

"THE ACHIEVEMENT SEEKS US"

Sweden's **KUNGSLEDEN** is a remote long-distance trail running through Arctic landscapes, where spectacular wildlife and Swedish culture put it in a class of its own.


WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY **ANDY WASLEY**

Skierfe's summit enjoys a spectacular view over the Sarek National Park.

The words were carved in Swedish into a smooth white boulder, flecked with grey crystals. "Insatsen söker oss inte vi insatsen." Midday, late summer, high on a mountainside in the Arctic Circle. Hot sunlight baked the tundra and wrung sweat from my face, while a sharp breeze quickly dried it to salt.

I used my phone to translate the inscription: "The achievement seeks us, not we the achievement." Which seemed very apt, as it felt like a decent achievement to have reached this spot, after a 70km hike through Swedish Lapland. But this was not my goal.

I had kit on my back to last three weeks as I followed the Kungsleden – The King's Trail – for another 390km south through Swedish Lapland. Around me, the terrain showed the colours and textures of an Arctic summer: blue-grey mountains, flecked with scree; vivid green tundra, and the ruby sheen of lingonberries ripening in the sunlight; dun reindeer herds flowing across the landscape.

And next to me, the white boulder with its inscription hinting at something inevitable: "The achievement seeks us." Maybe there was something 



inevitable in my journey there; an urge that seized me somewhere between Strathchailleach bothy and Kearvaig, on the last day of the Cape Wrath Trail. I needed something to match that hike's physical and emotional intensity. The Kungsleden had been on my hiking bucket list for years. Nothing else would do.

Mountain culture

I set off from Abisko, the Kungsleden's northern trailhead, in August 2023 – 10 months after leaving Cape Wrath. Outside the Swedish Tourist Association (STF) hostel I posed for a picture by the trailhead, then set foot on the Kungsleden for the first time. I felt something I had last experienced in Scotland: the queasy blend of anticipation and doubt that marks the beginning of a new adventure.

The first of the Kungsleden's three major sections runs for 216km between Abisko and Kvikkjokk, through four of Sweden's National Parks. It is a popular stretch, served by a network of STF mountain huts that make it possible to walk without a tent, packing enough rations for a day or two at a time.

Convenience belies the region's monumental beauty: here, hikers are fully immersed in an Arctic landscape, where rivers run cloudy with glacial meltwater and Arctic birds – long-tailed skuas, golden eagles and gyrfalcon – hover over the tundra, hunting lemming. Each stretch of the Kungsleden offers a new spectacle, from wooden boardwalks through alpine meadows to swaying bridges spanning gorges and cascades.

Soon after leaving Abisko I met Jauke, a 22-year-old from the Netherlands who was following the full trail from south to north. He had only 10km left and appeared to be overwhelmed by the experience.

"You always hear people – like, they're on this long trail and they find themselves," he said. "And at the end, they're kind of lost. I hope I'm not lost at the end, because it's been amazing." I asked if anything had been especially challenging. "The part between Kvikkjokk and Ammarnäs is quite lonely sometimes," he said. He paused, and gazed back at the mountains. "I've become better at being alone," he added. "Maybe that's a good skill to learn."

Solitude was in short supply in this part of the trail, but company was part of the Kungsleden's charm. Some chance encounters

would become fleeting trail friendships that lasted for days. Others echoed across the weeks in nods of familiarity, or stories told of hikers further north or south.

Trail friendships prospered in the STF's mountain huts – basic, off-the-grid spots where hikers' stories intersected over hissing gas-bottle stoves in shared kitchens. These are places where Sweden's outdoor culture is expressed in a blend of self-reliance and mutual kindness. Firewood must be chopped, fresh water carried up from the river, and wastewater carried out.

Be as introspective as you like: in the huts you are part of a community, and share in its duties and rewards. In Serve, close to the hike's end, I helped carry water for Per, a fiftysomething Swede who seemed to be a mountain gourmand: he spent the evening cooking a rich-smelling stew from vegetables and dried meat he had carried with him.

The next morning, as I finished my coffee, he called across to me: "Hej! Have you ever tried smoked moose heart?" I had not. He sliced a disc of meat from his plate and handed it to me: soft, sweet and smoky – an unexpected treat. "I think it's the best food in Sweden," Per said.

Later, by the trailside, he offered me a fresh herring, gleaming like blue steel, caught in a mountain lake. ("It's possibly illegal," he said, winking at me and glancing around at the wide, quiet landscape as if checking for spies. I turned this offer down.)

Pelle, a stugvärd (hut warden) at Alesjaure, was typical of the volunteers who run STF's huts on eight-week tours. He and his wife, both 69, had been volunteering with STF for six years. For all his experience, he was still impressed by the landscape: this early Kungsleden pitstop was a superb spot for watching golden eagles quartering the tundra.

"The main thing is to take care of each other," he told me. "To cooperate with other guests, and to have humility. What are the other person's needs? But also have the courage to be clear about your own needs."

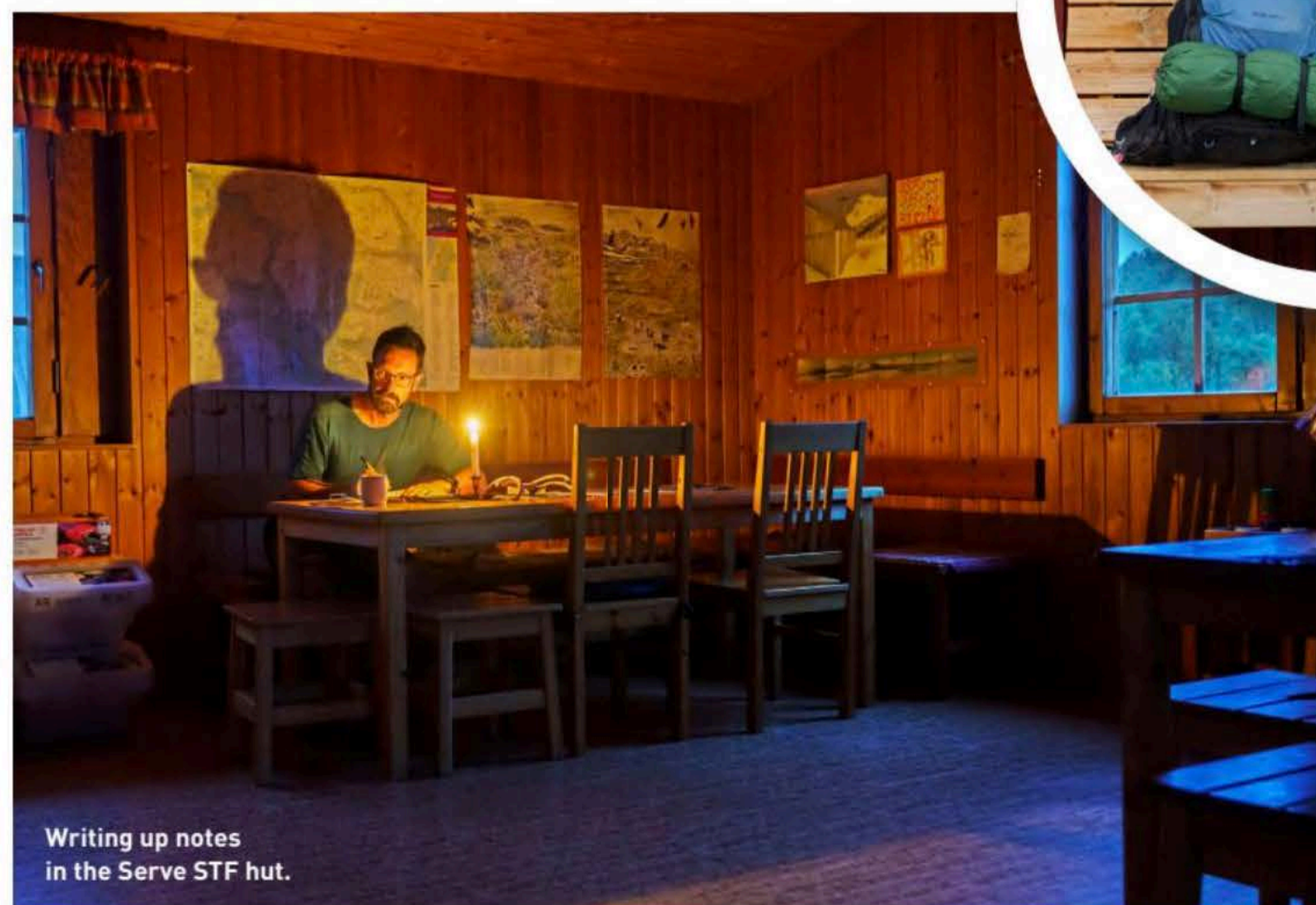
"You're going to live with other people all the time, and you're depending on them to have a good time. It's not like a hotel where you can just think about yourself."

It was a day's walk from Alesjaure to the Kungsleden's highest point – the Tjåktja pass, a broad plateau littered with boulders and a wild array of lichens and mosses. Ravens' ▶

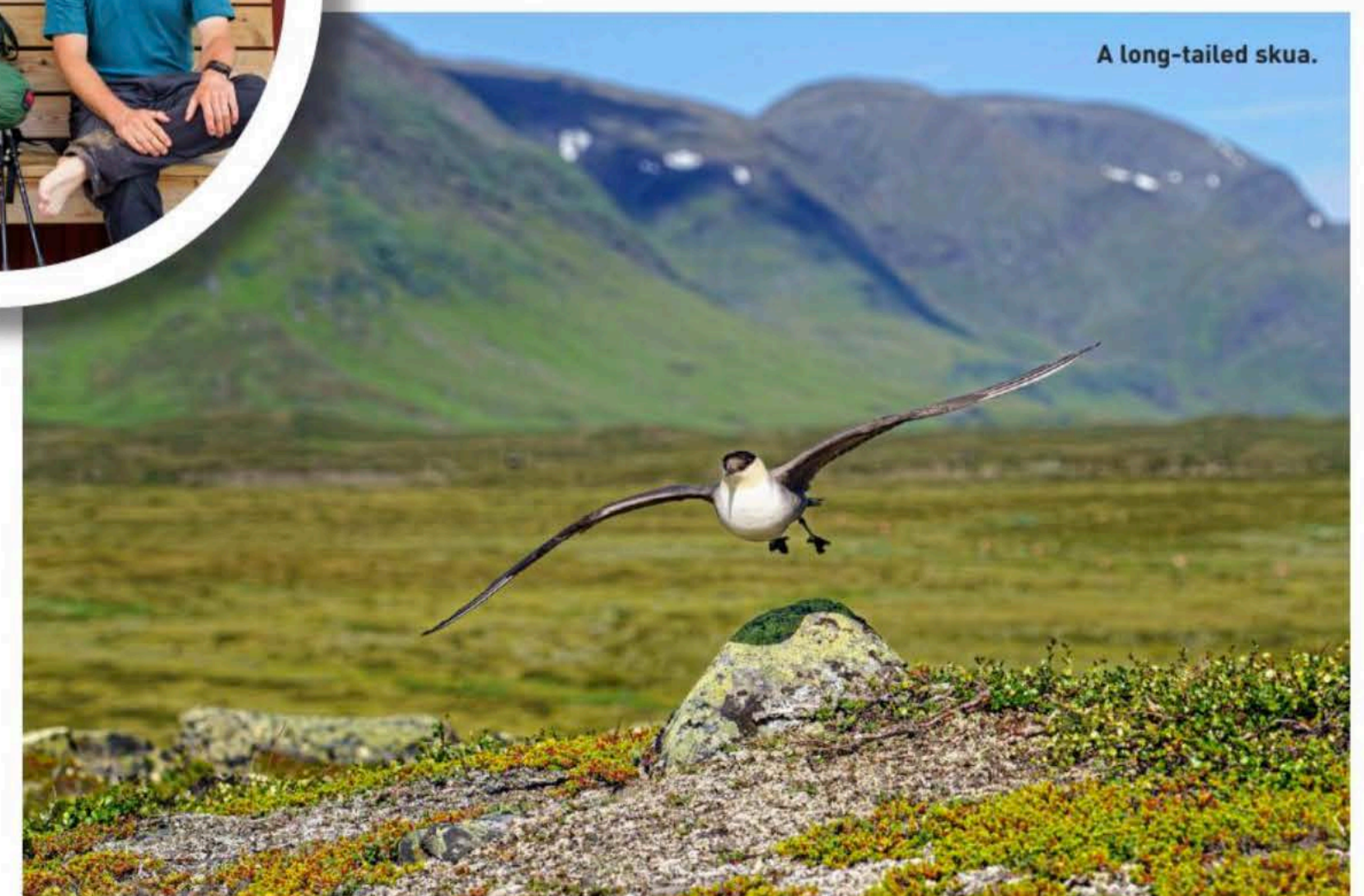
“Each stretch offers a new spectacle, from wooden boardwalks through alpine meadows, to swaying bridges spanning gorges and cascades”



One of the Kungsleden's many dramatic bridge crossings.



Writing up notes in the Serve STF hut.



A long-tailed skua.



Altesjaure STF hut.



Helena Adolffson pilots her boat across the Sakkat.

entirely alone. Near the mountaintop the clouds boiled away, and I had the summit to myself.

Skierfe's cliffs plunged far down into a wide glacial valley, whose countless streams and ponds lay still and bright, gleaming like polished jade. Sarek unfurled ahead of me, rolling out across mountain ridges, erratic basalt hills, glaciers and deep-green forests. One of Europe's finest views – and no-one there to see it but me.

Two days later I reached the end of the Kungsleden's northern section in Kvikkjokk, a tiny settlement where an STF-affiliated hostel offered a few final home comforts. I enjoyed reindeer stew, chatted with the many hikers for whom the hostel marked the end of their adventure, and cadged a full gas bottle from an Italian about to fly home. For the next week I would live on Real Turmat rations I had carried in from Base Camp Food, as I trekked south for 165km to Ammarnäs. I crossed Sakkat in a boat operated by Helena Adolffson and Björn Solstad, whose family has run the ferry service for generations. Helena, a fine artist, spoke to me about the colours in the landscape as she piloted the boat across the Sakkat's still surface.

"It's about the seasons," she said. "What it looks like in midwinter, spring and autumn. Even if it's only daylight between 10am and 2pm, it's more like

dawn and dusk – so there's more bluish colour down here, and the mountains are pink and golden."

Helena cut the engine, and for a moment we drifted in silence. In places the lake water was cloudy, tinted pale blue by glacial silt; in other places it cleared and took on a faint green hue. Below the surface, dark silt rippled on the lakebed like a beach at low tide. So much beauty here – and so much to love and fear in the landscape beyond the lake's edge.

The hike from Kvikkjokk to Ammarnäs is fit to test the toughest hiker, challenging morale and endurance with distance, rough terrain and wild weather. I had chosen my boots carefully – Inov8's rugged and waterproof Rocfly G 390 GTX – and felt grateful for my dry feet, until days of heavy rain and sopping bogs overtopped the ankles and filled the shoes with muddy water.

I squelched on through woods teeming with mosquitos, pausing only occasionally to snatch a handful of wild blueberries, fill my water pouch or wring my socks out by the path. True rest – and dry feet – happened uphill, where wind and sunshine chased the mosquitos away and wicked my boots dry.

On the felltops the landscape rolled out into plains strewn with boulders and countless lakes, ponds and pools. These airy spaces became my haven. I pitched my first wild camp below Goabddábakte,

a monstrous grey crag overlooking a vast sweep of birch forest and wetland. As the sun rolled behind the crag my tent was engulfed in shadow and cold. I fell asleep quickly, lulled by the weeping cry of golden plovers.

This set the template for the next week, as I chased felltop after felltop and pitched my tent only when I felt too tired to go further. On those exposed plateaus I watched great columns of rain chase rainbows across lead-grey lakes; and on reaching those lakes I watched cranes row through the air on immense, lazy wingbeats, their cries lending a mournful tone to the wetlands' hushed soundscape. I met very few other hikers during those long days, and sometimes it felt tempting to think of this spectacular and haunting place as 'wild' – a word that hints at its unforgiving weather, tough terrain and incredible wildlife.

But this is Sápmi, the ancestral land of the Sámi – Europe's last great nomadic Indigenous peoples. The reindeer herds that passed close by my tent at each wild camp, the presence of Sámi summer villages, and reindeer pens marked on my map were reminders that I hiked through a peopled landscape. To call it 'wild' is to speak the language of domination, judging it against 'civilisation' – and compounding the moral difficulty of hiking through a place whose population has a complicated relationship with tourism.

As I reached the middle section's southern end at Ammarnäs I met Samuel, a young Sámi mountain guide. He spoke with deep pride about his heritage, and was clear that hiking here should be seen as a privilege – one that should be repaid with respect.

"The nature here is really important," he said. "That's the thing I'm worried about when it comes to tourism: because of the impact people have. So, what can I do? I can take some people out and show them the carefulness you need to have when you are in nature."

"It's important to go out with people who have knowledge – so even if you're hiking alone, take one day to search for a guide and see what they have to say about the area and the culture."

What might I have missed without a guide? "Oh, I think you've missed a lot," Samuel said. "You just see the surface. You see some grass – but there's the place where the reindeer

get milked. You see a hole in the ground – but that's where we caught an animal, or it's where our buildings stand.

"Of course, you see the beautiful view of the mountains and the animals – but what the animals and the mountains really mean for the Sámi culture – that gets past you."

The final achievement

I had only a few days left on the trail – 79km to Hemavan. "Listen to nature and hear every sound," Samuel said. "I meet so many tourists who are walking the trails and only think about the time they'll do it in. That's OK if you're running – but if you walk, walk. If you're hiking, hike. Take the time you need, and go slow, and look around. Drink the water. Be in nature."

I could have started the hike with the same advice; I do not know if it would have made a difference. The Kungsleden offers so many wonderful views, emotional experiences and encounters with people and wildlife, sometimes it feels as if there is too much to take in.

And so it continued, as I pressed on south through the Vindelfjällen nature reserve: wide lakes hissing with rainfall, towering mountains patrolled by reindeer and birds of prey, and STF huts with their self-sufficient comforts and social warmth. But I felt more alert now to the signs of an ancient culture: traces of traditional káta shelters, archaeological sites and the ever-present feeling that I could only ever be a guest here.

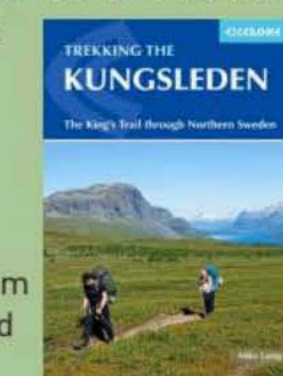
At Hemavan I pulled off my boots and rested at my journey's end. Flicking through my travel journal, I reminded myself of some of the Kungsleden's high points, working my way backwards, all the way north to Abisko.

There were those quiet nights on high fells, watching the shadows lengthen deep in Sápmi's wide, confounding landscapes. Cranes, skuas, ravens and eagles, lending their calls to the mountains while reindeer swept across the tundra. Smoked moose heart in a smoky cabin. And a white stone whose inscription promised each hiker a burden of awe and pride, hard-won and impossible to forget: "The achievement seeks us, not we the achievement."

Awe and pride in the Arctic, and adventure supported by the kindness of strangers. A hiking achievement like no other – Sweden's gift to everyone who sets foot on the King's Trail. **T**

TACKLING THE TRAIL

Start: Abisko
Finish: Hemavan
Distance: 460km/285 miles
Ascent: 8265m
 Andy followed the superb Cicerone guidebook, *Trekking the Kungsleden*, by Mike Laing. Search online for 'STF Kungsleden' for up-to-date trail information and details about STF's stations and huts.



KIT LIST

- Shelter:** Hilleberg Akto tent
- Sleeping bag:** Rab Ascent 900
- Footwear:** Inov8 Rocfly G 390 GTX
- Rucksack:** Osprey UNLTD AirScape 68
- Navigation:** Maps – TopoGPS app on iPhone; Friluftsatlas Kungsleden 1:50,000 booklet. GPS – Garmin Fenix 7X
- Sapphire Solar**
- Safety:** Garmin inReach Mini 2
- Rain gear:** Berghaus Ridgemaster
- Base layers:** Icebreaker merino wool top
- Shell:** Helly Hansen Verglas 700
- Nutrition:** Real Turmat rations from Base Camp Food – basecampfood.com



Mountains for the Mind is Trail's campaign promoting the benefits of spending time outside for better mental health. We believe in the power of mountains to change lives – something Andy is also very passionate about and keen to promote through inspiring adventures like his Kungsleden trip. Find out how you can join our 18,000-strong online community at mountainforthemind.co.uk

SUPPORTED BY OUR OFFICIAL PARTNERS

