

Sarek

SILENCE

“OK everybody, undressing time,” said Jan, one of our trekking guides – cheerfully, pointing to the 20 metre-wide river channel directly in front of us. “That’s what we’ve got to cross so if you don’t want to get your underwear wet you’ll need to strip.”

Everyone else was already half-undressed; I quickly joined in and was soon wading through the icy water – stark bollock-naked.

I was in the Rappa river valley in the middle Sweden’s Sarek National Park. Being asked to get my kit off wasn’t something that I was expecting, but then again Sarek is quite unlike any other national park. Unknown to most people outside of Sweden, Sarek is hidden away just inside the Arctic Circle in the far north-west of Sweden. Widely acknowledged as having the most rugged alpine terrain in Sweden, Sarek’s mountains rise to over 2,000m whilst its valleys are filled with virtually impenetrable, old-growth forests of birch and willow; home to bears, lynx and moose.

But what really sets Sarek apart is its uncompromisingly wild nature: you won’t find signposted footpaths here; There are precious few bridges and, brace yourselves, there’s not even one cosy mountain hut to head for when the weather closes in. “Sarek was established almost a hundred years ago to preserve its wilderness,” explained (a fully-clothed) Jan later. “People who trek here have to be experienced and totally self-sufficient.”

The meeting point for the eight-day 85km trek was Jokkmokk, the nearest town to Sarek, where I met our two guides, Jan and Andrea, and the other 11 all-Swedish and all-smiling trekkers. After meeting and greeting we picked up our provisions for the week: pasta, packet soups and a suspiciously large amount of crispbread. After checking that I’d not left the tent behind, I



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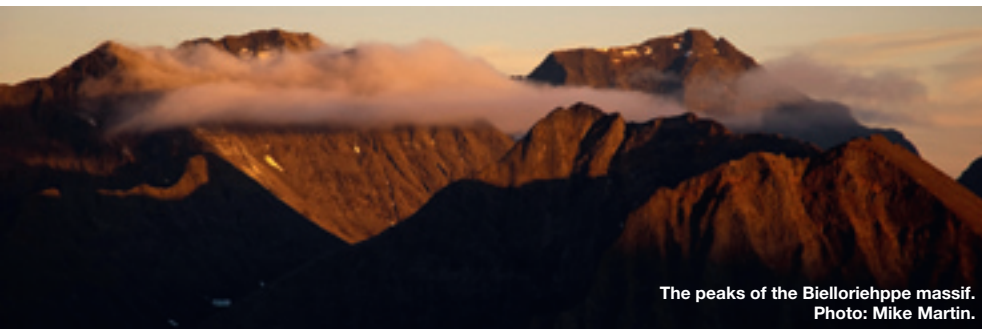
Sarek: a wild Áhkká massif underneath a midnight sun. Photo: Mike Martin.

hopped on the bus that took us to the start of the trek.

Our target for the evening was Aktse, an isolated campsite next to Sarek’s southern border. This was an easy 10km walk along a dirt track through open birch forest, leading to the edge of a vast lake from where it was a short boat ride to the shores of the campsite. Aktse’s location was idyllic – flower-filled fields spilling down to a shimmering blue lake, behind which poked glacier-

laden mountains. There was a sting in the tail though: mosquitoes.

“Don’t worry about the flies,” said Jan as he casually swatted a mozzie. “Tomorrow we’ll climb out of the forest where there are no mosquitoes.” I quickly escaped into my tent with Gunnar, where we brewed up from the safety of the tent inner. Jan was right: the mozzies miraculously disappeared the next morning, as we climbed above the tree line towards the peak of Skierffe –



The peaks of the Bielloriehppe massif.
Photo: Mike Martin.

“Below us we had dramatic views the Rappa river delta, whilst to the north lay the stunning sweep of the dazzling mountains of southern Sarek.”



You won't see anyone out here - foxgloves in the upper Rapadalen. Photo: Mike Martin.

Sarek's iconic 1,179m high mountain. It was a terrific (and pretty straightforward) 15km long walk – not only had we left the mozzies behind but our heavyweight backpacks too; the early August sun shone all day and it was warm enough for shorts and t-shirts.

"Wow, what a view!" cried Gunnar excitedly as I joined him on the summit along with the rest of the group who already busily taking photos. Way below us we had dramatic views of the Rappa river delta, whilst to the north lay the stunning sweep of the dazzling mountains of southern Sarek.

The following day, another short boat ride took us up the Rappa River and across Sarek's southern border. Low cloud had replaced yesterday's blue skies and the tops of the mountains were swallowed up by the gloom, whilst the vegetation seemed to close in on us adding to an increasing sense of foreboding. After the boatman helped us ashore with our backpacks he was off, leaving us quite alone. We began to bash our way through the green wall of trees and bushes that confronted us, focusing on not tripping up on tree roots or worse still, falling into the river.

Luckily the level of the Rappa was lower than normal and we were able to walk on shingle and sandbanks. Not only did this make the going much easier, it meant that we could look out for animal tracks in the soft sand. The most common of these were those made by moose, but we came across a much smaller set of tracks. "I'm pretty sure these were made by lynx," concluded Andrea as we all crowded round. "There

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are a few sightings of bears, lynx and moose every year," said Andrea, "but you've got to be both lucky, and more importantly, quiet." I knew the chances of our lively and chattering group seeing any of Sarek's big animals was pretty much zero.

Forcing our way through the head-high thicket of birch and willow trees, we made our way up the valley. We gradually gained height; soon the trees began thinning out and by late afternoon we finally emerged above the tree line. It'd been a long and sweaty day but we were rewarded with a camping spot perched dramatically high above the Rappa River - and the good news that from here the going would be gentler. Phew.

"We're aiming to set up a base camp less than 10km away so that we can have a day-walk to the summit of Gådokgajsse, We'll be above the tree-line and the ground rises gently so tomorrow will be much easier," said Andrea reassuringly at our regular after-dinner campfire get-togethers. The walk up to the base camp was indeed a doddle compared to yesterday's mammoth effort and soon Gunnar and I were brewing



Áhkká from Sjnjuvtjudis. Photo: Mike Martin.



Time to reflect - unnamed peaks of the Skårki massif. Photo: Mike Martin.

up a cuppa whilst taking in the views.

The next morning we were all happy campers at the thought of having a day-off from lugging our hefty backpacks around. At 1,670m high, Gådokgajsse was nearly 500m higher than Skierffe but the six kilometer walk to the summit was just as straightforward and we all but sprinted up the slopes that rose up from behind our tents, reaching top in just a few hours. Even though the mist was now swirling ominously over the tops of the nearby higher peaks, we could still clearly make out the distant outline of Skierffe that we'd climbed earlier in the week.

As we walked back down I asked Andrea why she was drawn to Sarek whose mountains were only half the height of those back in her native Switzerland. "Size isn't everything," Andrea replied laughing. "The Alps are filled with tourists, cable cars and mountain villages. What I love about Sarek is the space and the wilderness, you just never see anybody else here."

And of course Andrea was right, in the five days that we'd been trekking we'd not met one other trekker. However when we returned to base camp we found that we'd got visitors; hundreds of reindeer had joined us and taken up residence around our tents. "This is Sami country," explained Jan. "The reindeer are brought up here every summer to get fattened up for winter."

The reindeer were so tame that an evil thought flashed through my mind of luring one into our cooking pot to spice up our dreary diet of packet soups, but I resisted and instead settled to listening to them from the warmth of my sleeping bag as they grazed and grunted outside our tent deep into the night.

From base camp the final three days of the trek were the easiest of all as, apart from one small climb over a low pass, it was all gradually downhill. Plus, thanks to all the food we'd

been eating, our backpacks were now getting lighter. For our final night of camping in the Arctic, Andrea and Jan had chosen a site beside a small lake, complete with a backdrop of never-ending distant mountains that stretched towards the Norwegian border, lying less than 20 kilometers to the west.

So, how did everyone find the trek, I asked, as we all gathered round the campfire in the fading light "Sarek is a very special place for Swedish people as it's one of the few truly wild and untouched places left in Sweden," explained 31-year-old Sara. "When you're here you forget about your normal busy life and you just focus on walking through the wilderness."

"I love the silence and the solitude," added 63-year-old Britt-Marie. I agreed. Quite simply if you want to explore what are probably the wildest and most remote mountains in Europe, then take Andrea's lead, abandon the Alps and head north instead. Just one word of warning though – be prepared to get your kit off in public. **S**

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Essential facts: Sarek

Nature Travels offers an eight day trek in Sarek National Park for £420 (www.naturetravels.co.uk / 01929 463774). The train journey to Jokkmokk takes 44 hours from London St Pancras and fares start from £364 return, sleepers extra (www.raileurope.co.uk / 0844 8484070).