

Husky sledding

It takes more than shouting
"Mush!" to manage a dog
team in the frozen wilds
of Sweden's far north

Words & photography: Jamie Lafferty



the experience



Lumiki, Viper, Musta and Tuomi are keeping me alive. Later, I'll return the favour, but for now we need to get across this frozen river. And while I have no doubt the ice is sufficiently thick to stay solid, I'm nowhere near as sure of my ability to keep our sled upright.

I'm in Swedish Lapland for a week of husky mushing, getting to grips with the skills needed to manage a small team of dogs. Over eight days and nights (not that there's much difference up here), I'm getting much more than the usual mushing taster, learning to prepare the dogs, feed them, and fetch water in Arctic conditions. Nothing is ever simple, especially when the mercury sinks below -20°C .

"The colder it is, the better the dogs run," says Marion Kanerva, my guide with Nature Travels, swaddled in a gigantic Canada Goose jacket. "They hate warm weather." As though to emphasise the point, over the trip, they'll mostly sleep outside, no matter how cold it gets.

Kanerva, in contrast, still struggles with the climate, having moved up here from Germany a few years ago.

A typical day, if there is such a thing, starts in darkness, feeding the huskies before our own breakfast. "We take care of the dogs first, always," Kanerva explains.



Previous page: Terri, like many huskies, has different coloured eyes. Above, from left: Marion leads her group across the Torna river; Jamie on the back of a sled at -25°C ; freezing food must be left with an ice; pink light of dawn at Tana; Lappin waits to be fed

"I can't help but feel my experience is authentically Arctic"

After harnessing them, we go through the fraught business of attaching them to their respective sleds. Each and every time it's howling bedlam, followed by a sudden, eerie silence when the anchor is lifted and we shoot off through the cold air.

At the start of the trip, I try to stand on the back of the sled, enjoying the scenery as it zips along. I soon discover, though, that idleness is the principal ally of elemental cold and so, in a bid to keep the blood pumping, I find myself running off the back, as though pushing a stalled car.

It's seriously hard work. "Every season I lose so much weight," says Kanerva. "The dogs are losing it on each run. By the end of the week you can feel how skinny they are."

Occasionally while out in the infinite white, we come across tourists on day

tours, passengers for massive teams of 12 dogs mushed by a guide. Knowing how hard I'm working with my heroic quartet, I can't help feel my experience is a little purer, and that – even though no one living here today would choose this mode of transport over, say, a good snowmobile – it's more authentically Arctic.

At the end of each day, we pull up at a different hut, each half-hidden in the forests. Obeying the dog-first rule, we heat water on a fire to defrost pungent, high-calorie, high-fat meat. When it gets colder than -10°C , which is often, these meaty slabs become granite-hard, meaning I must pick up an axe and channel my inner Viking.

Dogs fed, we venture into the cabins, where I can begin to thaw my beard, and drink some soup. There's a deep fatigue that comes with this kind of work, a whole body workout, satisfying and exhausting.

The stars wheel overhead, and before long the aurora will creep up from the horizon like a column of green smoke. The dogs howl at the Moon. Everything tells me it's time for bed, but I check my watch, and it's not even 4pm.

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