

In the forest something stirred

An autumn break in a cosy cabin for two in the Swedish wilderness combines romance with roughing it, writes **Rhiannon Batten**

I'll show you how to lock the door, just in case of trolls in the night,' said Marcus, our guide, turning the latch on our cabin. But mythical creatures were not our main concern that evening, as my boyfriend and I settled down in our cosy forest cabin in the heart of central Sweden.

The previous week, a hunter further north had been mauled to death by a brown bear, the same species found in these pine woods. Then there were the wolves. Apparently, when the wind blows in the right direction, you can hear their howls. With the nearest lavatory 100 metres away through the bush, this didn't seem like the kind of place where you wanted to get caught short in the night. Trolls or no trolls.

It may be only a couple of hours by train and bus from Stockholm but Kolarbyn is a culture shock for city slickers. An encampment of 12 basic wooden huts and one slightly more 'luxurious' cabin, set in a forest glade, it's like nothing so much as Tolkien's Shire. Foliage wraps each building. Wild strawberries, raspberries and ferns dangle from the rooftops. Each shelter merges so effortlessly into the landscape that you could easily miss it. Only a curl of smoke twisting from the occasional well-disguised chimney hints at human habitation.

Kolarbyn – literally 'charcoal village', after the site's former incarnation – bills itself as 'Sweden's most primitive hostel' (and almost certainly its most eco-friendly). There are no showers en suite. No showers at all, in fact; in the summer guests roll out of the camp's rustic sauna into the adjacent lake, but in winter they make do with a quick splash of icy water. There's no electricity or telephones. The 'reception' is a semi-covered wooden hut and the cooking facilities stretch only to a charcoal pit. Privation is part of the experience, as you soon found out.

My boyfriend and I arrived on a cloudless autumn day, the foliage a mosaic of silver and gold, late-season blueberries and lingonberries still littering the forest floor. A nip in the air cried out for a wood fire. Not so fast, said the charming Marcus, who in his felt hat, natural woollens and buttermilk scarf looked like an Armani-styled Hobbit: 'At Kolarbyn all the guests cut their own wood for their fires.'

We stood in the central clearing as he pointed in one direction to the trunk of a felled birch and in the other to a collection of saws. After a brief lesson in how to handle an axe (rule number one: keep your legs apart while swinging, so you don't hit your shins if you miss) and an hour's chopping, sawing and wheezing we had about enough wood for a small fire. 'It's a funny thing,' said Marcus with a smile. 'Many guests don't seem as keen on fires at the end as they are at the start.' It was an interesting insight into the Swedish sense of humour.

But, though Kolarbyn strips away many of the frills of modern life, it still allows a few essentials, especially for romantic adventurers. Our cabin may have had a pebble floor and no windows, but the candles, fluffy duvets, white linen and sheepskins didn't speak of hardship. Meals are prepared by the staff and eaten



No showers, so expect an icy dip.

around the campfire, but there's also a hamper of Fairtrade chocolate, organic Shiraz, crisps and pears.

Resisting the temptation to hibernate, we struck out along one of the forest trails accompanied by the thud-thud-thud of a woodpecker high up in one of the pines. Usually you can walk for miles here. But because it was the first week of the hunting season, we were advised not to wander too far (more people in Sweden are killed by over-enthusiastic hunters than by bears).

Instead, we potted down the hill to the waterside, untethered a canoe and paddled out through gently swaying reeds towards a tiny island in the lake. This – Marcus had told us – was where he and his business partners, Thomas and Anna, intended to build an even more remote cabin.

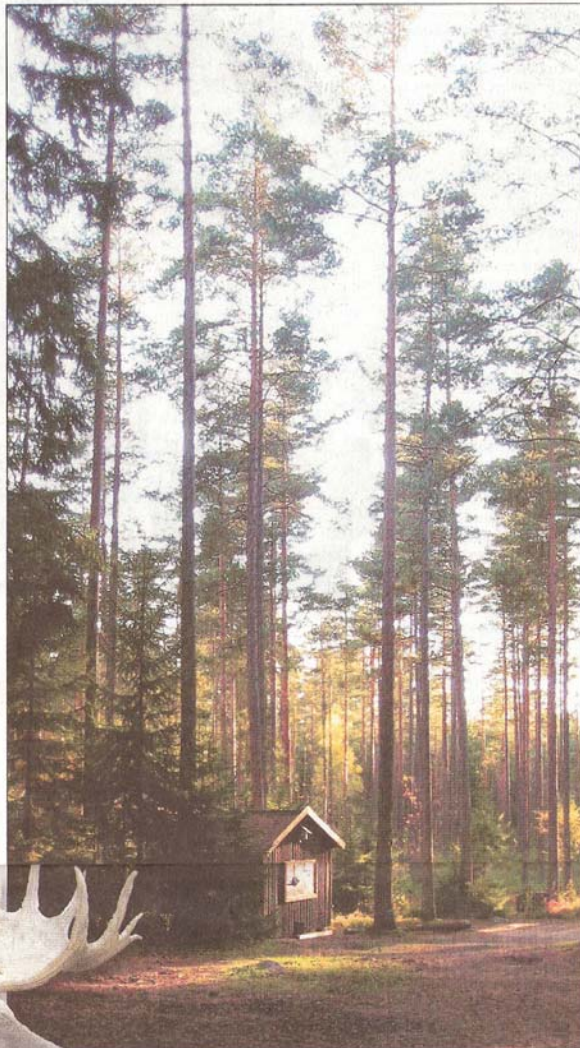
Circling this speck of land, too wobbly among the low rocks to try to moor, it was hard to believe that we had woken that morning in a Stockholm hotel. You can't get away from nature at Kolarbyn,



There are more moose than people in the area around Kolarbyn, north west of Stockholm.

ESSENTIALS

Rhiannon Batten travelled with Nature Travels (01929 463774; www.naturetravels.co.uk). A night in a cabin at Kolarbyn costs from £101 per couple, including dinner and breakfast but not transport. Elk safaris are £57 per person. All-inclusive packages at the Farna hotel (00 46 222 28190; www.femaherrgard.se) cost from £114 per night for a double room. In Stockholm, she stayed at the Nordic Sea hotel (00 46 850 563000; www.nordicseahotel.se), where double rooms cost from £70 a night. Contact Visit Sweden (020 7108 6168; www.visitsweden.com).



Marcus doesn't hunt himself: 'More than 80 per cent of the hunters say they do it for recreation, to get out into the forest, but I see the forest every day, without having to shoot something to enjoy it.' Instead, he is an expert in tracking down the creatures on moose safaris: 'In six years, I've never gone out and not seen at least one,' he promises.

Because hunters aren't allowed to shoot after dusk, we set out at night in the back of a van. This isn't as strange as it sounds – moose are understandably more jumpy during the hunting season and being in a scentless van means you can get closer to them than you would on foot. As Marcus drove, he wound down the window and scanned the forest edge with a bright torch. After 10 minutes, as the flashlight swept across a field, a pair of eyes suddenly glinted bright orange, like Catseyes on a motorway. Our first moose on the loose.

Coming to a halt, we climbed silently from the vehicle to watch a female staring directly at us. Marcus tried to make some moose noises to reassure it – a moose whisper. But before we could creep much further, she slunk back into the woods. Over the next hour, the pattern was repeated more than 10 times. But then, towards the end of the safari, we finally hit gold dust: three of them at a moose crossing, ambling down the

We were advised not to wander too far; the hunting season had started

road, just close enough to realise that you don't want to get any closer.

Before heading back to the cabin, we stopped off for a starlit walk to a neighbouring lake. Stumbling gingerly in the gloom over mossy humps, sharp twigs and a pungent lemony herb which Marcus told us was used by the Vikings as an aphrodisiac, we arrived at a dusky viewpoint overlooking the water. There we sat, talking and demolishing a picnic of hot tea, homemade lingonberry vodka and After Eights, until it got too cold to linger any more.

When it gets deeper into winter, most guests spend one night at Kolarbyn then one night in Farna, a country house hotel and spa nearby, for some deserved post-forest pampering. I could understand the appeal as we arrived back at Kolarbyn, vodka-warmed against the plummeting temperatures but plied with extra sleeping bags 'just in case'.

In the end, snuggled under the duvets, with the fire on and the spare sleeping bags undisturbed, we had a surprisingly good night's sleep. We were woken once, roused by a noisy scurrying that sounded like trolls trying to get in.

Whatever it was, next morning we discovered a nibble in each pear and a crescent-shaped chunk bitten from the Fairtrade chocolate; clearly it hadn't just been us who'd had a romantic night in the cosy forest cabin.

which is a member of Sweden's stringent Nature's Best eco-tourism accreditation programme. Roe deer, mountain hare, badger and fox all prowl the woodlands. Pike and perch swim in the lake and the site boasts 10 out of the 12 species of European owl. Even going to the lavatory brings you face to face with wildlife. In the little 'throne room' (decorated with pictures of the Swedish royal family), birds in search of a puppy-soft nest had pecked the toilet paper to shreds.

But, like the hunters whose guns we could hear, we were most interested in the king of the forest: the moose. 'There are more of them than people here, 6,000 to 8,000 compared to 4,500 people in the local town of Skinnkatteberg,' Marcus told us that evening as we sat down to a delicious campfire meal of Salsagne and Swedish 'messy cake'.