



# WHERE REINDEERS *Reign*

In the whiteout of an Arctic winter, **Ewen Bell** meets a group of modern Swedish outdoorsmen inviting visitors to experience their sub-zero wonderland.

Photography by **Ewen Bell**

In the middle of a frozen lake, Fredrik Broman is trying to free an immobilised snowmobile. It's a stunning day with blue skies above and  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  on the thermometer. "The powder is only a few feet deep here, but there is ice beneath it – smooth, flat, skating ice," says Fredrik as he works. "There's no traction for heavy machines."

As he bounces his weight on the rear of the vehicle, Fredrik revs the throttle and gets just enough bite into the mush to push off the clearing and back onto the trail. Knowing how to get your mobile moving again after getting ditched, sliding on wet ice or tumbling down a bank is an everyday survival skill in the Arctic. It's not nearly one of Fredrik's most impressive, though. Once he left the trail in late winter and found himself chest deep in freezing water. "You get out of the wet clothes quick as possible and head for a cabin," he explains. "Oh ya, I was naked. Naked is warmer than wet."

The human body does adapt to Arctic cold, but nude is still nude and you can't stay warm for very long here once disrobed. While he may have beaten the elements on that occasion, Fredrik isn't planning a repeat episode any time soon.

Snowmobiles are a way of life in Lapland, replacing skis and reindeer as the most common form of modern transportation. It takes little training to get the hang of the throttle and steering using your body as a counterweight. There is always the possibility of it all going a bit wrong and consequently ploughing into a snowdrift, which is momentarily terrifying until the powder acts as the world's coolest cushion.

The snowmobile safari from the Aurora Safari Camp, in Gunnarsbyn, to Brändön Lodge is a four-hour ride, taking in a series of forests, glacial lakes and a jaunt onto the Bay of Finland. An hour from the coast, we stop on sea ice to watch the sun mingle with the horizon. In February, Fredrik tells me, the ice below our feet is thick enough for freighters to drive on top of the ocean.

Out here the snow is never still. Instead it's blown by the wind into drifts big enough to hide a truck. Fredrik likes to take travellers on overnight trips into the wilderness, digging a cave into the massive mounds to act as lodging. After he picks out a suitable drift, we begin to shovel. It doesn't pay to get too carried away, though, since a small cave is a warm cave. "You get the right snow and it traps the warmth inside," he explains. "Body heat and a sleeping bag are all you need to stay cosy."

Sleeping inside the icy chamber is a ball, but it gets even better when Fredrik fries up reindeer jerky in a pan of butter and serves it with a mug of hot lingonberry juice. Steam rises above the pan and freezes on



Traditional Sami boots made from reindeer hide.

the ceiling. Warmth is a relative concept; as the mercury outside drops to  $-32^{\circ}\text{C}$  overnight we stay toasty at around  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$  inside.

Survival in the Arctic doesn't have to be a hardship – it's not a battle with the elements, but more of a dance. When the temperature drops below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  it becomes a different kind of cold, one that keeps the cap of ice on a river solid and bestows clear skies at night for watching the aurora borealis. It's a dry chill, which somehow makes it easier to stay warm. Minus two degrees can get wet;  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  does not.

Just a short sled ride from his home, we meet two of Fredrik's good friends, Pär Kassberg and Richard Karlsson, both of whom work with dogs to get around during winter. Pär often cooks a meal over the fire for guests at the Aurora Safari Camp and Richard can be relied on to bring a team of his Siberian huskies for a joy-ride.

The safari camp sits on the edge of a glacial lake, offering uninterrupted views of the Swedish wilderness. The canvas tents are an upgrade from the snow cave in every possible way. Akin to the traditional Sami *lavvo*, they are similar to the digs Fredrik came across when he was working in Africa. A wood heater in the middle of each tent pumps out serious heat, making it toasty warm.

Before the sun sets, we leave the camp to stand on the edge of the lake and observe the sky's changing colours as the darkness approaches. The landscape is cloaked in silence. Had the men not alerted me to their imminent arrival, I would never have heard the approach of Richard's dog team.

Handcrafted from timber and twine by a 67-year-old man in Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost town, Richard's sled is a work of art. This mode of transport is the

polar opposite of the snowmobile – the thin timber rails yield to the environment with grace. Only the sound of the dogs panting competes with the shush of snow beneath the rails.

The huskies' power isn't obvious until you witness the launch of the sled. The front rails leap a foot off the ground and I'm thrown backwards with the acceleration. We bounce along for 50 metres before Richard commands the dogs to ease off the pace.



Richard and his team of dogs head home at sunset.



A light sprinkling of aurora above the safari camp.

Welcome to Flakaberg on a sunny winter day.



Hand-crafted souvenirs at Jöknöck Winter Market.

Richard listens to his huskies and trusts their judgement. They possess an ability to avoid danger, aware of subtle patterns in the snow that might conceal hidden traps beneath. They also have a keen sense of survival when confronted with wild animals of the Arctic. “They regard the reindeer as prey,” Richard explains, “but the moose they have respect for. They’ll stare it down, but they know better than to start a fight.”

Richard can guide the dogs away from chance encounters with moose, but reindeer present a different challenge. Although they’re bred to run rather than kill, the pack can decide to chase the deer – on one occasion, Richard needed to muster all his skills and drop steel anchors into the snow to stop them.

“They get into a prey mode and they go crazy,” he says. “I couldn’t turn them around and couldn’t get them to brake. They see a herd of reindeer and they just want to take one down. I was really worried my lines weren’t going to hold – the ropes were straining away from the sled under their force.”

The trails across the rivers and through forests are essential to survival in winter. Fresh falls are packed down by snowmobile traffic before the trails freeze hard again. With each big dump of snow the ritual is repeated so the dog teams are able to do their thing.

I witness the cycle in action. While I’m asleep in the safari tent, the frozen landscape is covered by a massive fall of snow. As I emerge from my haven in the morning, there is no evidence of the tracks that were there just hours earlier. Even the snowmobiles are camouflaged in a fresh layer of white.

Pär makes us breakfast before setting out to clear the trails. Beneath the dump of fresh powder is the threat of unfrozen pools of water that can trap a snowmobile and ruin the day, or worse. On one occasion, Pär and his son both ended up in trouble when one of their snowmobiles became stuck in the ice and the pair slipped into the lake through a crack while they were trying to extricate it.

After dragging themselves from the frigid water, they took turns to jog behind the other snowmobile. In this case, it was far better to be jogging, an activity that at least keeps you warm, than sitting astride the snowmobile, the cold air turning your drenched clothes to ice.

**“An hour from the coast, we stop on sea ice to watch the sun mingle with the horizon. In February, Fredrik tells me, the ice below our feet is thick enough for freighters to drive on top of the ocean.”**

“By the time we reached the cabin our legs had turned blue and the feeling in our toes had been lost,” Pär recalls. “The pain began in earnest as things began to warm up and feeling returned.”

It wasn’t enough to get him to admit defeat and seek assistance: “Pure northern men don’t need to call for help. I’ve never made one call in my life. I always get myself out of trouble.”

While there’s no need for him to demonstrate his survival skills this trip, I do get to see – and eat – plenty of Pär’s cooking. Lunch at the camp turns into an event when the *murrika* (a concave steel plate) is swung over an open fire pit to fry up salmon and char. The boys stand by the fire, poking at the *murrika* and chatting while falling snowflakes gather in their beards and the smoke from the fire infuses the fish.

On the last day of my stay I meet Lars, a Sami man, and his reindeer herd in the town of Flakaberg. Sami people have relied on reindeer for thousands of years, owing their Arctic survival to the clothing, transport, meat and tools provided by the animals.

Every spring, Lars tells me, the reindeer and their herdsman head deep into Lapland where wide open pastures are better for calving. Their migration takes place before the ice melts, making the journey possible by sled

Fredrik takes the snowmobile for a spin in the powder.



Lars shares his collection of reindeer antlers.

or snowmobile. This is also the time the Sami people gather to trade reindeer skins. Flakaberg was once the site of the annual market, but for the past 410 years the town of Jokkmokk, a few hours away, has been its home.

You can still buy reindeer skins or take a bite of the animal's meat cooked on a *murrika* at the Jokkmokk Winter Market. The bitter cold and remote location mean only the most adventurous of travellers find themselves here. Instead, you'll discover most visitors are actually locals. Many of the market stalls have a modern feel to

and flames drift across the snow in a display of light and movement.

There are also opportunities to connect more deeply with the culture. Three days of reindeer racing take place on frozen Lake Jokkmokk, and one of the best Sami museums in the Arctic can be found here, along with Sami training colleges celebrating traditional crafts and survival skills.

My favourite treasures in Jokkmokk, though, are the snow balls. Local artist Cecilia Lundin has spent decades perfecting these modern igloos. First she carves blocks of ice from the

“The boys stand by the fire, poking at the *murrika* and chatting while falling snowflakes gather in their beards and the smoke from the fire infuses the fish.”

them, but some gems remain: you can buy drinks prepared from wild Arctic berries, smoked fish caught in glacial lakes, and Sami handicrafts.

Fredrik and Pär show me some of the market's more artistic treasures, including a presentation on wild foraging by local culinary expert Eva Gunnare and a fire-dancing performance at sunset. Embers

river then moulds them into balls, before using snow to 'glue' them together and render them smooth. Only the Swedish can turn survival into art. You enter the snow ball through a circular portal and emerge into a dome of tranquility. There's room for two inside and a little nook at the back holds a candle for light. In the long dark of the Swedish winter, it is one of life's necessities. ☼



A snow ball in Jokkmokk designed by Cecilia Lundin.

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Qatar Airways, winner of the Skytrax Airline of the Year in 2015, has return flights from Sydney to Stockholm (via Perth and Doha) during winter from about AU\$1700. From Stockholm, Scandinavian Airlines has connections to Kiruna and Luleå for about AU\$150 return.

[qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com)  
[flysas.com](http://flysas.com)



TOUR THERE

All-inclusive packages to spend a night camping and dining at the Aurora Safari Camp, plus another night in the luxury of a timber cabin on the Bay of Finland, start at about AU\$1400 a person, including snowmobile adventures. You can book locally in Australia through 50 Degrees North, who can book everything from snowmobile treks to reindeer races.

[aurorasafaricamp.com](http://aurorasafaricamp.com)  
[fiftydegreesnorth.com](http://fiftydegreesnorth.com)



GET INFORMED

Jokkmokk Winter Market gets bigger and better every year, but book early for accommodation and the best restaurants. Driving the winter roads in Arctic Sweden is no problem if you prefer to self-drive across Swedish Lapland, as all hire cars come with snow tyres. Aurora Safari Camp provides warm boots, gloves and snow suits for fly-in visitors who don't want to pack for polar conditions.

[swedishlapland.com](http://swedishlapland.com)

