

Albert Ehrnrooth journeys to the Arctic Circle and discovers the wonders of one of Europe's last wildernesses

PER KLAESSON



Sveg station on the railbus route to the Arctic Circle: travellers can stop en route and continue the next day

Easy-going rhythm of the slow train to Lapland

A TRAIN driver on the Swedish Inland Railbus told me a chilling tale. "It happened not far from the Arctic Circle, on a pitch dark day in fierce weather in the middle of winter. My first collision involved ten reindeer. I had to climb out and make sure they were dead by taking a hammer and driving a stake through their brains. The nightmare was not yet over; I killed another 12 reindeer during that journey."

Swedish Rail ended up compensating the Sami deer-owners for their "slaughtered" stock. In the end, and with incidents like this, it became too expensive to run a train service in the north during the winter. In the summer, though, the Inland Railbus still provides a once-a-day service. The problem of reindeer on the track has not gone away but they are less likely to be run over with the visibility being so good, day and night. Most passengers "doing" the Inland Railbus are tourists and on every train there is a tourist guide.

The Inland Railway is a 1,100km stretch of track from Mora, in the heart of Sweden to Gällivare, in Lapland. Some Swedish fellow travellers told me that most of their countrymen have never been to Lapland. Reindeer roaming freely in the wild is a pretty exotic sight, even for a Swede.

As the name suggests, the railbus is a pretty slow train. But the whole idea is to sit by the window and watch one of the last wildernesses in Europe pass by and appreciate the easy-going rhythm.

The train stops at night, giving you the opportunity to stay in a hotel – or on a camp-site, or just put your tent up in the wild, which is generally allowed in Sweden. The railbus will also drop you off at any station of your choice on the route, even if it is not a scheduled stop, as long as there

is a station marked on the map. Mind you, "station" is too grand a word for these request stops: a few wooden planks and a place name. You can pick up the next train the next day, or the day after.

The railbus leaves from Mora at 15:40, stopping for the night at Östersund, 320km further up the track. If you decide not to jump off anywhere along the line, you will arrive in Östersund at 21:35. I had decided to do this first leg nonstop, but before hopping on the train I explored Mora and its immediate vicinity.

The region is called Dalarna (the valleys) and Mora is situated on idyllic Lake Siljan.

Timber houses and beautiful gardens surround the lake. The area's residents stick with patriotic fervour and joy to their local traditions. People like to dress up in their individual village's traditional dress and dance madly around the Midsummer pole. This might be a clichéd Swedish tourist trap – the great number of craft shops and tea rooms are a dead give-away – but what a pleasant way to be trapped. The people are

friendly and the atmosphere is genuinely homely.

Back to the train. After half an hour the tourist guide announces the first photo opportunity, at the waterfalls of Helvetesfallet (Hell's Falls). They are pretty rather than spectacular – but well worth a snap.

On we go to Sveg – the gateway to Härjedalen's mountains. Nearby lies Asarna, a village that has produced a remarkable number of world-class cross-country skiers; the residents have built a museum in their heroes' honour. The village also sports the

world's only museum devoted to the lavatory.

It is late when we arrive in Östersund but the midnight sun provides ample light. I visit Frösö Island, which used to be an important centre for Viking midsummer and midwinter festivities. The baroque church is Sweden's second most popular place for weddings.

Next morning the railbus is off early at 06:45, rumbling past endless forests and lakes mirroring the sky's myriad shades of blue.

Once in Lapland proper the birch, pine and fir trees thin out and appear like lonely monuments in the tundra. The eerie desolation makes you aware of how terrifying beauty can be.

Making detours from the railbus is encouraged: there are pre-arranged trips to go fishing, white-water rafting, canoeing, hill-walking and summer skiing. A good central point for these activities is Arvidsjaur. This is the heart of Sami country – the nomadic people prefer the word Sami to the old-fashioned and, in Swedish, slightly derogatory-sounding "Lapp".

As the train continues north the landscape turns bleaker, with the occasional snowdrift still clinging on to the mountainside. But there is a surprisingly explosive wealth of wild flowers on the tundra.

We reach the Arctic Circle and an extended photo opportunity. Gällivare is the end of the line. On the edge of town lies a deep open pit, dug during a gold rush.

As on every day of my five-day trip the weather was fantastic. Towards midnight I went to the top of Dundret hill (820m); from here you can see nearly ten per cent of Sweden.

Mora-Gällivare one way costs Skr600 (\$77). Information, tel: Östersund +46 63-101590; fax 119980



The wilderness that is Lapland

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