

Walking in Sweden

by Kevin and Shirley Liddiard

We have recently returned to Australia after living in Sweden for two years, and thought the Friends would be interested in our walking experiences in that beautiful country. Sweden is much larger in size than most people think, extending from latitude 55 degrees north in the mild southerly area near Malmö to 69 degrees north, well into the Arctic Circle. This is a distance of some 2000 km; however the country is at most about 300 km wide. Many people are aware that Sweden brought to the world the safety match and the vacuum cleaner, ball bearings, SAAB and Volvo, to name just a few Scandinavian successes. However, the pristine natural beauty, low pollution and cleanliness of this lovely country is a secret which the Swedes like to keep to themselves, and for this it is worth enduring the long, cold winter.

There are more than 9,000 km of marked provincial walking trails in Sweden, all with names ending in 'leden', meaning 'the way'. This is in addition to walking and jogging tracks in almost every town, typically 2.5, 5 and 10 km, which are often converted into illuminated skiing trails during winter. The best known of the walking trails is the mighty Kungleden (literally 'Kings Way'), which starts in the Abisko National Park in Lappland, and winds southwards for 500 km through the Swedish mountains. This rugged region is somewhat reminiscent of the Flinders Ranges (except for colour, which is predominantly grey rather than red) and, together with the northern regions of Norway and Finland, is often called the last wilderness in Europe. There are well equipped overnight stops, including food supplies; and like all Swedish walking trails, there are excellent maps and information guides. Incidentally, these northerly walking trails roughly follow the routes of cross country ski trails in winter, but there are a few traps for beginners. In particular, one never follows the ski track markers during summer, since they are likely to lead into swamps or across lakes!



Shirley in the snow

Given the extent and beauty of walking trails, a foreign visitor begins to wonder why there are not more people encountered during a walk. There are two main reasons, both cause for envy. First, in Sweden there is an ancient law which translates from the Swedish as 'Every Man's Right', or more usually expressed in English as the 'Right of Public Access'. This right of access simply means that people may move freely through the land wherever they wish, provided they obey commonsense rules, not much different to our bushwalker's code. In other words, there is not the same sense of private property as we know it. One does not camp in people's gardens, but it is perfectly acceptable to move through private property, if necessary talking to the owner before setting up a nearby camp (courtesy and politeness are very important in Sweden). Clearly, if one can walk where one wishes, why use the walking trails?

Secondly, orienteering is extremely popular, which is not surprising since this is the country which invented the sport. Orienteering is well organised, and the nature of the land has a lot to do with its success; reasons which also reflect on the magic of walking in Sweden. Except for the mountainous region along the border with Norway, Sweden is largely a flat country, more than 70% covered with forests. The forests are usually of two types. In the spruce ('Christmas tree') forests the understorey is dark and mysterious, with huge moss rocks, the world of Trolls and Hobbits, and numerous species of edible mushrooms. The Scotch pine forests are much more open, with an understorey much like a springy carpet, easy to run or walk on, ideal for orienteering. In these open forests berries such as lingon, blueberry, and raspberry are common, and foraging during summer is a popular pastime. The evergreen pines form the majority of the forest trees, but we should not overlook the deciduous species such as birch, beech, chestnut and oak, which produce magnificent displays during autumn.



Kevin on the trail

Shirley and I walked extensively in the province of Östergötland, which for those geographically minded is roughly midway between Stockholm and Gothenburg. The walking trail in the province is the Östgötaleden - almost impossible to pronounce by English speakers. There are a number of legs to the trail, which pass through pristine forest and past numerous lakes (there are said to be 96,000 lakes in Sweden), truly a fairyland of great beauty. The principle leg of the

trail is part of Europe 6, which starts in Greece and ends in Sweden north of Stockholm.

The trails are well marked (the national walking emblem is two quaint walkers with pixie-like hats), and usually in good condition, but to my mind not in the same class as the Heysen. To be fair, this is not surprising, since in open areas the grass grows so fast during summer it's impossible to keep the trails clear. One very frustrating experience is that many forests are privately owned, and it is not unusual to find the trail logged, and much time wasted finding the next markers (see photograph). With regard to markers, it is common practice to paint stripes or circles onto trees, which is quite effective and much simpler than the practices we are used to. I have seen the same technique used in the USA. Unfortunately, our flora is not suitable for this form of marking.

There are some downsides to this idyllic walking paradise. In autumn, perhaps the most beautiful walking time, one is likely to share the trail with very well equipped hunters, determined to rid the forest of deer and elk. This is quite a culture shock, but is viewed as a traditional right in Sweden. We were careful not to complain, but meeting your local cardiac specialist with high power rifle on a national walking trail takes a little getting used to.

Not surprisingly, the walking season in Sweden is summer. This corresponds in time to our winter season. We started in early spring, and found this a delightful time, with flora at budburst, much activity in the bird and animal world. The only poisonous beast one encounters is the adder, which is relatively harmless compared to our Common Brown. As the time progresses into summer, growth along the trails almost explodes, wildflowers are common, and the days grow longer. It is perfectly safe to camp in the forests, and there are many established camping areas, often on the banks of the many lakes. Given that sunrise may be as early as 4 a.m. and sunset 10 p.m., and that the land is largely flat, one can walk long distances in a day. Our longest was 30 km, which included cooling off in some of the lakes encountered during that day. We are planning to return this year. We have friends who own summer cottages in the depths of the Swedish forests.

The first of the accompanying photographs shows Shirley negotiating the trail during early winter. Fortunately, the trail markers are still visible in the snow. The second photograph shows Kevin indicating the trail marker we found after much search following logging. Note the Friends logos and faithful Rossie Trekkers.

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