

Go skating in Sweden this winter

Forget crowded indoor ice rinks. Once you've skated on natural ice, there's no going back.

It was the question on all of our minds, but I asked it: 'How do you know when the ice isn't safe to skate on?' Niklas, our calm Swedish guide, rubbed his chin, thought for a moment, then offered up the wisdom of a lifetime spent playing around on frozen water. 'When it breaks,' he said with a broad smile.

The comment wasn't exactly reassuring, but his easy confidence was. As long as it was just jokes being cracked, maybe we'd be all right after all. Niklas, a maths teacher when having breaks from pursuing his favourite hobby, was not entirely joking about his attitude to ice. **(1)**..... The fact that strong ice makes a deeper sound under one's feet than thin ice does is a useful clue.

Our group of beginners was feeling rather nervous as we stood at the edge of a vast frozen bay that first day. Niklas tried his best to persuade us to move forward but, like hesitating penguins on an iceberg, no-one wanted to take the first step. **(2)**..... 'Look at your faces,' shouted Niklas to the happily smiling group, racing along behind him.

Our expressions had been far less joyful the previous evening on being told that a five-hour drive would follow our flights into Sweden's Arlanda airport. That hadn't been the plan; but then, in the world of natural ice skating, no-one expects very much from plans. With its 100,000 lakes and continuous sub-zero winter temperatures, Sweden has no shortage of ice. **(3)**..... For instance, too much overlying snow and you get a bumpy, uncomfortable ride; a sudden thaw and vast areas become unusable.

Perfect conditions must be sought out, and don't last. **(4)**..... Niklas had received a message via social media about Stigfjorden, a shallow, island-studded bay around 50 kilometres north of Gothenburg on the west coast.

There we quickly discovered skating in the open air is a wonderfully leisurely activity. Push off with one skate and you can go 10 metres with ease. Two or three quick kicks at the surface and you accelerate like a top-class sprinter. (5)..... We weren't yet ready to skate that kind of distance, but we certainly had a wonderful sense of freedom.

Our best day was at Vattern, one of Europe's biggest lakes and also one of its clearest. In ideal conditions, this clarity creates a phenomenon known as 'glass ice'. The rocky lake bottom stretched beneath us, three metres below a surface so perfect it was unseen. My tentative first steps left scratches; it felt like vandalising a classical sculpture. As my confidence grew, so did my speed. The sensation as I raced across the invisible ice was astonishing, somewhere between floating, falling and flying. Then there was a sharp noise from all around us. (6)..... No one had to say it. We were skating on very thin ice.

A That was the reason for our unscheduled journey from one side of the country to the other.

B Ten minutes later we laughed at our earlier caution as we slid across the smooth surface, our joy as limitless as our surroundings.

C The skates consisted of removable blades that fastened to the toes of our specialist boots like cross-country skis.

D At first I ignored it, but when thin cracks began to appear I thought it wise to return to solid ground.

E After our first session on the ice had ended, we were not surprised to be told that covering 250 kilometres in a single day is quite possible.

F The Swedes adopt a common-sense approach: they are cautious, they test as they go, and they use ears – as well as eyes – to check it.

G This is not always suited to skating, however.