

BACKPACKING IN A SWEDISH WILDERNESS

After getting a flavour of what Swedish Lapland had to offer walking the well-known Kungsleden Trail, Mark Waring made a return visit for a solo long distance hike through the wild and dramatic Sarek national park

IT'S strangely compelling, this long distance right-out-there-in-the-wilds game. I have spent a number of summers undertaking long, remote walks through the mountains of Northern Sweden, high above the Arctic Circle, enjoying the bright summer nights, the culture and resilience of the native Sami people, the freedom to camp and walk at will protected by law, and perhaps most of all the sheer space available in the remotest parts of a country roughly twice the size of the UK but with one sixth of the population. As an added bonus all these attractions are repeated next door in Norway and I have over recent years determined several routes that pass over the border, noting no more formality in crossing than searching the horizon for the occasional border cairns that mark my passage.

The idea for my latest trip took seed some years ago when I walked Sweden's premier Arctic mountain trail, the Kungsleden, which provided 400 unbroken kilometres of spectacle with high alpine mountains, deep forests, vast plateaus, Sami villages and the occasional boat trip across huge lakes. This is a popular walk that thousands undertake annually, in whole or in part, and its beauty justifies its popularity.

The Kungsleden passes through several national parks. Of particular note though is Sarek, which is unique due to its lack of basic touring infrastructure such as huts and established paths. While other national parks in Sweden are genuine wildernesses, their ranges can offer everyman accessibility due to a marked network of trails supported by mountain

huts. Sarek stands apart; ringed by wilderness it requires a couple of days' walk at least to reach its boundaries. Once there the walker finds no established paths and has to rely on map and compass while carrying shelter and food. Unless a skilled mountaineer and expert in crossing glaciers the only escape routes are back the way you came or forward across a rough and rugged terrain of bog, dense vegetation, talus and glacial rivers. Add to this high precipitation which in the summer will see rain two days out of every three and a reputation for storm-force winds. The rewards though are obvious: adventure, beauty, intense solitude, wildlife (bears and elk are abundant in the forests) and the occasional Sami sacrificial site bearing testament to a shamanic past.

One of the highlights of my Kungsleden



THE GREEN BAND

RECENT announcements in the Scandinavian outdoor press of the “Green Band” have heralded Europe’s answer to the US’s Continental Divide Trail and an irresistible challenge to many of the continent’s backpackers and long distance walkers.

A collective including Swedish tent manufacturer Hilleberg and clothing company Klattermusen have created and sponsored a scheme which challenges long distance walkers to walk an uninterrupted and unsupported trek through the summer sub-arctic mountain landscape of northern Scandinavia on a route of their choosing, provided the journey either starts or finishes at the mountain station of Grovelsjön in the south of Sweden with the corresponding start or finish at the northern border stone of Treriksroset (where Sweden, Finland and Norway meet), a distance of some 750 miles.

This is a journey which would entail the challenger walking through a spectacular and unbroken wilderness setting, uninterrupted by any major towns or significant pockets of human habitation. The challenge would call for high levels of navigational ability and fitness, not least because the choice of route is entirely at the discretion of the challenger, entailing the prospect of crossing remote national parks such as Sarek with its high 2000-metre glaciers and peaks.

The rules are few but are required to be observed in order that the successful challenger is awarded the Green Band. The journey must be continuous (save for rest days), it must be unsupported (save boxes sent to the villages on any chosen route and the odd supplies bought from mountain station or the indigenous Sami) and must be entirely self-propelled (allowing rowing boats to be used to cross mountain lakes). The organisers are also running a sister challenge, the White Band, which allows for a continuous ski journey between the two points.

Details in English are as yet unavailable but the website at vitagronabandet.se provides an email address (see “Kontakt”), and any queries will be answered in English.

This indeed represents a challenge of a lifetime to those without the time or resources to complete the Continental Divide Trail in the United States. It would be of interest to see who is the first British walker to complete such a unique challenge.

trip was the brief incursion the trail makes into a corner of Sarek and more particularly the crossing of the river Rapa. I got a lift in a Sami boat across the large river delta. The reflection of the grey clouds above gave the water a mercurial quality. Staring up into the mouth of the Rapa, broken by scores of lush green islands and framed by mountains on either side, I was struck by an irresistible longing to journey up this silver artery deep into Sarek’s glacial heart.

So it was several years later that I disembarked from the night train from Stockholm at Gällivare for a three-hour coach ride into Lapland’s mountains. This journey took me to Kebnats and a short, but very scenic, ferry ride to the mountain station of Saltoluokta. I had passed through there several years before and

now, as then, there were a large number of languages spoken, bearing testament to the international popularity of the Kungsleden, which passes right outside the front door. The trail walkers sported loaded backpacks though some were lightly packed as this northern section of the Kungsleden has staffed huts at around every 20 kilometres. My own catering for the nine-day walk I’d planned across Sarek was far more rudimentary with every gram accounted for and balanced alongside the essential gear, not least a Hilleberg Akto perfectly suited to Sweden’s demanding wilderness (indeed, some Swedes swear that Hillebergs are not made in an Estonian factory, rather they grow wild amidst Sarek’s glacial moraine!).

Sarek was very much the main event, however I was also to cross into the gentler ►

FACT FILE

Maps: Lantmäteriets Fjällkarta topographic maps have a scale of 1:100,000 and include a map key in Swedish, English and German. Sheet BD10 covers the Sarek national park. Sheet BD9 covers Padjelanta and Sulitelma. The maps are stocked in the UK by Stanfords (020 7836 1321, www.stanfords.co.uk)

Travel: It is possible to fly to Stockholm from a number of UK airports. British Airways and the Swedish national airline, SAS (0871 226 7760, www.flysas.com) both fly into Arlanda International, the airport closest to the city. Trains in Sweden are operated by SJ (+46 771 75 75 75, www.sj.se)

Useful websites:

The Swedish Tourist Association's website is at: www.svenskaturistforeningen.se

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency website (www.naturvardsverket.se/en/In-English/Menu/) includes a section on the Sarek national park. Follow links to 'Enjoying nature' and then 'National parks and other places worth visiting'.

The website advises: "Sarek is not recommended for beginners. Those wishing to visit the park must have considerable alpine experience and the correct equipment and should be used to spending time outdoors. Sarek is an extremely inaccessible wilderness with no facilities whatsoever for tourists."

The website for the Green Band is at: www.vitagronabandet.se

national park of Padjelanta and over the border into Norway and the sharp peaks around the Sulitjelma glacier. The first day and a half would see me through the southerly section of the fine Stora Sjöfallet national park after an initial stretch along the Kungsleden, then into Sarek and its heartland through a number of valleys until I reached its centre, crossing the river of Mihkajohka which spills from the park's highest peak of Stortoppen (literally "the big peak") standing at 2,089 metres.

Looking at the map of Sarek brings a spider's web to mind: seven clusters of mountains each containing densely packed peaks range up to over 2,000 metres. These are broken by a number of deep glacial troughs which allow access through Sarek principally by following a number of rivers flowing from its centre. A comparable walking experience to following these valleys, albeit on a smaller scale, is the Cairngorms' Lairig Ghru. My route was to see me approaching from the north-east using the troughs to access Sarek's centre through the gap afforded by the lake Bierikjavre. From the centre I was then to travel out again through a further long valley until I exited the national park at Alkavare.

I had come looking for challenge in a ruggedly inspiring environment and I found it. The untracked wilderness meant demanding walking and with a pack initially weighing around 18 kilos I often worked hard to cover the miles, crossing ground that was either boggy or tight with dense vegetation (the bush-like dwarf willow being the principal culprit) which grabbed at my feet, legs or my pack itself depending on the height. I also spent large parts of the walk crossing the boulder fields which littered the glacial troughs. Here I trod carefully, wary of a broken or sprained ankle. The rewards became quickly apparent though: as I crossed the skyline above my first night's camp Sarek's peaks appeared for the first time and I was struck by a palpable sense of anticipation and a little foreboding. Reindeer lazily watched my progress.

To my right for a large part of the second day was the peak of Slugga, its pyramid shape topped with cloud, as I wandered past lone birch trees resilient to the ferocity of Lapland's weather. In the main my company was my own throughout the trip. Solitude is easily found in Sweden's vast wildernesses though certain exceptions exist. The northern section of the Kungsleden is

popular due to the relative ease of the route and in early August bursts with more than 3,000 walkers participating in a 100-kilometre timed trek sponsored by the clothing company Fjällraven. Away from the honeypot of the Kungsleden and some further popular areas to the south in Jamtland you tend to be alone. Sarek's ruggedness and the requirement for self sufficiency limit greatly walkers' numbers but it exerts an appeal for the experienced who see it as a must-do.

The weather adds to its compelling reputation and I was subject to a variety of conditions. My third day began cold and windy with dark clouds gathering until a light snow storm around mid-morning. It was late August but cold largely characterised the nine-day trip, though I was grateful for the low temperature's work in accelerating the demise of the Swedish mosquito, a creature that can blight warmer, sunnier days.

Snow settled on the peaks as I walked into Sarek's heart, moving parallel to the large lake Bierakvarve for several hours, my progress again slowed by boulder fields. The weather briefly improved though, and from the tent at 10pm that night I watched the sun dip behind the central massif's peaks as high snow fields flared and blazed in the light until the valley floor was cast in shadow. Though some weeks from the last of the midnight sun there was no darkness on any night during that trip.

Wet, cold and unsettled weather dominated the rest of my crossing and I reached the central point of many a walker's journey in Sarek, the bridge at Mihka, in heavy rain. The roaring of Mihkajohka, tumbling from the central massif, heralded the sight of the small hut at Sarek's heart in which sits an emergency radio telephone, a small but significant connection to the outside world. Crossing the bridge I paused, held by the sight of the foaming water beneath me.

Some miles further I passed another small hut owned by the Sami whose winter reindeer pastures stand nearby. I peered in through a large window, a little envious I must admit, at the tidy bunks and the large wood-burning stove. My own night was spent in the deep valley of Alkavagge where I pitched camp. The wind and cold kept me in the tent that evening; I lay there dazed by tiredness listening to rocks, broken free after millennia of constant weathering, tumbling down the steep valley sides.

My journey out of Sarek first saw me stare into the bright heart of the glacier of Vattendelar from my vantage point of a col at 1,200 metres in some welcome sunshine. My ultimate exit culminated in a descent off high rocky terrain into a landscape of softer, grassier slopes blanketed in low-lying rain clouds and onwards into the national park of Padjelanta, a wilderness of lakes and rolling hills which stretch to the Norwegian border. Padjelanta is a stark contrast to Sarek, its soft mountains



Norwegian mountain huts

favoured as summer reindeer pasture by the Sami who reside in half a dozen small settlements. Linked by a long footpath running over 160km from Ahkka in the north to Kvikkjokk, these settlements provide basic wilderness accommodation and provisions and it is possible to follow the well-marked trail of Padjelantaleden with light packing. Indeed, the small settlement of Saltoluokta has a helicopter service which runs both to Ahkka and Kvikkjokk and for around £60 one half of the trail can be walked and then return transport points accessed by air.

The marked Padjelanta trail was rather a strange experience at first after Sarek but one which made for quick walking. Perversely I fell twice on several sections duck-boarded with wooden planks and slippery in the rain but quickly reached Staluokta, with its basic facilities and small shop. I hung around long enough to watch two helicopters disgorge a handful of walkers who ran through the rain, whipped up by the rotors' backdraft, to the large accommodation hut. I, however, pressed on to camp in the rain – on my seventh night, after almost a week of solitude, I would have found communal hut life a little busy.

The last days were marked by improving weather and my trip towards the border saw me shedding first my rainwear and then my softshell as the sun returned after almost four days. I followed a path towards the lake of Sarjos in bright warm sunshine and was struck by the immediacy of the change in the surrounding mountains' appearance as I stepped across the border. Norway felt, well, remarkably Norwegian – with jagged peaks capped in snow and the trail now marked with the DNT's (Den Norske Turistforeningen) familiar red T blazes. A last evening on the trail camped next to a lake provided a memory for life as I revelled in sunshine, either swimming in the bracing water or brewing up on a fine sandy beach.

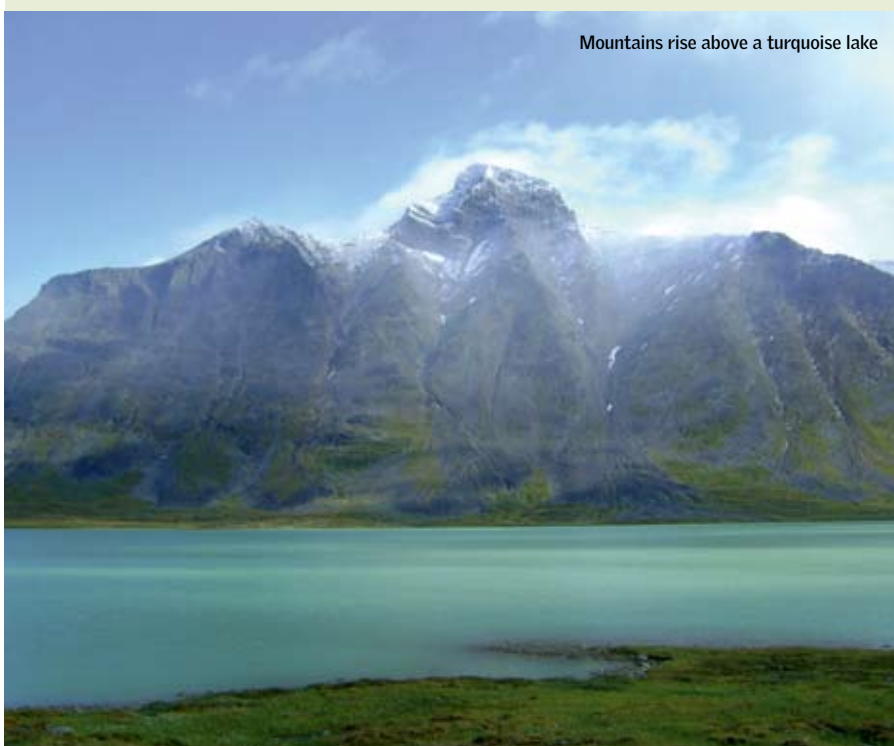
The walk's conclusion was the trail to Sulitjelma through steep terrain. The area's mountains felt close and intimate, culminating in a step descent to the lakeside village. Here awaited beer, a night camped stealthily in a forest and then the early morning school bus to Bodo on a day which would see me arrive 15 hours later at Heathrow.

It was a trip I'll never forget, one which emphasised the freedom that Sweden's mountains, and indeed Norway's, provide. Limitless treks are possible there thanks to the celebrated right to move across this vast space, including a mountain chain of nearly 1,000 miles. Very few have walked its entire spine (TGO's Chris Townsend has completed the "keel" as its known) though a recent initiative, the "Green Band" (Grona Bandet) could well see many hundreds more making a crossing of the Swedish part of the chain. Sarek will no doubt feature on numerous route plans and its demands will surely prove to be the highlight of many a completion. ■

Sarek's peaks show themselves



Mountains rise above a turquoise lake



Ahpar

