

THE KING’S TRAIL

RECOMMENDED BY **Bob Carter**



The Kungsleden (or “King’s Trail”) is Scandinavia’s best-known trail, running 265 miles north to south along Sweden’s border with Norway. It was not created by or for Swedish royalty, but instead gained its sobriquet from its reputation among aficionados as a king among trails. (The route was created by the Swedish Tourist Association at the end of the nineteenth century to introduce both down country Swedes and foreign hikers to the majesty of Lapland.) For some Swedish nationals, it’s a point of national pride to hike the entire trail, either in a monthlong odyssey or in a series of one-week walks. Visitors generally trek the northernmost fifty-four miles, which run from Abisko to Kebnekaise Mountain Station, above the Arctic Circle, through a sublime landscape of birch forests, jagged mountain peaks, immense glaciers, deep valleys, and turbulent river rapids.

“In some ways, the King’s Trail gives you the best of both worlds,” Bob Carter began. “It puts you in the middle of western Europe’s last great wilderness, with tremendous wide-open spaces and stunning scenery. Thanks to the infrastructure of the trail and mountain huts, the wilderness is accessible to walkers with less wilderness experience. I spent a lot of time in Scotland before coming to the King’s Trail, and I’d liken this part of Lapland to the Highlands, but on a much bigger scale; not bigger mountains, but just bigger. Sections of the King’s Trail run past Sarek National Park, which has no trails or other infrastructure and is completely wild. You can stay at one of the cabins along the King’s Trail and make detours into Sarek.”

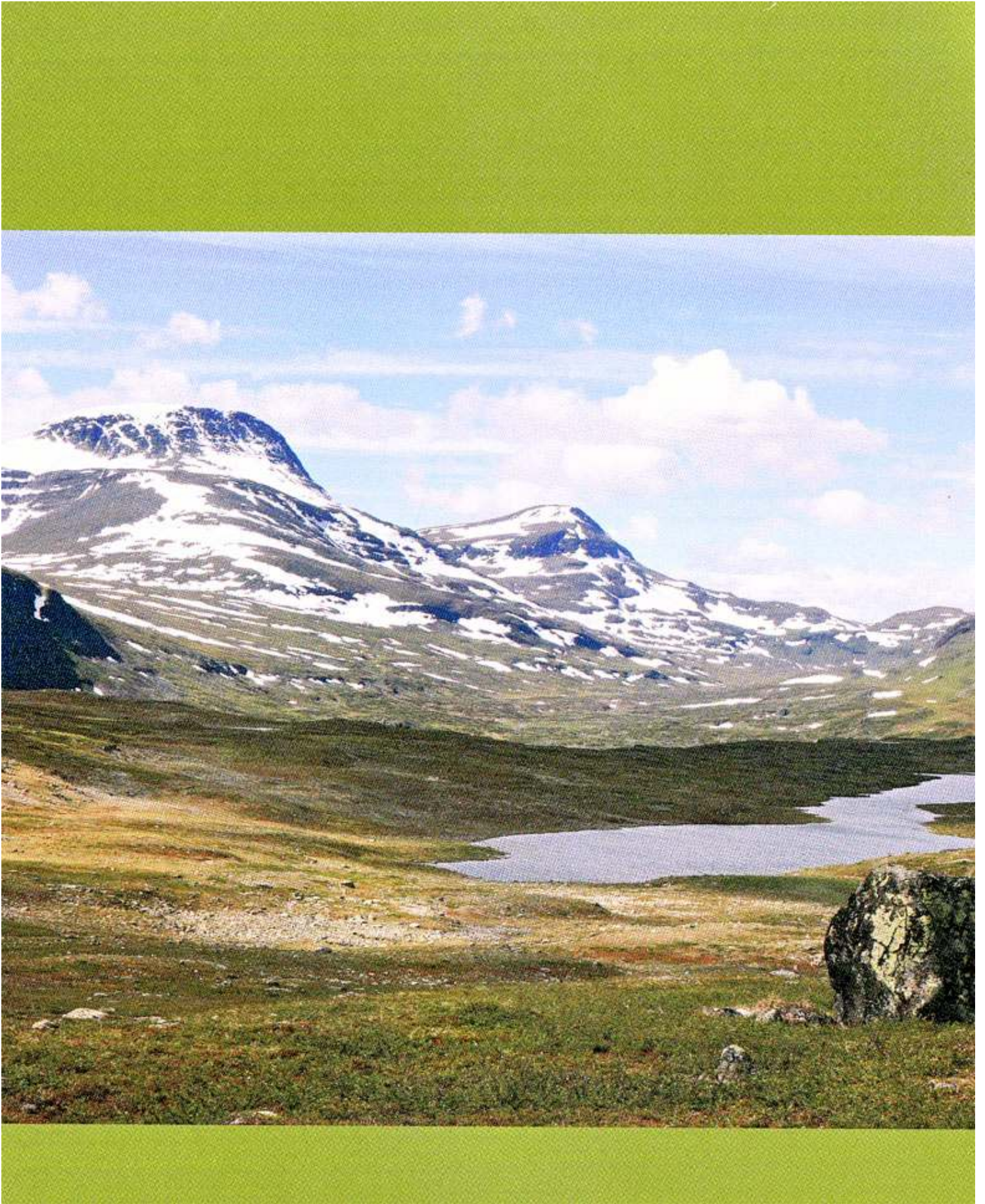
After a gentle first day along the beech-lined Abisko River, the King’s Trail climbs above tree line. The Kebnekaise massif, Sweden’s tallest mountain (with the Kebne peak eclipsing 6,900 feet) will be in view for much of the remaining time on the trail. (Hikers have the option of climbing to the top of Kebne near the trek’s conclusion.) The terrain is rugged—

sweeping, glaciated valleys (like Tjäktjavagge), shimmering glaciers, and moonscape-like passes—but the walking is not overly taxing. “Daily distances on this section of the King’s Trail range from ten to fifteen miles,” Bob explained. “While you need to be accustomed to carrying a modest backpack—twenty-five to thirty pounds—you never gain more than 1,000 feet of elevation on any one day. Boggy areas have boardwalks above them to protect the terrain and keep hikers comfortable, and larger streams have suspension bridges. There’s no need to feel rushed along the Kungsleden in the summer—light lingers in the sky through most of the night. You can go for a hike at one a.m. if you desire, and you’ll have no problem finding your way.”

The mountain huts along the King’s Trail provide a perfect middle path between camping and a proper lodge. “The huts are very well designed to blend in with the landscape and not detract from the wilderness experience,” Bob said. The wooden structures include sleeping rooms (with bunk beds), a common room, and a kitchen. Each room is equipped with a wood-burning stove; a well-stocked woodshed rests outside, as well as an outhouse and the living quarters of the *stugvard*, the hut’s volunteer caretaker. (It’s accepted courtesy on the Kungsleden to restock firewood and tidy up the hut before hitting the trail.) The huts have gas stoves for cooking, as well as running water, though that running water is in the form of streams that run a hundred yards or so away; while mildly inconvenient, the water is pure enough to drink without treatment. At the Alesjaure Mountain Hut complex, you’ll find the first of several saunas along the trail. The dry warmth is a well-deserved reward.

The wilderness of northern Norrbotten county is home to an abundance of animal life, including brown bear, lynx, wolf, wolverine, and moose. “The moose in Sarek are Sweden’s largest,” Bob said. “The genetic strains produce gigantic bulls, though they’re seldom seen.” The two animals you’re most likely to encounter, however, are lemmings and the iconic ungulate of the Arctic, the reindeer. In the summer, reindeer feed on grass and leaves; in the winter, they feed on lichens (mostly from fir-spruce trees) and shrubs, but mostly subsist on fat reserves. Most of the reindeer that hikers encounter on the King’s Trail are semidomesticated, herded by the Sami, the indigenous people of Swedish Lapland (which they call *Sápmi*). “Sometimes we’ll come upon the nomadic villages of the Sami,” Bob added, “a series of *kata*, the tepee-type of structure that they use for shelter. If we do, we can stop off and visit, and perhaps buy handicrafts, which, as you might expect, are connected to reindeer. The Sami are renowned for their sense of humor. My

OPPOSITE:
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wife was visiting one of their fixed camps recently, and the villagers had set up a reindeer-burger bar called ‘Lapdonald’s.’”

As mentioned above, more adventurous trekkers may wish to detour into Sarek National Park to experience the Swedish wilderness without the comforts of huts, boardwalks, and trails. Bob recalled one such adventure. “One of the popular hikes in the Sarek is to a hill called Nammatj. From here, you have a fantastic view over the Rapa Valley delta, where many of the region’s glacier-fed rivers come together. To do this hike, you take a short trip upriver in a boat that’s operated by a Sami guide. I was going upriver to the hike on one occasion, and was joined in the boat by a pair of Dutch fellows with huge rucksacks. One of the guys had a T-shirt that said ‘Wildebeest Trekking.’ I was sitting next to the guide, and he was chuckling to himself as we motored along. I asked him ‘What’s funny?’ in Swedish. He replied that he often brings big men with big rucksacks into the Sarek wilderness, but when he goes to pick them up the following week, they look much smaller.”

BOB CARTER started Nature Travels with his wife, Sofia, in 2005; the company orchestrates a variety of outdoor experiences throughout Sweden. Bob has long been fascinated with the outdoor wonders Sweden has to offer, and has kayaked, dog-sledded, hiked, and skied across much of the Scandinavian nation.

If You Go

- ▶ **Getting There:** Kungsleden visitors tend to fly into Kiruna, Sweden, which has regular service from Stockholm on SAS (800-221-2350; www.flysas.com). From Kiruna, it’s one and a half hours by car to Abisko Turiststation where the trek begins.
- ▶ **Best Time to Visit:** Hikes on the Kungsleden are offered from late June through mid-September. You can cross-country ski the trail in the winter months.
- ▶ **Guides/Outfitters:** Nature Travels (+44 1929 463774; www.naturetravels.co.uk) leads hiking trips on the Kungsleden, through Sarek National Park, and in other venues in Sweden.