

Reindeer herding in Swedish Lapland

A journey to the far North

Every time a reindeer's foot leaves the ground, the two halves of its split hoof click softly together. When a whole herd is moving, it sounds like the leaves on the silver birches rustling in the wind. But there are no leaves, for this is winter-spring, and the Sami are driving the herds back to the hills.

There are Sami tribes in Russia, Finland, Norway and Sweden – they are the northern most indigenous Europeans – and here in Swedish Lapland where I live, they are the only people permitted to own commercial herds of reindeer. I live next to the Vindelälven River which, being undeveloped by the power companies, still freezes over for many months of the year and becomes a smooth, white highway for dog-sleighs, skiers, snow-scooters, and reindeer herding...





There are around ten Sami languages (a few of which are near to extinct) which can vary depending on which country, or even which part of that country you are in. The Sami year has eight seasons: our four plus winter-spring, spring-summer, and so on. There are two distinct groups of Sami, the skogssamer (wood Sami) who have a fixed base where they live and keep their reindeer, and the fjällsamer (mountain Sami) who keep their herds in the mountains during the warmer months, then in the autumn-winter bring their reindeer from the hills to overwinter on the lower, forested land near to the river. While the river is still frozen in winter-spring, they herd them the 200km or so back to the hills, camping out with the animals en route. The reindeer are their principal source of income. They sell the meat and hides and use antlers and bones to fashion knife handles and ornaments. The Sami supplement their income by the sale of handicrafts: leather goods, jewellery, drinking cups and bowls of birch wood and hand-made knives which range from simple utility pieces, to stunning museum-quality works of art.

Every February for the last 400 years, the Sami have hosted a winter market in the town of Jokkmokk, just inside the Arctic Circle. The town has some 4,000 inhabitants but the market, which is on for three or four days, attracts up to 40,000 visitors from all over the world. Accommodation is at a premium, to say the least, as are seats in a restaurant. To have a chance of a bed for a few nights, prospective visitors have to register with the Jokkmokk Tourist board in the previous September and then keep their fingers crossed. As -20°C is common →



and -40°C possible, it is a little too cold for camping out, or sleeping in the car! It is well worth the effort though. The main road of the town is given over to market stalls selling everything from jewellery to fox-fur hats, from knives to air-cured elk meat, and it is packed with visitors enjoying the spectacle and taking in the live entertainment.

Like other indigenous people such as the Native Americans, Inuit, and Native Australians, the Sami have not always lived in harmony with 'civilised society'. Up until the 1960s, Sweden had eugenics statutes that directly affected the Sami, and some others. A recent film *Sami Blood (Sameblod)* tells the story of how a teenage girl 'is taken from her home and family and sent to a state school where indigenous students are converted into acceptable members of Swedish society'. Also, the nomadic lifestyle has a deleterious effect on their education, health and well-being; a recent survey found that some 30 per cent of young Sami had considered suicide, and physical health problems can become an issue when you are a long way from a health centre or doctor.

On the positive side, the Sami now have representation at government level, plus their own Sápmi Parliament and their culture is celebrated at *Gammplat-sen* (historical sites) in most of the larger towns. In fact, a Sami singer took part recently in the Swedish heats for the Eurovision Song Contest!

Recent times have, however, also brought conflicts of interest between the Sami and developers, miners, and Forestry Commission. Small changes to the eco-system can have serious consequences, as reindeer are quiet and nervous creatures, sustained by a narrow range of food. Although many residents here own forested land, these are managed traditionally, usually just for firewood, leaving most of the 'old woods' in good condition for reindeer; however the forests managed by the Forestry Commission are industrially



harvested – almost a ‘scorched earth’ scenario which can leave the land unfit for reindeer grazing for many years, as the reindeer feed (almost exclusively) on one specific type of moss (plus grass) which needs the old woods in which to grow properly.

A year or so ago a developer submitted plans to build timber and glass holiday ‘tents’ on a disused bridge over our river, together with restaurant and conference facilities near to the bridge. The Sami objected and the plans have still not been passed. Similarly a new mining proposition near Jokkmokk was vetoed. When I took the photos illustrating this article I explained to the herders where I would be shooting from (a bridge) and was asked to stand near one of the pillars and keep very still and quiet as the reindeer are easily spooked.

Global warming is having an effect too. Reindeer can easily survive in a constant -300°C with deep snow; they dig through the snow with their antlers and hooves to access the moss and grass beneath. The problem arises if the snow starts to thaw then refreezes, as their moss and grass is then embedded in a smooth layer of ice and they cannot reach it. A recently published survey, conducted over 16 years on Svalbard, has shown a drop of some 12% in average reindeer body weight. Global warming has also meant that the pastures produce more reindeer-friendly food in the summer, so the females produce more calves. Thus the reindeer population can be increasing whilst the access to winter grazing is diminishing.

I’m not sure how much longer the traditional Sami way of life can continue. The external pressures from the 21st century are huge. The world has an insatiable need for timber, iron-ore, infrastructure, and leisure activities, all of which impact on the Sami way of life. The Vindelälven River is one of very few major rivers in Sweden which does not have a power station on it, but one day the need for renewable energy might be greater than the need for preservation. There are internal pressures too, as new generations of Sami might want to enjoy a life without reindeer, in a fixed base with ‘mod cons’ – the latest technology, education and healthcare.

One glimmer of hope on the horizon is the prospect of the Vindelälven area becoming a UNESCO Biosphere. To be approved for Biosphere status, there must be plans in place to preserve natural amenities, habitats and history, and to encourage low-impact sustainable tourism and leisure activities: the

application for Biosphere status is at an advanced stage and the results should be announced in the next 12 months.

Life here can be hard enough even for those of us living a ‘normal’ lifestyle. There can be a meter of snow lying on the fields from December to April. A recent winter saw a low of -38°C and now, in early May, it was snowing yesterday and the river is only just running free again. For five or six months of the year you have to be ‘layered up’ before venturing outdoors, and chopping wood and kindling is an everyday task. Getting around is hazardous on foot or by car, and we’re 45 km from a proper town. I can’t imagine what it must be like living in a kâta (Sami tent), a simple structure of poles covered in reindeer skins.

There are benefits though in the solitude, wildlife, scenery and the Northern Lights. Also, one of our party tricks is to stand outside when it’s really cold and throw a cup of boiling water directly overhead. It vaporises long before it lands on your head!

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GRAHAME SODEN ABIPP

SWEDISH LAPLAND

Grahame Soden lives 300km south of the Arctic circle in Vormsele, Sweden. He's been there since 2013 with his German photographer wife. At the time of writing, it's -9°C in the afternoon with on and off snow showers. After living in Berlin they decided that there was more to life than the big city and ended up – as you do – in Lapland. Grahame explains: 'We love travel and a bit of adventure – beginning down in central Sweden and then up here to see a proper winter. We were not supposed to stay but we saw a little house, bought it and moved. It's our base camp and I haven't been back to the UK for six years. Lyckseler, 45km away, is our nearest shop – it's quite a long way to go to the shops.'

After Grahame left school he joined the Police force aiming to be a photographer, but when that didn't work out he joined the RAF and later the Civil Service. His big love photographically is digital printing, which he began with in 2007 – a time as he says when 'there was nothing to tell you how to do it, so I taught myself and then a number of others'. He dryly states that his other half is the better photographer, though it's Grahame who has the interest in the technical aspects. Back in Germany he was a sports photographer: 'I enjoyed the routine of shooting 1,000 images over an event and then spending the weekend editing and working the files and getting them up on press portals. Now, a little later in life I'm doing wildlife, landscapes, the Northern Lights – along with a bit Reindeer racing, of course.'

He says it was the slow pace of life in the North that took the most getting used to: 'It's very different – everybody is helpful; no one is in your face all the time but I know that people here will be there for me. Round here there's an average of two people per square kilometre and there are more reindeer than people by quite a margin. Autumn gives you amazing colours and the migratory birds passing through. I don't let a day go by without taking a photograph – you naturally sync in with the seasons. Right now we're waiting for the snow. That is a state of being. Recent years have seen more snow than is usual – there's something happening up in the far north and the snow that would have fallen up at the North Pole has been forced south. That means we've had big melts too.'

A lot of life is based around wood, Grahame explains: 'Buying it, storing it, burning it. You need to know everything there is to know about it. You live very close to nature – it's a big wilderness out there but you can go anywhere you want. You can walk, you can camp – it's a very open society, though you have to be unafraid of dealing with animals. In many ways it's just like a more respectful England, but a lot colder.'

