



A MUSHER'S TALE

Dog sledding through the fresh January snowfall of Swedish Lapland is the perfect way to connect with the wonderful natural environment of the Arctic province, but also to experience kinship with a pack of huskies that are genetically gifted with the ability to cross vast swathes of frozen landscape with relative ease.

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For the best dog sledding experience, you should be taught how to harness your own team, care for them and settle them down at night. At the very least, you should be shown how to drive the sled. This includes jumping on and off, assisting the dogs on steep pinches, controlled braking, cornering, stopping and anchoring.

Musher Elias is disappearing into the blanket-white wilderness signalling at me to “go”.

In theory, wrestling two metal claws – ‘anchors’ – from the icy ground seemed easy. In reality, the chaotic, howling, barking chorus and dirty doggy looks from five impatient racing huskies has turned me into a fumbling mess.

In my defence: I’m also in squat position, balancing on the ruler-width foot rails of a traditional wooden sled in boots that are two sizes too big. My oversized survival suit – a kind of down-filled onesie – has the deftness of Michelin Man and I’m struggling to grab hold of anything in a pair of enormous baggy mitts.

Swedish local Elias says all this roominess is crucial for survival in -30°C temperatures, so that body-heated air can flow around my extremities. In other words, plus-sized kit is a must if I want to hold on to my pinkies over the next three days.

My excited pack senses the exact moment I yank out the anchor. In the same time it takes them to lurch, I have to stand up and hook the metal claws on the handle bar without stabbing myself in the hand. A jerk later, I’m whooshing through the fresh January snowfall of Swedish Lapland.

Ahead is a 100km mush through Vindelfjällen Nature Reserve – a rarely visited Narnia-esque landscape of mountain plains, frozen lakes and ancient spruce forests, that are ideal for exploring by sled. At 5,500km², it is one of Europe’s largest protected areas. I am immersed, literally, in the

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landscape. The trails haven’t had time to pack down this early in the season and watching my legs disappear under a growing bulge of glistening powder has distracted me from preparing for a sharp bend. Getting around it is a tricky mix of bodyweight shifting and going at the correct speed to generate a kind of slingshot action: too fast, and my sled will overshoot the trail; too slow, and over the apex I’ll go.

While the dogs surf through the powder like dolphins in a wave, I tip past the point of no return and remind myself of rule number one: “Always hang on to the sled”, which I successfully do while being dragged through a snowdrift backwards. My canny canine crew senses something



TIPS & INFO Finding responsible kennels

Sledding standards vary widely from country to country, so it’s a good idea to research the kennels before you go. British Columbia’s 2012 Sled Dog Code of Practice is a good place to start.

Choose small group tours and longer trips

It’s a good sign if kennels only run longer tours with small groups, says Elias. “If you’re considering a short day trip, it’s tempting to choose a place where you can drive yourself; please don’t! I’ve seen more dogs mistreated unintentionally by untrained tourists than by professional guides and handlers. Unless you are spending a couple of days on the sled, please leave the driving to your guide and have a nice relaxed ride instead.”

Ask to see the kennels

The conditions of well-run kennels can’t be created overnight. There are standards for feeding, shelter size and insulation, resting, socialising and space. A responsible kennel will happily show you around.

Ask questions

Quite rightly, husky kennels get a lot of scrutiny and questions about their dogs. Good kennels are transparent and happy to explain.

Opposite page: From top, “Always hang on to the sled” is the key advice for learning to drive a dog sled; Below, huskies have coats and footpads uniquely adapted to withstand icy temperatures, and the intelligence to make split-second navigational decisions.

This page: Once the dogs have been tended to, it’s time to head into the cabin and put the kettle on, followed by a dinner of fried moose and potatoes cooked in a traditional muurikka.

amiss, they slow to a halt and I manage to jump back on, to more filthy looks I’m afraid.

Mushers are very close to their dogs and one of my first tasks is to get to know my team. Up front are leaders Nikita and Bruna, who are remarkably talented at picking up the trail, even when it’s buried under knee-deep snow. MJ and Red are the back ‘wheel’ dogs requiring strong and steady personalities that are not easily startled by the sled. They are centred by Balto, a stocky and calm character who pulls in the middle. He is the namesake of a hero husky from history who, along with others, in 1925, undertook a gruelling journey to a remote Alaskan town with lifesaving serum to treat a lethal diphtheria epidemic.

For some reason, I expected my highly trained huskies to be stand-offish. Instead, they are playful, friendly and excited, particularly when they spot the harnesses, to the point where they push their heads in between the straps if I’m taking too long getting them on.

Studies show this playfulness, which is key to teamwork, is one among many characteristics purposely bred into huskies by tribes such as the indigenous Chukchi people who inhabit the furthest reaches of Siberia. Throughout history, selective breeding means Arctic breeds have adaptations at a cellular level giving them instincts and capabilities other dogs do not have. They process energy for extreme endurance, have coats and footpads uniquely adapted to withstand icy temperatures, and possess the intelligence to make split-second navigational decisions to safely cross the frozen Arctic tundra.

Elias explains to our small group of four that our dogs are capable of covering a mind-boggling 1,000km in one week. “There is no other animal that can run as long in these temperatures,” he says. “Control of the sled is paramount; they’ll want to gallop, but your job is to keep them in a quick trot, so they won’t burn out.”



It's not long before we are mushing confidently through a fairytale landscape, where nature's architect has been busy bending snow-laden branches into a series of twinkling archways. We get a rude awakening when the meditative forest spits us out on to a glassy lake, swirling with a capillary-bursting blizzard that rams snow up my nostrils for the best part of an hour. Despite steering through ice-encrusted goggles, I manage to spot a herd of reindeer galloping across my path to, I assume, take shelter in the forest. It's extremely tempting to follow their lead, but the dogs prefer to push on.

It feels as if the January sun has barely risen before it dips, sending the sky into a flux of magenta and candy-floss pink. Soon after dusk creeps in, we enter a crystallised marshland pockmarked with black bog holes. The steaming hollows, which retain heat throughout the winter, have a sinister pong and pose a devilish hazard the dogs instinctively know to avoid. Another two hours of mushing in the darkness delivers us to our cabin for the evening.

Quite rightly, Elias doesn't muck around making it clear how things work. "First, we tend to the dogs and after that you can head into the cabin and put the kettle on." Over a dinner of fried moose and potatoes cooked in a traditional *muurikka* (pan), we chat more about the history of Arctic man's best friends, from first being harnessed for hunting and transport, through to modern-day sledding, which is steeped in controversy.

In 2016, a documentary, *Sled Dogs*, exposed cruelty behind the scenes in the dog-sledding industry throughout Canada and the US. Animal rights organisation PETA (People For The Ethical Treatment of Animals) has since called for a worldwide ban, claiming mushers routinely abandon or kill dogs when they become ill or if they don't run fast enough. It led to British Columbia introducing new laws: The Sled Dog Code of Practice.

Clockwise from top: Lapland is a province in northernmost Sweden; A traditional wood-fired sauna in the wilderness; A tea break on the trails; Sled dogs are the fastest mammal in the world once you exceed a marathon distance.



HUSKY RESCUE NZ

Husky Rescue NZ is a rescue organisation for Siberian huskies. It rescues, desexes, rehabilitates, retraines and rehomes huskies throughout NZ. huskyrescue.nz

LOCAL HUSKY ENCOUNTERS

UnderDog New Zealand offers summer and winter tours with traditional Arctic sled dogs: underdognz.co.nz. Real Dog Adventures NZ does tours of its kennels and harness-making and sled-building workshop. realdog.co.nz. Timberline Racing Huskies, 20 minutes outside Taupō, has a purpose-built facility for its dogs and does tours, too: timberlineracinghuskies.co.nz.

"ARCTIC DOG BREEDS HAVE GAINED IN POPULARITY AS HOUSE PETS."

Elias, who has been mushing and racing for four seasons, disagrees that sledding is inherently abusive. "Saying that the sport as a whole is cruel is just ignorant beyond belief – it's like saying that every driver is a drunk." But Elias recognises there are those who don't meet the laws at all. "These people, I believe, are the reason why PETA lists dog sledding as a cruel sport," he says.

Responsible mushers agree that abusive individuals need to be dealt with. But they believe animal-rights extremists, who want sledding totally banned, are too removed to be judging so vocally and it would create more problems for Arctic dogs, which have been specifically bred to pull and live outside. "There is no way you could get every husky adopted to new homes," explains Elias. "And I'm 100 per cent sure that the majority of them would not be better off even if it were possible. Huskies are a breed that need an active lifestyle, and by active, I don't mean a walk around the park twice a day, I mean running or pulling something regularly," Elias continues. "If you spend most of your days in the mountains, a husky may well be the perfect dog for you, but if you live in a city and work eight-hour days five days a week, then choose a different dog, or maybe a goldfish."

Professor Raymond Coppinger, a canine research scientist who has conducted many studies on the physiology and behaviour of running dogs, explains in his book, *How Dogs Work*, that sled dogs are the fastest mammal in the world once you exceed a marathon distance: "Nothing can touch them." Coppinger describes the Arctic breed as "the perfect models of animals selected for a single behaviour – an integrated machine whose external appearance and whole internal organisation is admirably suited for the performance of pulling a sled". However, the result of this intentional breeding is that, often, huskies are more active than the average pet owner wants. Since the

release of *Game of Thrones* and the movie *Snow Dogs*, Arctic dog breeds have gained in popularity as house pets. However, most people are unaware of the amount of physical and mental stimulation energetic huskies need to be happy. Animal welfare groups have reported an alarming increase in these working breeds being dumped at shelters and have repeatedly warned against buying them for their looks.

As UK adoption organisation Blue Cross points out: "Huskies can pull sleds across hundreds of miles of icy terrain. They are not happy with simply slobbering in front of the telly after a 10-minute plod round the block."

The Chukchi people have a saying: "The way you treat your dog in this life determines your place in heaven." If that's true, Elias will get a top spot. He spends an average of three hours with the dogs each evening: checking, feeding, watering, massaging and digging snowholes. To him, it's more than a relationship; it's a culture and a way of life he is deeply connected to. "When you work and live closely with a team of dogs, the group develops a harmony," says Elias. "You're in tune with each other – I think you become a bit dog-like."

Throughout our three days, he watches, coaches and encourages us, but we know his huskies are a priority. "Listen to them," he says. "The dogs will always tell us when we're right or wrong, not in words of course, but still loud and clear."

It's true, huskies do have a lot to say. At every pause, every break and every stop, the howling and barking chorus commences until we set off again. And by the end of the trip we've learnt a little of what it takes to conduct a band of spirited huskies – firmly from our second-fiddle place. 🐾



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A photo of sled dogs wading through water ankle-deep on top of a melting ice sheet in Greenland shows the state of the planet's rapidly melting sea ice in stark fashion. mindfood.com/walking-on-water