

Long skating in Sweden

Why | To take a favourite pastime back to where it began

Where | Sweden | **Duration** | Two days +



The skater in front of me was flying across the frozen lake when he seemed to stumble on the ice and his foot broke through the surface. He managed to pull it out and keep gliding forward, but then the other foot crashed through and suddenly the ice had collapsed around him, sending him crashing into the freezing water.



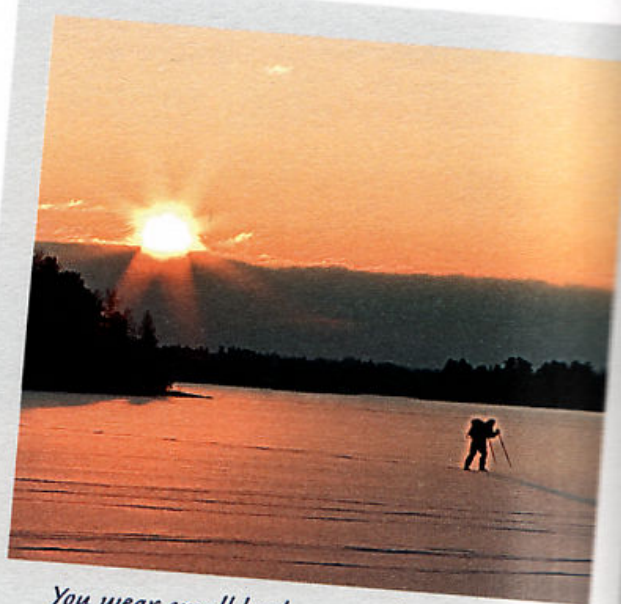
We were on a day's 'long skating' tour, travelling around the lakes in Sörmland, 45 miles south-west of Stockholm. In Sweden, skating is a national obsession, and entirely different to the sport as we know it in Britain. Rather than being confined to going in circles around ice-rinks, here skating is a means of escaping the cities and travelling out into the wilderness.

Sweden is a land of forests and lakes – there are 97,500 lakes larger than 2 acres – and as soon as winter freezes them and the waterways that connect them, enthusiasts head out on their skates. Dotted about beside the lakes and rivers are thousands of log cabins, both privately owned and belonging to clubs. You can either base yourself in one of them and make day trips on the ice from there, or make multi-day excursions, staying at a different cabin each night.


In the same way that skiers obsessively seek out perfect powder snow, for Swedish skaters it's all about finding the smoothest ice. There are countless websites on which they post reports and chat about ice conditions around the country.

Having the right kit is essential. The skates themselves are about six inches longer than conventional ones, enabling easier gliding, and the runners are wider and more stable. Some skaters carry a long pole to test the ice thickness, but all carry a rope, two small claws (like miniature ice axes that hang on a rope round your neck) and a spare set of clothes, sealed inside waterproof bags in a rucksack. If you break through the ice and get wet, you only have minutes to change before the onset of hypothermia.

Which brings us back to my friend. 'Stop right there!' he yelled as soon as he had broken through. I was following about 30 metres behind – it's vital



You wear small hooks around your neck in case you fall into the ice.

A photograph showing the silhouettes of three people long skating on a vast, flat, frozen lake. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, shimmering reflection on the ice that stretches towards the foreground. The sky is filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds. The skaters are dressed in heavy winter gear, and their long poles are visible as they glide across the ice. The overall mood is serene and adventurous.

everyone keeps some distance, to spread the weight on the ice, and to give you a chance to stop if the person in front breaks through. If that happens, you have to fight the natural instinct to rush forward to help – you’ll only make the hole bigger and the situation worse. So my friend set about hauling himself out. First, he turned round. The only ice you know is thick enough to carry you is the stuff you’ve already skated over. Then he took the two claws on the rope round his neck, one in each hand, and drove them into the ice. Though they looked small and flimsy, they gave him just enough purchase to scabble out of the freezing water.

Thankfully, we were only a few minutes from our cabin, so rather than change, we sped back across the ice to the warmth of the cabin and got straight into the sauna (considered a necessity by the Swedes, even in the most basic and remote hut). After a couple of minutes my friend was fully warmed up and laughing about the incident. The occasional dunk in freezing water is an accepted part of being a keen long skater.



I'd gone out with some Swedish friends, but there are several tour companies who can arrange three- or four-day skating itineraries. And skating on the inland lakes and along the rivers isn't the only adventure to be had.

In the Baltic Sea around Stockholm is an archipelago of some 24,000 islands and islets. Some are uninhabited, others have nothing but a couple of log cabins, some have small hotels or restaurants. In summer there's a buzzing scene as people cruise between them in small boats, stopping for meals or to sunbathe on deserted islands, and you can wild camp where you want as long as you're out of sight of the local houses. In

winter, they are mainly shut up and inaccessible, but after a few weeks of bitterly cold weather, the sea sometimes freezes over. Then the skaters can head out from the lakes and rivers and on to the open water, gliding across the sea and staying overnight in cabins on the islands. It's a whole new type of island-hopping.

Now do it . . .

Nature Travels (www.naturetravels.co.uk) are experts in outdoor and adventure travel and can organize your long skating adventure. See Visit Sweden (www.visitsweden.com) for all you need to know about Sweden.