

GREAT  
SCANDINAVIAN  
WALKS  
KUNGSLEDEN  
TRAIL, SWEDEN

# ON THE ROOF OF EUROPE

*Great Walks* experiences the hike of a lifetime across mountains, forests and Arctic tundra in northern Sweden: the spectacular Kungsleden.

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WORDS AND PHOTOS\_  
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Crossing a river in the Kungsleden's challenging and remote section.







A young reindeer was cropping the tundra, barely 20 metres from me – fur the colour of earth and birch bark. Its antlers, still coated with velvet, stirred cold mountain air saturated with low cloud. I crouched between rocks splashed with vibrant green and yellow lichens, and held my breath. Over 130km into my hike, I had learned how flighty reindeer could be. The tiniest sound could set them running: a boot softly padding over moss in a still forest; a golden eagle's shrill cry echoing in a mountain pass. Silent now, I could hear the animal sniffing for food, tearing out and chewing dwarf birch. Then it stopped and looked straight at me. Still as a stone.

Behind the reindeer, the cloud parted for a moment, revealing a monumental landscape: shattered mountains spilling scree into a delta threaded with jade-coloured streams. My

## “EVEN GETTING TO THE START OF THE KUNGSLEDEN IS A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE”

target summit – Skierfe – jugged above the plateau, its sheer cliffs plunging nearly half a kilometre straight down.

Maybe the reindeer caught my scent, or heard my half-whispered, half-gasped “wow”; it turned from me and flowed away downhill, disappearing into the cloud and freeing me to continue my trek to Skierfe's severe, lofty summit.

I have to remind myself that this moment

happened barely a third of the way into my hike along the Kungsleden (the King's Trail), a 460km Arctic hiking route in northern Sweden. It is a trail whose abundance of spectacular landscapes, charismatic wildlife and outdoor culture offer so many moments of stark wonder, it can be hard to pick one moment to capture the whole route's glory.

This is one of Europe's finest hikes, set in a land where – for a while, at least – the sun doesn't set.

### An Arctic adventure

Even getting to the start of the Kungsleden is a memorable experience. From Stockholm I caught the Arctic Circle Train, an overnight service that covers the 1,300km from Sweden's capital city to the northern trailhead at

Abisko. I woke to find Norrland, Sweden's northernmost county, rolling past my cabin, a vast carpet of woodland and mirror-flat lakes. It's a fitting tableau to enjoy while preparing mentally for the trail.

Abisko lies 200km north of the Arctic Circle, where midsummer sees 24-hour daylight. The Arctic setting lends the Kungsleden characteristics that put it in a different league from other big hikes.

First, there's the terrain, sculpted over millennia by glaciers and the freeze-thaw passage of seasons. The trail is customarily broken into five stages, each offering a different Arctic landscape ranging from rugged, snow-capped mountains in the far north, through bare fell, expansive birch woodland, wetland and tundra to the southern section's glacial valleys.

From the moment the trail left Abisko,



### Clockwise from bottom left:

River crossings are an occasional hazard along the Kungsleden.

Skierfe, an optional side route, offers spectacular views.

The Aliseatnu River surges below a bridge near Alesjaure.

Reindeer are a common sight throughout northern Sweden.





STF Alesjaure Fjällstuga.

## “I GREATLY ENJOYED THE CHANCE TO MEET HIKERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD”

I was immersed in a place of staggering magnificence: the Abisko National Park, the first of four national parks traversed as the Kungsleden tracks south. Here the trail unrolls along immense tundra plains patrolled by birds of prey and cut through by surging rivers.

It is an early introduction to the Kungsleden’s excellent route marking and long stretches of well-maintained boardwalk – but also to its notoriously changeable weather and demanding conditions underfoot. Four seasons can be experienced in a day, particularly as the trail crosses the Tjäktja pass within the first week – the highest point on the Kungsleden, at 1,150m, and still partly under snow as late as August.

### NEED TO KNOW

**Time:** Three to four weeks | **Distance:** 460km (410km on foot) | **Ascents:** 8,265m | **Grade:** Moderate to challenging

The Kungsleden leads you through northern Sweden, offering access to outstanding Arctic scenery and wildlife. The route crosses several lakes where motorised crossings or rowing boats must be used. Wild camping is permitted along almost the entire route, while STF huts and stations offer simple, shared accommodation in the northern and southern sections.

#### Planning your visit

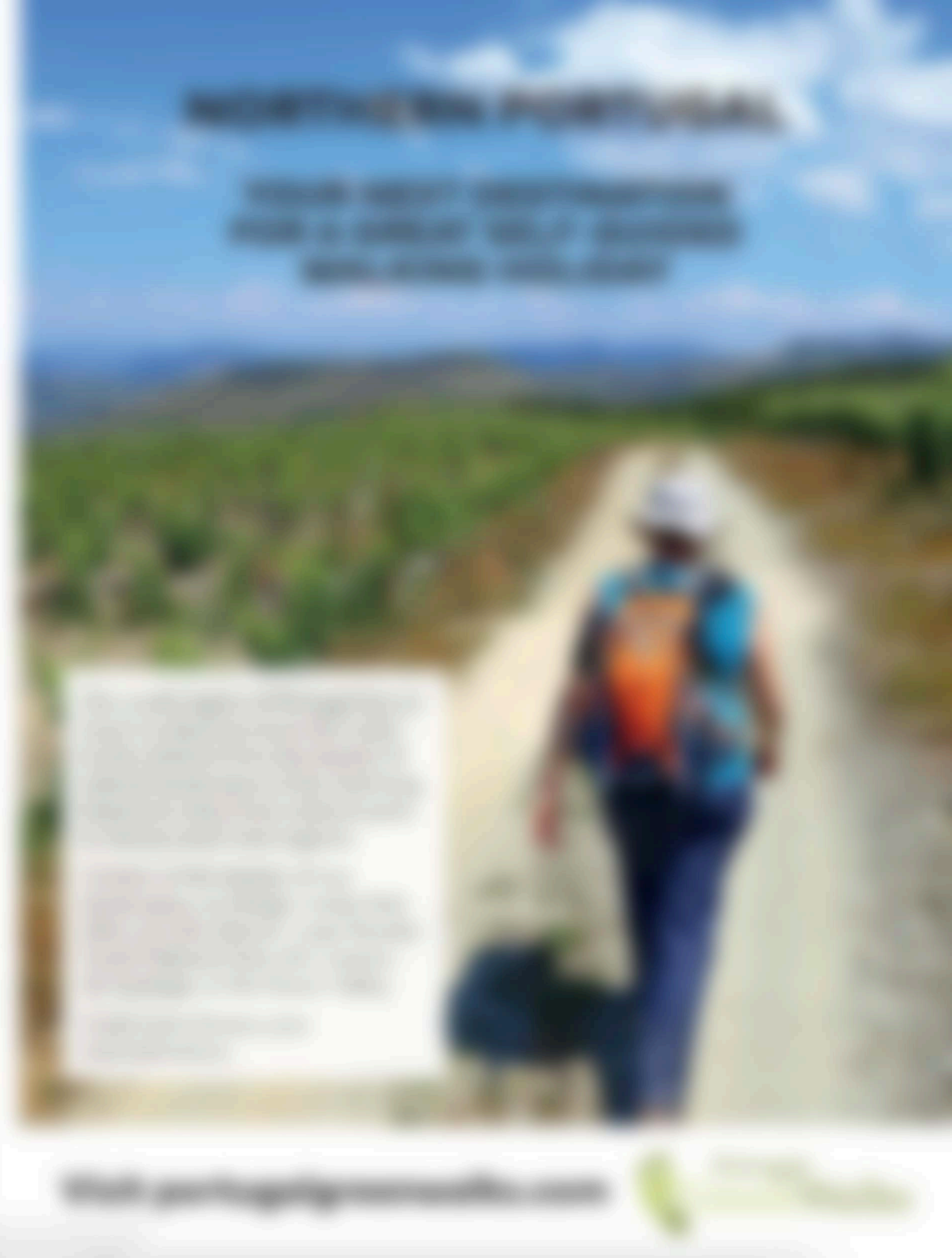
**Travel:** Sleeper trains from Stockholm to Abisko are operated by Vy – visit [vy.se/en](http://vy.se/en)  
**Accommodation:** For information about STF’s mountain cabins and stations, and to pre-book accommodation, visit [swedishtouristassociation.com](http://swedishtouristassociation.com)

### Cabin life

The Kungsleden’s first, second and final stages benefit from a network of mountain cabins and stations operated by the Swedish Tourist Association (STF). Seldom more than 20km apart, STF’s cabins (*fjällstugor*) offer simple, shared accommodation, and are a useful way to break the route up into manageable chunks.

I had my place pre-booked at the cabins, although it’s possible to turn up without a booking or to camp nearby and use the

The Kungsleden’s boardwalks offer a break from bogs.







facilities for a small fee. Those facilities – shops, saunas and communal areas – provide visitors with options to resupply en route, or to take a break when the trail has taken its toll on body and stamina.

They also offer company. I greatly enjoyed the chance to meet hikers from all over the world, as we each joined a hiking community based on cooperation and a mutual love of the outdoors. Each fjällstuga is managed by volunteer hosts, stugvärdar, who settle guests into their temporary home and help them to learn the cabins' etiquette.

“You have to respect that people are not used to this kind of life,” said Pelle Johansson, a stugvärd at Alesjaure, a cabin a couple of days south of Abisko. “That’s a part of our job which I think is important: to educate.

“The main thing is to take care of each other – to cooperate with other guests. To have humility, and not take things for granted. And have a friendly attitude – because you’re going to live with other people. It’s not like a hotel where you can just think about yourself.”

Indeed not: guests are expected to help

by cleaning their bunk-rooms and shared facilities, fetching clean water and carrying out their own rubbish. These tasks formed a routine within which I felt I was part of the Kungleden, not merely bolting through it – deepening my appreciation of the trail, and of Swedish hiking culture.

My time in the cabins provided many of my happiest memories from the Kungleden. At Aktse – close to where I met the reindeer on my way to Skierfe – I chatted with French, Italian, German and Swedish hikers as house martins took insects on the wing over a misty alpine meadow. Sitojaure found me chopping birch to fire an iron stove to dry my gear. Pärte was a place to take a dip in a cool woodland lake, before retreating into a cosy bunkroom for a hard-earned rest.

Away from the cabins, STF’s larger mountain stations at Abisko, Saltoluotka, Kvikkjokk and Hemavan offer much-needed opportunities to recuperate at the start and finish of the hike’s main stages. These are good places for resupplying, and for enjoying Swedish cuisine in restaurants whose views are as appetising as their food. Expect to find reindeer on the menu, and desserts featuring cloudberry and lingonberry.

## Trail life

But you don’t need to stop at a fjällstation to sample mountain fruit. Edible berries are an easy find along the trail: tart crimson lingonberries, sweet blueberries and cloudberry – an Arctic fruit whose flavour can range from tangy to caramel. Grazing on these trailside gifts became a welcome way to supplement my food a little, particularly in the hike’s third and fourth stages.

Those stages, comprising nearly 180km, are the most challenging of the route. Accommodation is sparse, so it is necessary to carry a tent and sleeping bag as well as several days’ food. Depending on your attitude to wild camping, the sparsity of fixed shelters can make these sections a nightmare or a dream.

For me, this long and relatively quiet part of the trail marked an opportunity to enjoy some solitude and enjoy world-class views from my tent. One pitch in particular stands out, early in stage three. I had struggled through an immense forest, full of marshes and bogs soaked by relentless rain. After hours of exhausting, sopping progress – cursing my tired feet and wet gear – I hauled myself uphill on Jähkägaskatjärro, an expansive plateau dotted with countless lakes, pools, ponds and tarns.



**Above:** A wild camp on the flank of Jähkägaskatjärro.

**Opposite page:** Hiking out of an inversion by Syter on the final day.





**Top to bottom:**

Looking towards Riebnes, one of the mandatory lake crossings.

STF Aktse Fjällstuga.

An Arctic skua in Abisko National Park.



The worst of the weather had cleared, but gauzy columns of rain drifted along the plain below me. These towering veils summoned up rainbows that slid steadily across lakes the colour of brushed steel. I found a flat pitch for my camp, and watched sunlight, clouds and rainfall keep up their waltz until the rainbows, and my exhaustion, had disappeared.

**Making it happen**

Its rewards are many, but the Kungsleden is a considerable undertaking. Most hikers will take up to four weeks to complete the entire trail, although many choose to hike just one section (with Abisko to Saltoluotka offering an especially rewarding seven- or eight-day route).

Hiking shorter sections can mean you do not need to carry a tent or sleeping bag, thereby reducing your pack weight. But good equipment is still essential: sensible Kungsleden hikers pack suitable gear for sun and sleet, and footwear that can cope with terrain that can be unforgiving on lightweight shoes.

Above everything, though, the Kungsleden demands nothing less than your effort and love. A few thousand people a year make the trip to Abisko to join the King's Trail. Few follow the whole route; but every hiker I met, whether their trip was long or short, shared the same wide-eyed disbelief at the full richness packed into every kilometre.

After the reindeer left me near Skierfe, I continued my walk to the summit. There, alone, I sat at the top of those terrifying cliffs, looking deep into a landscape of otherworldly beauty. From horizon to horizon, I couldn't see another soul: just a realm of peaks and lakes bearing the scars of deep time.

For that moment, I had the finest view in the world to myself – and the Kungsleden to thank for it. ⚙️

**BOOTS FIT FOR THE KING'S TRAIL**

I put my trust in inov-8's excellent Rocfly G 390 GTX boots. The boots' graphene-infused 4mm rubber lugs offered outstanding grippiness in all terrains – mud, marsh and river crossings – while Gore-Tex membranes kept my feet dry in all but the most appalling conditions. It took several days of rain, outmatched gaiters and one or two unwary river crossings to see my socks soaked; even then, the boots dried quickly when aired overnight. [inov-8.com/au](http://inov-8.com/au)

