

Go with



The giant ice-scape
comes to an abrupt
edge where the Baltic
refuses to freeze

the. fine.

Forget sequins, pirouettes and Dancing On Ice. Gliding across frozen lakes and seas, Scandinavian-style, makes for a spectacular winter adventure, as Lizzie Enfield discovered

Pictures Johner Images/Alamy & Henrik Trygg/Corbis



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UR SWEDISH GUIDE

checks his GPS as the rest of us shuffle around a patch of thin ice and clamber across the granite rocks onto an island in the Baltic Sea. Here we stop for lunch,

getting a fire flaming to barbecue some sausages. "90km an hour?" he muses. "That can't be right."

This is my first time 'wild' or Nordic skating on natural ice. Trying not to fall over or fall through it are more important to me than speed. But for the hardcore skaters in the group, who hail from Switzerland, Germany and Belgium, knowing how far and how fast they've travelled is part of the sport's appeal.

John The Guide looks confused, but then realises this speed must have registered while we were still in the minibus, driving to a spot where the ice was thick enough to skate. "30kph is the fastest speed since we've been on the ice," he corrects himself.

This sounds fast to me, faster than I can ride my bicycle pedalling furiously on the flat. But it is slow compared with top speed skaters, who can reach up to 48kph, albeit in ideal conditions. Our conditions require a certain amount of caution, though some members of our party would like to throw that to the Arctic winds. We perpetually need to look ahead, check for holes in the ice and be mindful of rough patches, so trying to go flat out is ill-advised.

A fellow skater sees my concern and tries to reassure me. "I've seen cars driven across frozen lakes in Sweden," he says. "I'm sure you don't weigh as much as a Saab."

Back when I was at school, the equation "pressure equals force divided by surface area" was illustrated by the notion that a woman in stilettos has more chance of going through the floor of the gym than an elephant. Now, standing a long way from the shore and looking at darker (and therefore thinner) patches of ice, I wonder if me on very thin blades is the equivalent of the woman in heels, a Saab the more evenly distributed elephant.

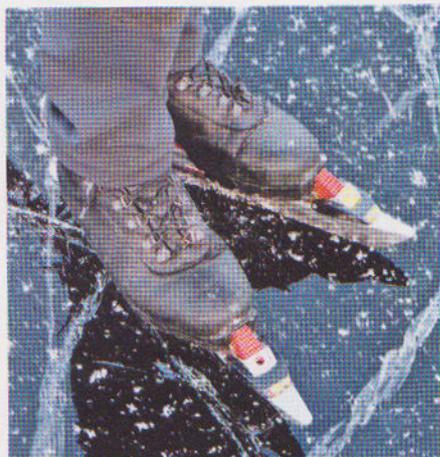
John, a wiry Swede who leads parties across the frozen wastes for much of the winter, has an equation of his own. "The thickness of the ice squared, then times five, equals the amount of weight in kilos that it can sustain."

I do a few quick calculations and decide I stand more chance of remaining dry than the tall German in our party, who must have a good five stone on me. My theory is borne out when, on our final morning, the sound of the ice cracking is followed by our German friend sinking waist deep into the icy waters.

"It's not unusual for skaters to fall through," John says. "You won't drown. You will just freeze to death, if you don't get out soon enough!" I think he's trying to calm us.



Lizzie Enfield and pals fire up the barbie



Wild skating feels like roller-blading on ice

BLADE RUNNER

Nordic tour skates have a blade about 50cm long and are attached by clipping the toe of skating boots into a binding. The boots are like walking boots, but with a toe clip – good for when the ice becomes thin and you need to climb onto an island and walk.

Nordic 'wild skating' is about as far removed from the fixed grins and sparkling sequins of *Dancing On Ice* as cross-Channel swimming is from synchronised swimming. It is exposed, thrilling and a magical way to explore the majesty and tranquility of the Swedish winter landscape. This is a vast, slightly surreal frozen plain dotted with fir-clad islands, and utterly pristine. Gliding over patches of clear ice, the smooth hiss of the skates in my ears, is as wonderful as it sounds, and so different to doing dizzying laps at a local rink. The winter sun makes a lazy effort to rise in the sky, but at sunrise and sunset the light across these empty panoramas is mesmerising.

Skate touring is also physically demanding, as we cover up to 50km in a day. In style it's not dissimilar to rollerblading, requiring

balance, stamina and co-ordination. You bend your knee slightly and push with one skate, lifting your opposite leg to the side slightly as you glide forward across the ice, before repeating with the opposite leg. On smooth ice, progress becomes a delicious swish-sway rhythm, and when the terrain gets tricky or the biting wind turns against us, we use our Hansa poles to push us along.

We skate over newly frozen black ice; white ice formed after a fresh snowfall; orange ice coloured by soil; farga (ice which goes up and down); trumis (ice with air trapped under it); and asocial (ice on which you can't speak to each other, because concern over its thickness forces you to keep your distance) – to name but a few. The Stockholm skating club, which brings coachloads of skaters up the Swedish archipelago at weekends, has 250 different words for ice. That gives you an idea of how varied the terrain is.

We've been skating for just over 10km on day one when we reach the edge and the ice stops, giving way to the liquid version of the Baltic Sea. I'd expected a more gradual thinning of the ice, not this sudden ice-sea frontier, and as we peer tentatively over the edge we realise the sensation that we've been on solid ground is quite mistaken. The sheet of ice against which the freezing waters of the Baltic are now lapping is only 7 or 8cm thick, and we can feel the rise and fall of the ocean beneath.

Some crazy Swedes like to make a hole in the ice at this juncture, stripping off and diving through before swimming a few yards beneath the frozen surface to emerge in the sea. They then heave themselves up on the edge with the air of someone pulling themselves out of a temperate swimming pool.

I'm relieved that no one suggests we follow suit. While the possibility of falling through is real enough, doing so voluntarily seems mad, not least because on this type of skating trip there is no letting up, nor any cafés to hide in if things get intolerably cold.

We carry food in our backpacks, stopping at islands to eat and on occasion building a fire for sausages. Each day we drive an hour or so in search of 'good ice' from our base at a hostel on the mainland, in a town called Trosa. The sauna, a 50-yard dash from the hostel, is a welcome evening respite for aching muscles, before we tuck into dinners of salmon, reindeer stew and chicken. While we eat, John checks the ice conditions via a fraternity of online skaters who, a bit like birdwatchers, post the latest news on where the ice is good.

On our fourth and final day, I feel so tired I can barely stand. John is on his eighth day of continuous skating, and has the lean body of someone in regular training to show for it. Pit him against Christopher Dean or Robin Cousins in a test of endurance and my money would definitely be on the Swede. ■

Lizzie Enfield travelled as a guest of Nature Travels (01929 503080, naturetravels.co.uk), which runs four-day Ice Skating on Natural Ice tours to Sweden between January and March. Tours cost £834pp based on two people sharing. Ryanair (ryanair.com/en) flies from Stansted to Stockholm Skavsta from £40 return; it's then a half-hour drive to the nearest ice.



“Some crazy Swedes like to make a hole in the ice, stripping off and diving through for a quick swim”

! WHAT IF IT CRACKS?

Skaters must carry a rucksack with a complete change of clothing in a waterproof bag. The pack itself acts as a buoyancy aid, keeping your torso above the water so you can unclip 'ice claws' from its strap and haul yourself onto firm ground. The claws look like a skipping rope, but the handles unwind to reveal sharpened spikes, which will cleave the ice. The pack also contains a line to throw to fallen fellow skaters.