



skate it

lake malaren

SWEDEN

After a winter sport with a difference? **Catherine Mack** is spending three days 'trip skating' among the archipelagos of southern Sweden. She recommends wearing padding...

WHAT: Trip skating, like a multi-day hike but on skates

WHERE: The lakes and islands around Stockholm, starting in Trosa, 70km south of the capital

HOW LONG: Three days

DIFFICULTY: Give yourself some time to get the hang of it – once you do you're off!

LOOK OUT FOR: Frozen wonderlands, swans, naked saunas, cracks in the ice...



My relationship with ice skating had moved beyond the annual flirtation on the local rink at Christmas – I was ready for a full-blown holiday romance. Researching places I could go for a dirty weekend, I found Sweden the only country where trip skating, as they call it (also known as tour skating or wild skating), has been a way of life for generations. And it's none of your *Dancing on Ice* nonsense either; this is getting out into the fragile frozen wilderness of Sweden's archipelagos.

Starting on a frozen jetty in Trosa, just 70km south of Stockholm, where nothing but a few trapped reeds moved in the stunning freeze-framed waterscape, our guides John and Christine Savelid handed out special

boots, like hiking boots but designed to attach to skates. They were very different to the skates you get at an ice rink, with a flexible blade that moves up and down with each gliding movement. John and Christine then distributed backpacks that also act as buoyancy aids, which also have special ice claws clipped to the shoulder straps so you can pull yourself back on to the ice if you fall through.

When John admitted, light heartedly, that last year he was the first one to fall in, I realised that I had been living in denial of the word 'crack' until now. Fear started to flood through my body and as I took my first steps out on to the crystalline Baltic, my legs locked in fright. It was like finally getting that first big date – and being struck dumb. Only last week I had been proudly circling the rink, feeling

crisp and carefree, and here I was, on the precipice of Swedish serenity, and I couldn't put one blade in front of the other.

Christine stuck with me as the other skaters, a mixture of Dutch, German and Swiss, varying in age from 20-something to 60-something, glided off into the distance. Poles tucked up behind them, they looked like swans taking flight. I, the ugly duckling, used my poles to manoeuvre slowly along, trying hard to lift one leg off the ice and glide. I wasn't consciously afraid of falling through the ice, because I knew that there was at least 30cm of the stuff holding me up, but my legs had turned to lead. It wasn't helped by ice cracking right in front of me, sending multi-levelled crevices out across it, even though Christine smiled and reassured me that these are normal and just on the surface layer. She poked her pole to test the ice all around as we slowly made progress of some sort. After a couple of hours we stopped for a picnic lunch and a hot chocolate on the tiny island of Fagelo, my arms aching from pole pushing, while the others didn't seem to be even out of breath after their 20km circuit.

Perhaps it was the shot of brandy from a sympathetic fellow skater, who could see the frustration hanging

around me; a scene so beautiful it's as if Mother Nature keeps it this way for months just so we can savour it for as long as possible.

Lake Malaren is a vast waterway heading inland from Stockholm. It's home to thousands of islands, some just offering a quick rest point, others protected nature reserves. It's like a giant obstacle course on ice, with twisting bays, wide open tracks and old lighthouses to skate round. As we followed the coastline west from Skabbholmen Island for about 16km, into the sunset, the fast guys lead the way, their skates creating an illuminated runway in the distance as the metal reflected the last rays of the day.

For the next two days I continued to glide through this petrified paradise, moving further west to Eskilstuna, meaning that we skated into the sunset each evening. Christine and I still skated behind the others a little, taking things at a gentler pace. But my moment in the winter sun came at last, on the final day. Just before we turned the corner into yet another beautiful bay, Christine stopped to warn me about the change in wind direction. "For this one, just lean forward, put your hands behind your back and let the wind take you," she said, and off I went in full sail. And at exactly the



Skating on thin ice (actually it's perfectly safe)

off every bead of sweat on my brow, that finally made everything click into place after lunch. As we followed the coastline into the mouth of Lake Malaren, my legs finally start to work. Christine grinned as I took my first real glide, lifting one leg off the ice for several seconds at a time while moving forward on the other. I almost wept with relief and started to look up and see the extraordinary sights

same time, two swans took flight, following me down the bay, their beating wings serenading my first real flight into freedom. This wasn't a holiday romance any more, this had turned into a full blown love affair. And the shoreline barbecue followed by the Swedish-style naked sauna back at the hostel in Eskilstuna couldn't have been a better way to finish the trip. ■

need more info?

»» BOOKING DETAILS

Nature Travels is the only company in the UK offering this trip: www.naturetravels.co.uk. It isn't cheap, but this is Sweden, and you get top notch guiding. Accommodation is hostel style, where you muck in with cooking and washing up, but the food was hearty and wholesome. Be prepared to hand out £734 based on two people sharing for three nights, with a single supplement of £39 per person per night. Flights aren't included. But it is worth it.

»» GETTING THERE

Nature Travels will pick people up from Stockholm Skavasta airport, served by Ryanair, or Nyköping railway station. Other airlines including BA, easyJet and SAS fly to Stockholm's Arlanda airport – if you fly there, take a train or bus to Stockholm Central Station, where you can get a connection to Nyköping station either by train (www.sj.se) or airport shuttle bus (www.flygbussarna.se). Non-fliers could also get the ferry to Denmark and then the train to Nyköping.

»» WHEN TO GO

In addition to scheduled dates (this season 17-20 January 2013; 21-24 February 2013 and 7-10 March 2013), which are suitable for adults and those with some previous experience, groups of four to eight people can also book private tours, when the needs of less experienced skaters and families can be accommodated. For private tours, there are also options for different standards of accommodation. Prices for these depend on group size.

»» GETTING TRIP FIT

Apart from a few Christmas sessions, and a lot of roller skating as a kid, I was a newbie to this. I had a one-to-one lesson before I left just to boost my confidence a bit. Runners will love it, and if you have done some cross-country skiing you won't have a problem adapting to the skates, but as a non-skier, it was all new territory to me. Generally though, you just need a good sense of humour, a bit of determination and a bit of padding on the hips does help with the falls. You also need to be able to swim, just in case.

»» WHAT TO TAKE

I bought some Decathlon Quechua Bionnassay winter hiking trousers that were perfect. Everything in the salopette department would have been too hot, but these were warm, water repellent, windproof and had removable braces and gaiters, plenty of stretch and an inner lining. They are now an invaluable part of my walking wardrobe too. The pros wore cross-country skiing tights, but they weren't for me. On top you need lots of thin layers, a waterproof jacket and a hat, as you get hot and then cold very quickly. Skiing gloves are a must for falls. All other equipment is provided (except the hipflask!).