

# OutThere

Edited by Chris Miller

Live life in the fit lane

## Cool. Running

In northern Sweden within the Arctic Circle, a dogsledding team is the only way to travel. *MF*'s Jon Lipsey harnesses champion dogs for five days in the snowy wilderness >



Photography Hugh Hacking

**M**y five-day dogsledding expedition is only a few seconds old and already I'm struggling. At the first bend the dogs veer left, I go right and I'm clinging on one-handed as I wrestle the sled into a manageable position. I have never felt less in control of anything in my life.

At this point my chances of successfully negotiating the full route, a large loop within the Arctic Circle in northern Sweden, don't look promising. But that's what I - along with six other first-time mushers (the name for a sled driver), our guide and 42 dogs - aim to do. We'll cover up to 50km a day and sleep in remote cabins and tents along the way.

**Gonda the dogs**

As if the challenge were not intimidating enough, I have the honour of running with some mixed-breed racing dogs that belong to our guide, Milos Gonda, a champion musher. Originally from Slovakia, Gonda now divides his time between leading expeditions in Sweden and entering dogsledding races around Europe. Earlier this year he won the prestigious La Grande Odyssee, an 11-day, 1,000km race in France. Now four of his dogs, Hella, Falco, Max and Flox, will have me, a complete novice, trying to control their speed and power.

The final member of my team is Kamos, a husky who belongs to the company in charge of our expedition. Frankly, I feel scared for all of us.

The sled has been designed to move swiftly through the snow, which means the runners and footrests are uncomfortably narrow. The wooden frame has a handrail at the back and two footrests at the bottom. Between the footrests is the brake - a pedal with two spikes attached to a spring.

Unfortunately for the beginner, braking isn't easy. When you want to stop, you jam your foot down on the pedal and the spikes jab into the ground. But to do that you've got to balance with one leg on the 5cm-wide footrest as the sled shudders across the snow.

And if you don't like braking you won't be a fan of cornering because cornering is achieved through strategically timed braking. 'Use the brake going into a corner to make sure the sled follows the dogs,' says Gonda. 'If you don't brake, your sled will flip over.' He also suggests that we lean into the bends and tells us that we should never let go of our sleds, even if that means being dragged face first through the snow for some distance.

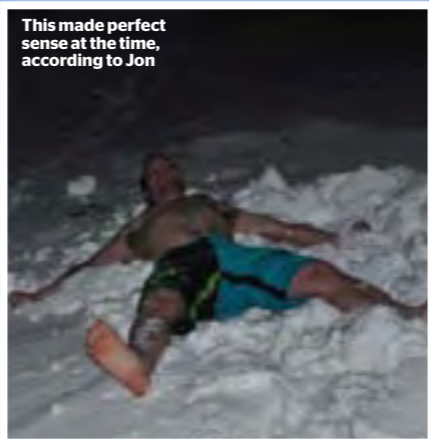
**Sled weight**

My fear of falling means I'm gripping the hand rail so tightly that my knuckles are going the colour of the snow that lines the trail. I'm using every muscle and every bit of energy just to stand up, which seems pathetic compared with what the dogs are doing. When we get to an incline, they're dragging man, sled and cargo - a combined weight of well over 100kg - uphill.

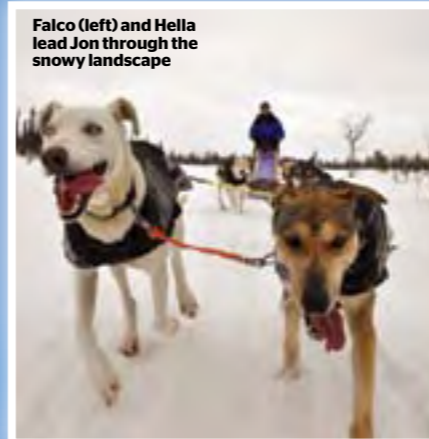
But it's what's on the other side that could really hurt them. Not because they find going downhill difficult, but because the incompetent lump they're pulling could do them serious damage. 'You have to brake on



MF's Jon survives a night spent at -15°C in a Sami tent



This made perfect sense at the time, according to Jon



Falco (left) and Hella lead Jon through the snowy landscape



The mushers' lodge where the journey began under the Northern Lights

**Sami speak**

Essential words and phrases for visiting Lapland

- Hello** Bours
- Goodbye** Hivastat
- Thank you** Geito
- Dog** Benna
- Reindeer** Bocho
- Snow** Muohta
- Dwelling-place** Asodat
- Food** Biebmu
- Cold** Sogjde
- Ice** Jieknga



The dogs can drag an overall weight of over 100kg - sled, cargo and musher

a steep downhill,' Gonda says. 'If you don't then your sled can go into the dogs.'

At the next turn, Gonda advises us to build up speed to avoid the sled cutting the corner and floundering in the deep snow on the side of the trail. I oblige by careering into the turn, only I forget to lean so my sled flips and launches me head first into the snow. Somehow I manage to hold on and to get it upright while the dogs are going slowly enough for me to leap back on.

The final stage of the day takes us across a frozen lake. The trail is packed hard so the dogs can run and, for the first time, chaos and panic are replaced by calm as we pass over the vast and simple landscape. Our overnight stop is at the Vakare camp, a large

packed snacks and told that Christmas will now be held once a fortnight. But I'll overlook their excitable barking and whining because I know how much effort they're going to make for me.

The start of day two is slow because overnight winds have blown snow over the trail, causing sleds and dogs to sink. We also face hazards in the form of overflows - pools of water on top of the snow. 'When it's cold the ice cracks beneath the snow,' Gonda explains. 'The weight of the snow pushes the ice down and water seeps up through the cracks. If you get your feet wet and don't dry them you could get frostbite.'

Unhelpfully, the wind returns just as we start the 20km run across a vast frozen lake

**'I'm gripping the hand rail so tightly that my knuckles are going the colour of the snow'**

wooden cabin. It's basic (no electricity or running water) but it has a sauna, which we make use of before heading back outside for a very brisk snow bath. After this it doesn't take long to drift off to sleep, even with an occasional howl breaking the silence.

**Sinking feeling**

As soon as we begin to harness the dogs in the morning they start behaving like small children who have been fed E-number-

called Sautos Jarvi. It's so cold that it feels like someone is scraping icy sandpaper over my face. It's even chilly enough for my mixed-breed champs to need coats. Kamos seems to be the only member of our team untouched by the plummeting temperature.

After a thorough battering from the elements we arrive at our base for the night for a dinner of meatballs and rice, and Gonda tells me more about his life as a musher. He tells me how he has bred his

dogs for both speed and endurance. I won La Grande Odyssée because I followed a good training programme and because I have a good bond with the dogs. You must become best friends with your dogs. Then they trust and respect you. If you run them more than you should they'll lose respect for you and you won't win races.'

He also talks me through the intricacies of mid-race paw care. During a race they need to be moisturised regularly. You need to put cream between their toes, but not when it's too cold because it can go hard and cause their pads to crack. That's why some mushers give their dogs booties. But even that is tactical. 'With booties it's slower but it protects their feet so you can finish the race,' he says.

### Big shot

We awake to another fresh blanket of snow, which looks beautiful but makes progress slow as we head towards the evening's destination - the small Sami settlement of Ovrri Soppero. The Sami are a traditionally nomadic people who have lived in the northern reaches of the Nordic countries, stretching from the Norwegian coast in the west to Russia in the east, for thousands of years. When we arrive we're greeted by Britt-Marie, a Sami lady who has kindly offered to cook us dinner - a feast of reindeer. The meat is delicious and after three days in the wild it's great to experience a bit of comfort.

As we're finishing our meal, in walks Per-Nils, the man of the house and the herder responsible for rearing what we've

just eaten. He tells us proudly that he shot the moose whose skull and antlers are hanging on the wood-panelled wall. 'I shot him just below the shoulder, where they teach you to shoot,' he says. Apparently he shot it from a kilometre away.

Long-range marksmanship is just one of the things that has made Per-Nils into something of a legend in these parts. One of the guides at the mushers' lodge, a man known as Erik the Viking, told me about the time they went up on a mountain plateau in a blizzard in the middle of the night to rescue a stray reindeer. They couldn't lasso it because of the swirling winds, so Per-Nils took a flying leap from his snowmobile on to the animal's back to get it under control.

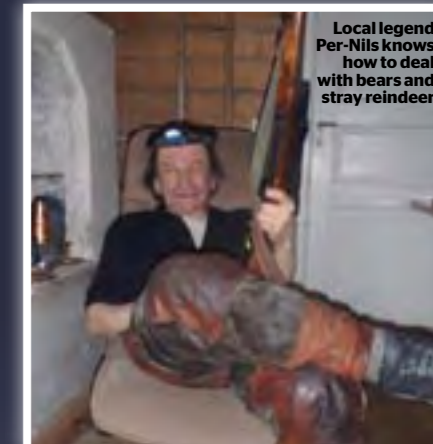
### Bear arms

As he sits in his favourite chair, rifle in hand, Per-Nils gives us some words of wisdom about the local predators. 'There are many bears around here,' he says. 'Brown bears. If you see one, never run. That can be dangerous. It's better to look for some big tree.' He also tells us about the winter of 1972, and how the ground was too frozen for the reindeer to dig for food. The village's herd of 17,000 was reduced to just 3,000 and only ten calves made it through the season. 'That is the life of a reindeer herder,' he says.

His stories and advice aren't limited to hunting and herding. He assures us that when reindeer antlers are ground into powder they become a powerful aphrodisiac. 'It makes a man strong and hard,' he insists.



Humans and dogs rely on each other for strength and safety



Local legend Per-Nils knows how to deal with bears and stray reindeer



Jon digs out the entrance to his Sami tent (pictured left)

## Dog roles

Each dog in a team has a different job. Here's what they do

### Leaders

The dogs at the front. The most important attribute a leader can have is the ability to listen to the musher and follow commands.

### Point dogs

The main job of the second row of dogs is to help maintain the speed of the sled so they need to be fast runners.

### Team dogs

Any dog between the second row and the row nearest to the sled is a team dog.

### Wheel dogs

The dogs closest to the sled are called wheel dogs. They need to be strong because they help to pull the sled around corners.



Tonight, however, it's reindeer skins I'm more interested in because we're going to sleep in a traditional Sami tent. I start the night wearing just a base layer in my sleeping bag on a bed of skins but it's so cold that I gradually add two fleeces, a jacket and a woolly hat. When I wake in the morning I try to swig from my water bottle but it's frozen solid - the temperature dipped to -15°C in the wee small hours.

### Return to mush

Day four starts with a serene glide across 30km of pristine snow. It's -10°C but it feels mild. My body absorbs the shocks and jolts and I let the dogs gallop while occasionally leaning on the brakes to prevent them overtaking the team in front. I'm starting to feel like a real musher.

On the final day we cross the southern stretch of Sautos Jarvi before tracing the River Torne back to the mushers' lodge. The bumps and turns that caused me so many problems at first now barely register. And as we head for the lodge Gonda turns and

indicates something in the snow ahead of me. As the sled hurtles past I swoop down and pick up a discarded dog harness, a move that, just a few days earlier, would have had catastrophic consequences.

Back at the lodge I chat to Dries, a Belgian guide, about his experience of running the Iditarod, an iconic race that involves

## 'I start the night wearing just a base layer but gradually add two fleeces, a jacket and a woolly hat'

covering 1,850km from Anchorage to Nome in Alaska. He tells me that he first got into dogsledding so that he could 'take off, disappear into the wilderness and survive'.

Hearing about his time in the Alaskan wilderness is intoxicating so I ask Gonda what it would take to turn me into a dogsled racer. 'Everything is possible,' he says. 'But to

enter a race is a big gap. You'd have to train for at least a month. Not physical training but learning about the dogs and simulating any situation that can happen in racing.'

A month. No problem. Sure, it'll take a bit longer to get ready for Iditarod but I can work on that. Then Dries offers some more advice. 'They always say that in a dog

### The dogsledding trip experts

Men's Fitness did the Arctic Dogsledding Expedition with Exodus Travel. A seven-day trip including flights with SAS (flysas.co.uk), accommodation, guide and meals costs from £2,699. To book call 0845 863 9601 or visit exodus.co.uk.

For our five top dogsledding trips go to [mensfitness.co.uk/links/topdogs](http://mensfitness.co.uk/links/topdogs)