

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.