

The Ratekjokk Trail in Lapland – in the land of the moose

As far as the eye can see, the northern Swedish tundra stretches out below us, with its low-lying forests, bogs, heathland and lakes. There are no houses or roads in sight. The view from the aeroplane, before we land in Kiruna, is breathtaking! Quite unlike the 'capital' of the north, with its population of just under 20,000. This town only came into being around 1900, when the Swedish government developed the huge mine here. At present, some of the houses are being demolished to make way for the excavations once again.

Until the mid-17th century, the Sami, the indigenous people of Lapland, lived largely undisturbed, but then the authorities began to interfere increasingly in the lives of the indigenous people. Reindeer herding was regulated, and settlers from the south seized land and hunted the Sami's animals.

Later, people were also forced to speak Swedish, and the Sámi language was banned from schools. The Church did its part to convert this indigenous people to Christianity by any means necessary. There were no major uprisings against these encroachments on the part of the Sami, as they are a very peace-loving people. Today, they make the best of the situation: traditions are still upheld, and crafts, reindeer herding and fishing remain the most important sectors. These have now been joined by tourism and, indeed, the mine.



Kerstin and Matti have dedicated themselves primarily to tourism with their first-class Icelandic horse farm. In winter, guests explore the enchanting snowy landscape on horseback, by snowmobile,

reindeer sleighs and so on; in summer, they set off on horse-riding tours up into the mountains. I'm heading to the Far North in mid-August for one such wilderness tour. In the evening, all the participants arrive in stages by plane, train and bus. The diverse group, aged between 15 and 65, comes from Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Belgium, England and even New Zealand. Alongside Kerstin, we'll be accompanied by Sarah, who has trained as a wilderness guide and has been a permanent member of staff for several years. We spend the first night at the riding centre in two cosy, typically Swedish guest houses. The vast paddocks stretch all the way to the wide Kalix River, which looks more like a lake here. The newly built sauna is also situated on the riverbank. The next morning, however, we head straight into the wilderness. First, though, the horses are loaded onto the trailer, as we need to cross the river. Sometime in the morning, all the saddlebags are packed, the horses are saddled and assigned, and we're ready to set off. After a short stretch along the Kalix, we leave the paved main track and ride along narrow footpaths through a low birch forest. Although the summer has been very wet so far, the ground isn't slippery; the forest floor is nice and loose and mostly covered with springy moss. We quickly realise just how good the Icelandic horses are: Kerstin places great importance on proper training, and all of them are four- or five-gaited. In the treeless mountains, we're advised to ride spread out rather than in single file, so the horses don't become dulled. This isn't a problem at all; they're all very responsive and easy to ride independently. We're particularly impressed by Brenna, the experienced pack horse. Even during breaks, she is often free to roam whilst the others graze in a fenced paddock. So she occasionally pops by our barbecue spot to see what's on offer. When she isn't carving her own path through the undergrowth and across the plains, Brenna – who is otherwise low in the pecking order – likes to make the most of being riderless and slows the horses behind her down a little.



After passing through the birch forest, on the evening of the first day we reach a vast mountainous landscape where a strong wind blows in our direction. Finally, we arrive at our camp for the next two days: two Sami tents, a barbecue area and a large paddock, all situated in a sheltered and idyllic spot by a stream. The first evening in the wilderness is quite chilly, so after a delicious dinner by the campfire we soon retreat to our teepees. Everyone is given a reindeer skin to sleep on, which proves to be surprisingly comfortable. There's also a small stove in the middle, where we light a fire with wood to keep us nice and cosy. Kerstin proves to be a wonderful cook, conjuring up three-course meals even over the campfire. The main dish is reindeer from our own herd. We eat it in every conceivable variation, from smoked to black pudding.

In between, we also have fish from the surrounding waters. The fish soup, in particular, is hugely popular. And, of course, moose is a must on the menu. As a vegetarian, I much prefer the live reindeer and moose that we spot from time to time. We even manage to spot a few moose through our binoculars. Whilst these mighty animals gather around the riding stables in winter and help themselves generously to the horses' hay racks, they tend to be rather scarce in summer. The wilderness is simply too vast; you need a bit of luck to track the animals down. Binoculars are definitely worth bringing.

There are also bears, wolves and wolverines here, but they remain completely hidden from us – and we from them, I suppose....

The natural landscape also impresses with its unique flora: alongside the characteristic birch trees, the ground is mainly covered with mosses, low bushes and berries. So we dismount time and again to pick blueberries, black crowberries and the rare cloudberry.

There's always plenty of time for wildlife spotting, berry-picking, collecting reindeer antlers and taking photographs – there's no such thing as rushing here! That doesn't mean we ride at a walk the whole time, though. Every now and then there's an opportunity to trot, tölt or even break into a short canter. But overall, it's the perfect riding tour for simply relaxing in nature. In the morning, we start with a leisurely breakfast, and at midday we also take plenty of time to look after the horses, cook and eat.

We reach our next stop via a beautiful treeless plateau, parts of which are already tinged with autumnal reds. The view stretches across lakes, wooded valleys and all the way to the Kebnekaise mountains, which still have quite a bit of snow on them. In the late afternoon, we reach a large forest, where our next stop is located. It is Matti's home village, which is now used exclusively by the riders. Two huge horse pastures surround the two larger wooden houses and several smaller log cabins, as well as the sauna by the river. The houses have no running water, or rather, only the crystal-clear river from which we regularly draw water. Instead of water, the toilet is powered by fire...

The only slight downside to this very idyllic setting is the mosquitoes, which thrive in the damp forest. But with the right mosquito repellent, it's no problem. What's more, whilst the weather is pleasant, it's certainly not T-shirt weather. After a very hot summer in Germany, this week in Sweden is giving us a bit of a cool-down and a taste of autumn – the best time for horse riding anyway! In the evening, we enjoy a sauna session before

Kerstin and Sarah call us in for dinner. The farmhouse holds a few treasures from days gone by; all sorts of everyday objects hang on the walls, the purpose of which we can't quite guess. Kerstin, who has also taught traditional crafts and the Sami language, is happy to tell us about the history of the peaceful Sami people. On the last day, a ride awaits us high up into the crimson-coloured mountains, offering a magnificent view over the wide Kalix River, the Kebnekaise mountains and the vast forests. At the picnic spot, we find fresh moose tracks and droppings. Unfortunately, we've arrived too late...



We then say goodbye to the horses, which are staying behind in the Sami village this time, and walk the short distance down to Kalix, where Matti is waiting for us with the ferry. After a lovely crossing, we take a minibus back to the riding centre, where we are greeted by the other animals: As well as nearly 30 Icelandic horses, the farm is also home to a cat, two playful billy goats and several dogs. Six new horses arrived from Iceland over the summer and are now being carefully trained. Some of the older horses will then go on to enjoy their retirement with friends and acquaintances of the riding centre. It's lovely to see how well the horses are looked after. Before the ride, we were told a bit about each horse's individual traits, and every one of us was absolutely delighted with the horse we'd been assigned. The combination of superb horses, wonderful hospitality and unspoilt nature makes the ride a unique experience – highly recommended!

After the ride, we spend another two days in Stockholm. The picturesque harbour city is definitely worth a stopover. As the domestic flights are fully booked, we've booked a night train that chugs its way from Kiruna to the

capital. On the way, I finally spot a moose up close, albeit only briefly. The trains are also quite cosy, with a few stops and layovers along the way. It turns out to be a very comfortable and affordable alternative to flying. Passengers even have access to a clean shower. Well-rested, we explore the old town, the various islands and the waterfront promenades. And we don't miss the chance to see Streiff, King Gustav Adolf's famous 17th-century Oldenburg warhorse, which stands stuffed in the castle's armoury.

Link to the programme:

<http://www.equitour.com/ret007.htm>

Jessica Kiefer, August 2018