to sink back into my jacket or slide to back of my neck in its attempt to take cover.

The lakes came and went in a blur. At times the man in front, with his small headlights confirming his position, would accelerate away so fast I genuinely thought I might get left behind. Hitting speeds of up to 50 mph on a skidoo was thrilling, but the thrill came with the same knowledge that we were treading a fine line. While the surface was smooth for the majority, ridges would suddenly appear in front of you forcing the machine to lean heavily, its balance disturbed.

On and on we flew; the lead bike stopping from time to time to locate the path once again. Occasionally we would all stop and check how our respective health. We changed machines when the arms grew so tired that turning almost became too difficult, but we never stopped for long and the sense of urgency never ventured to far away.

After about an hour, Peter stopped again and flagged us all down. Our vision blinkered by narrow slots for the eyes to avoid frost bite, Peter pointed at the sky and we realised the Northern Lights had started above us. They eclipsed the lights that we had seen the previous night. They moved across the sky, initially in green monotone, but then developed different colours with whites and purples taking it in turns to ripple down the green backbone that they had created across the night's sky.

Because they vary so much from night to night, it is difficult to explain just what the Northern Lights look like, but they seemed to me to look like a long thin piece of material which is being blown by a wind. If one could add sand into the analogy and say that while the general direction of this movement remained the same the exact strength and exact projection of it varied, one gets a (slightly) better image of its hypnotic and mystical quality.

The sight was sensational. An often over used word, but one that seems so suitable for so many aspects of this holiday. With the lights continuing to pulse above us, we reluctantly mounted up and drove out – as they say!



The trail continued and we followed with one eye on the road and the other on the heavens and, as if led home with divine help, we made it to the rendez-vous just two minutes ahead of our transport. We were hot and steaming, but deliriously happy. Peter paid us the ultimate compliment, thanking us for keeping up, and claiming he would never have normally dared to travel at such speeds except with his local friends.

It had been an incredible twenty-four hours. Each of my senses had been stimulated to exhaustion and while my veins were full of the heady combination of pheromones and adrenaline, I hardly noticed the aches each time I moved. We talked and laughed as we competed with each other to narrate our experiences.

That day will take some beating.

From being able to meet and listen to so many of the Sami people; participate in such a rare and traditional event and then drive unfettered across a wild and unforgiving country with our own private light show leading the way, I think that it will be some time before I feel quite as content again.

Saturday

As with all transfer days, everything felt a little like 'after the Lord Mayor's show'. The day before had been draining both physically and emotionally and when this was mixed with the disappointment of returning to Stockholm, little could lift the spirits.

At the appointed time and at the appointed place, Peter arrived to return us to the airport. The jokes still flew and the conversation still flowed, but it felt a shame to leave. It had been an excellent trip. Maybe there had not been quite as much mushing as I had originally hoped, but the activities that we had participated in instead were amongst the most amazing of my life.

With a parting joke and a touch of sadness, we bid farewell to Peter, Kiruna and the arctic. We had to return to London and our credit card debts, while Peter had to return to his dogs, deer and sled.

Woolfy