

# 12 Skate on lakes, Sweden

Soaring over frozen lakes is a godlike sensation, says **Jasper Winn**



In the watery midday light of a Swedish winter it seemed fairly reckless to be more than a mile offshore on the waters of an immense lake. So immense that the far shore, even more miles away, was only a faint, black scribble of trees under snow-covered hills. It was very cold: -10°C? -15°C? Parky anyway.

But it was the cold that had helpfully frozen the waters into the friction-free thick skin of ice that was allowing me to swiftly slide across the surface of Ännsjön. Rather than merely walking on water, I was actually flying above it. I'd become Mercury with his

winged heels. Or that's what it felt like. And it's what Erika – experienced local skate-tourer and my guide – looked like as she swooped gracefully ahead of me.

I, on the other hand, might be speedy, but I was also stumbling and inelegant. I blamed the technology strapped to my feet. Archaeologists have discovered tie-on skate blades made of bone dating from four millennia ago. Not much has changed since then. The awkwardly long and high blades are metal now, but they still gave me the tottery sensation of running down a cobble-stoned street in fashion clogs.

I was further hampered by wearing

a bulky, waterproof backpack filled with dry clothes, food and a length of rope. And carrying two titanium-tipped sticks like ski poles didn't help. Twice I'd managed to swing one or other of these between my energetically scissoring legs, and both times I'd fallen flat on the frozen water at speed. Capsized, if you will. Though painfully rather than wetly.

Pratfalls, yes, but it was still exhilarating skate-touring out here a very long way from any indoorsy comforts. There was nobody else within miles of us. There was, though, a distant 'pruk' from a pair of ravens. And I knew that there were >

## Active winter

< reindeer on the slopes above the lake because we'd seen them earlier.

On the smooth expanses it was easy to be lulled by the dreamy rhythm of my swaying push-and-slide gait. But this was not the kind of ice that you find on a rink – it was wild. There were rough patches of broken, re-frozen ice, like scattered unassembled jigsaw pieces, and there were fault-lines where the ice had crashed together like two tectonic plates and had to be stumbled across. At one point pressure had pushed water up through a crack and made a wide shallow puddle.

### Blades of glory

We had been through the rescue procedure: if you fall through the ice you must grab the ice-spikes hung round your neck and claw your way out of the water, then rapidly strip and change into dry clothes. Keen skate-tourers practise this kind of thing,

in the way that kayakers practise their Eskimo rolls. We, though, had decided on caution, zigzagging to stay on ice we were totally confident of.

In mid-afternoon – sunset – we landed on a rocky islet wiggled in birch trees and ate a late lunch. We sheltered out of the wind while eating salmon rolls and drinking strong Thermos coffee. Looking down at the shallowing lake bottom through the glassy ice I could imagine how this shoreline might be on a hot summer's day. There was even the weak, reddened sun on our faces. But no heat. It was time to head back towards shore and the wooden jetty we launched from hours ago.


Our outward journey had been into the wind. Now, with the breeze at our backs we were soaring effortlessly across the lake's surface, skates hissing across the ice. Our rush of speed across this immense wintry wilderness was tipsy-making. Briefly, I really

was a Nordic Mercury flying along with steel wings on my heels. I might even have looked graceful. Though I doubt it.

**When to go:** January – March

**Getting started:** Nature Travels (01929 463774, [www.naturetravels.co.uk](http://www.naturetravels.co.uk)) runs scheduled *Ice Skating on Natural Ice* tours in Sweden from £734, excluding flights; private trips (minimum four people) are available on other dates. Based near Stockholm and Nyköping, the four-day itineraries vary depending on the best lake ice available. Accommodation is in two-bed hostel rooms. Some skating experience is required (ice-rink or inline skating is fine); also, you must be able to swim. Skates, boots and safety kit are provided.

Après-skate pleasures include saunas and Scandinavian cuisine (but stock up on drink prior to arrival). If the timing is right, a trip highlight is skating by moonlight. >



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