

Some thoughts on a great experience. Sledding Dec 9th to 12th 2012

Having returned yesterday from Kiruna I would like to thank all at Nature Travels for arranging such a fantastic holiday for us. The term awesome is often overused but to be so close to the elements where twilight, cold and beauty touch is an amazing feeling.

Your practical help and tips were invaluable.

I would add that having decided to go up the night before on the Arlanda –Boden-Kiruna night train, it was much smoother than I had feared. Booking on the SJ website is straightforward if you realise that it only takes debit not credit cards. If you use the rebookable insurance and decide to change arrangements as I did book your new arrangements before cancelling the old ones. I had booked three first class compartments but booked from Stockholm to Kiruna and when I stupidly changed to Arlanda C to Kiruna I could not get other than shared compartment.

In fact I should have kept the first class and taken the express from Arlanda C airport to Stockholm where we could have easily joined the train. Arlanda C airport is fairly small and the train station is part of it at the far end well signposted, however at 7 pm on Saturday evening only one business remained open which is a pub restaurant by the railway station. The meal was pleasant but take a pack of cards, as there is a wait to the night train! The railway information desk closes about 8pm but getting the tickets was very easy, just type in the reference number into the tall grey machine to the right of the information desk and the tickets emerge.

I think if we had gone into Stockholm to catch the train there there may have been more to pass the time at Stockholm station. (The earlier train leaving only about 50 minutes after the plane lands would have been risky/impossible with baggage clearance etc)

We were warned that the platform would be very cold and not to go down until 10 minutes before train arrived. However the platform is surrounded by a Perspex shelter and no problem. However when the train stops at Boden next morning to change the platform is totally exposed and my family huddled in a doorway while I kept a lonely vigil!

The train is not the orient express! It was very clean, warm and functional but catering was basic biscuits etc. Next morning we were able to buy some plated micro waved meals pasta/meatballs which were very acceptable but we wished we had copied fellow passengers and taken supplies. The night train is very quiet and the conductors most helpful. Gliding through the snowy conifer forests was a great experience although younger passengers have to accept it is a slow way to arrive (about 15 hours return flight was 90 minutes).

The guide who met us at Kiruna could not have been more charming as indeed was everyone we encountered. The transfer to base camp only takes 15 minutes by car so it is easy to arrive on the Saturday evening flight. The Saturday afternoon was a great time to see the huskies and play with skis and snow shoes.

The thermal suits boots and hats provided at the base camp are incredibly efficient. On day two we were at minus 27 degrees and three people got very chilled but the guide swiftly arranged a stop in a tepee for a fire and meal. I was surprised by my tolerance of cold as I am 61 and usually feel the cold. I think the Damart underwear (doubled on the very cold day) plus shirt and fleece worked

fantastically under the thermal suit. You definitely need to take scarf, balaclava or necking to add protection to nose and ears. Their hats are warm but not very tight-fitting. I did not use my goggles to get a clearer view but wore contact lenses and was okay.

The thermal mittens provide are excellent and vital, but are too clumsy to use when carrying out jobs such as closing the couplings on the harness. Then a fairly thin pair of gloves such as thinsulate worked best. Obviously half the fun was helping with all the camp chores and carrying water to drink from the ice hole in a frozen lake under the stars really put one in touch with the eco system. The guide carried a 12 inch long dagger and we found no use for penknives etc.

The dogs are wonderfully willing and friendly in fact the biggest risk is being licked to death.

The first day got us to the cabin in the woods which we used as a base for two nights. This has no electricity and external lavatory facilities which amount to a hole in a hut. However it is all kept very clean and tidy. (Perhaps a role for an enzyme biomass converter??)

I think I now understand the term "call of the wild" as relating to the power to get me up in the middle of the night at about minus twenty to attend to the "call of nature". Having said that, once the thermals were on the shock was manageable and the experience truly memorable.

The headlight is absolutely vital and it is worth investing in a good one. The guide's Swedish Army light was in different league. In mid December the sun does not rise above the horizon, producing a sort of perpetual dawn from about 10 am to 2 pm so dressing etc is by headlight or candlelight. The Swedes do not seem to use wardrobes, even at the Ice Hotel, so keeping your stuff together was a challenge.

I think they could have marked the thermal suits and boots etc which all look the same in the dark, so that we did not spend so much time swapping and searching. Similarly a few hooks and a cardboard box each in the dormitory would have made life much easier so we could put our stuff for the morning to hand. Basically I ended up just putting on everything near my bunk as soon as possible. Heaters are burning all night so the rooms are fairly warm. Meals are excellent with loads of tasty simple food. My appetite just exploded.

We would have loved a video of our experience and perhaps they may consider stationing a guide with a camera perhaps on the final run back to base to video us. As a father I *would* have gladly paid *to get* such an image. Driving your sled in single file means it almost impossible to get a video. I wish I had taken a head cam, but on reflection several ordinary cameras failed at below minus ten so it may have failed. Also driving in line made action photography views difficult. Anyway the company may give that some thought.

Each night we fired up the sauna in the woods. Without any taste of alcohol, all did the full Swedish thing of rolling in the snow after the sauna, although we amended the nudity and birch whipping to swim suits and a nice cup of tea. The sauna was the best we had experienced.

Returning on the third day, we were back at base and electricity by 11 am giving an easy transfer to the ice hotel. Again full thermal equipment was provided there. The Ice hotel is a wonderful, very friendly although expensive. Do not fail do the Sami Reindeer trip which includes driving a reindeer,

which compared to the Huskies is truly stimulating/terrifying as they are only controlled by a single rope!

The flight back from Kiruna airport was a doddle. Ground staff were most helpful and once I was sure the baggage was going straight through Stockholm airport I was able to relax (taking the 1.40 pm flight from Kiruna allows you 50 minutes to get to the flight to Heathrow it is doable but a sprint. We were actually helped because the Kiruna plane was 15 minutes late so we were allowed to go through priority security.

As a final advantage coming back made London weather seem like the summer and seeing sunlight again even after such a short break was great.

I cannot thank you all enough for giving us the best holiday experience to date.