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Easy glider

Catherine Mack

I take my first steps out on to the frozen waters of the Baltic and my legs lock with fear. All that practice on the Christmas rink feels like a futile flirtation as my Swedish guide gently urges me to put my trust in the long metal "tour skating" blades and slide.

Only weeks ago I had been proudly circling the rink, feeling carefree, and now here I am, on the precipice of Swedish serenity, and I can't seem to put one blade in front of the other.

It isn't helped by the fact that my best friend Simon, who had reassured me he could hardly skate at all, takes off with all the other Dutch, Swiss and German skaters on this guided tour of Sweden's frozen archipelago and lakes. There are two guides, John and Christine Savelid, father and daughter, the latter patiently holding back with me as I await my Torvill and Dean moment.

Our trip started a couple of hours earlier, with John showing us maps and trails at our hostel accommodation in Trosa, just 60km south of Stockholm. After distributing special boots, designed to attach to the skates, we headed to a nearby jetty for our equipment training. This included a backpack which was to act as a buoyancy aid in the event of us falling in; crampons to stick into the ice in the event of falling in; and a rope to throw to anyone, in the event of them – yes – falling in. I could feel the fear starting to build but everyone else was smiling, donning all the accoutrements and, within seconds, skating.

Attaching the blades to the boots is straightforward and, finally, I ease myself gently on to the ice, thanks to two walking poles which the others are using to boost their speed. It's when the ice starts to crack in front of me – creating multi-levelled crevices across the surface – that reality hits, my legs lock and I hit the deck. Christine smiles, reassuring me that the cracks which appear sporadically, taking off across the surface like silver snakes in all directions, are normal. They are just on the surface, with at least 30 centimetres of solid ice underneath, she tells me, poking her pole to test the ice all around as we make slow progress.

I have chosen the end of February for my visit, the end of the ice season, which usually starts around the beginning January. But with tracking technology, our guides are in constant communication with other skaters, who keep them updated on conditions. We stop after a couple of hours for a picnic lunch on the tiny island of Fagelo, my arms aching from pole pushing. Simon, on seeing my frustration, pours some brandy from his hipflask into my hot chocolate.

It all starts to click into place after lunch. Christine smiles as I take my first real glide, lifting one leg off the ice for several seconds at a time while moving forward on the other. At last I can look around me and see a scene so beautiful, it feels as if Mother Nature freezes it especially, just so that we can view it in this perfect state. Lake Malaren is a vast waterway heading inland from Stockholm and home to thousands of islands. It's like a giant obstacle course on ice, with twisting bays, wide open tracks and old lighthouses to shimmy round. As we follow the coastline west from Skabbholmen Island, skating into the sunset for about 16km, the fast guys lead the way, their skates creating an illuminated runway in the distance, as the metal reflects the last rays of the day. For the next two days I glide through a frozen, fragile wilderness, moving further west to Eskilstuna, where the ice gets more mirror-like in its smoothness.

Christine and I take things at a gentle pace until she stops to prepare me for a new bay up ahead, where the wind changes direction. "For this one, just lean forward, put your hands behind your back and let the wind take you," she says, and off I go in full sail. As two swans take flight beside me, the first sign of life in ages, we soar down the shoreline together.

Many Dutch people travel north to keep up their tradition, with climate change warming up the waters back home. They skate into Sweden in droves, grieving the loss of a sport which is as close to their hearts as GAA is to many of ours. And grieve they might, because In 2009 the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency gave a rather pessimistic outlook claiming that, given current climate trends, the race was only likely to happen every eighteen years, compared to every seven years during the last century.

We also meet a few locals fishing, drilling through the ice with small hand drills, and sitting on stools for hours jigging small rods up and down. This is how wealthy Stockholmers enjoy weekends at their island cabins, fishing by day and warming up in their waterside saunas by night.

We too get to enjoy a sauna at a hostel in Eskilstuna. This is Swedish, starkers style, so be warned, but it is well worth it, as my hips are feeling the strain of several falls.

Overall, this trip was one of the most memorable of my travels. The joy of gliding never dissipates, whether it is out into the open waterscape or along reed protected coastlines.

On the last day we had our ultimate ice experience, travelling to Lilla Blacken on the north side of Lake Malaren to skate a circuit of 30km. Here, from the minute we put our skates on, a series of booming noises start to echo around the bay. This is followed by loud groans being carried off in the wind, as if the giant creatures of the deep had been wounded in some underwater attack.

It is just the ice starting to melt and move, and these noises only happen when the ice is really deep.

"It's all good," John says, skating off with an elegance I have spent three days trying to emulate. I follow, leaving my fears far behind me on the jetty this time, revelling in this trip full of sensory overload, and celebrating nature's ability to keep us guessing . . . and my need to just keep on gliding.

* Catherine Mack travelled with Nature Travels , naturetravels.co.uk

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Ryanair. For more information on holidays in Sweden, see visitsweden.com. You can see a short video of Catherine Mack's trip at vimeo.com/37835777