

Åre, Sweden, A winter wonderland



I hum the tune “Walking in a Winter Wonderland” to myself as we drive from the airport in Trondheim on the snow covered E14 to Åre, in Sweden, our base for the next few days. As I hum, I recount the images that the song has conjured from my youth to adulthood. There are iced white trees, snow covered wooden houses adorned with golden lights and in between the few areas of forest that remain green, all is completely white with snow. That is what I picture, and when I dig deeper into the vision of the perfect winter scene I imagine the inhabitants, completely at home with the crystal white cold of their surroundings, busy behind the rustic wooden walls creating hearty food that warms the soul and encapsulates life in a cold, cold winter.

Of course such day dreams are usually interrupted with the request to insert my card properly so that I can pay the supermarket bill! Not today, for as we drive through the Norwegian and Swedish communities en-route to Åre all these winter dreams unfold. How will I possibly steal myself to return for Christmas?

Our destination is the top Swedish ski resort of Åre linking the ski areas of Duved, Tegefjall, Åre and Åre Bjornen, the latter being home to Copperhill Mountain Lodge, the five star mountain chalet inspired hotel that will be our home for the stay. En-route to Åre we

pass by Storlien Mountain the first Swedish Ski resort and though now very

limited in its range of skiing and facilities still visited annually by Swedish royalty.

And so our journey continues in the mid-afternoon where the Nordic light fades into the darkness. Whilst the neon and candles begin to light up the snow we pull up to the reception area of the Copperhill Mountain Lodge. It is fair to say that our expectations were already high from online reviews but as we pull our cases into the vast wood and copper space that comprises the atrium of the hotel the scene is more akin to something from a Bond film than a Jackson family winter break.



The Copperhill Mountain Lodge was designed by Architect Peter Bohlin (he also designed a home for Bill Gates and the Apple offices worldwide) and marries the warm wooden feel of a mountain chalet, with truly awe inspiring design that captivates its guests well beyond arrival. We are shown to our Copper Suite room on the 4th floor accessed by the balconies that line the atrium with views down on to the enormous fireplace in the lobby area. For the entire stay I fail to tire of the wonder of this central area where tired limbs sink into the cosy seating and where the spirit is warmed with Scandinavian fireside treats.



Though the days are short in the Nordic winter the resort supports floodlit skiing on most evenings from late December onwards. We take in an hours skiing after arrival before a dinner which includes the much anticipated meatballs for the teenagers while I opt for the hunters choice of reindeer with lingonberries (without the effort).

Our second day starts early with a mind-boggling Scandinavian breakfast including pancakes, apple & cinnamon porridge, breads, lingonberry and cloudberry jams, smoked salmon, cheeses, pates and cold meats, not to mention the staple British choices of bacon and eggs. After driving my children to their chosen downhill ski location my day is to begin with a long desired attempt to master the Nordic sport of cross-country skiing.

The first sign of what is to come is clear from my arrival at the Bjornen ski centre where I am greeted by Bjorn and Jimmy who will be my guides for the cross country session. My teachers are both elite cross country skiers who graduated from the same sports academy and have practised the sport at the very highest and most competitive level. They are both ready for action kitted in lycra and light but warm jackets also sporting the slim athletic physiques that you would expect of sportsmen familiar with the extreme requirements of this demanding sport. In front of them is a challenging specimen, fifty years of no such experience adorned in the far

less appropriate attire of downhill ski clothing that is designed to keep you warm while the steep downhill slopes provide the effort!

As we travel by quad and trailer towards the frozen lake that will provide our practice ground Jimmy tells me that more and more English people are turning to the sport, though numbers are still tiny in comparison to Alpine skiing. As we work through the four gears of Cross Country skiing, alone on a freezing lake in biting temperatures of minus ten degrees, my body heat is more akin to what you might experience running across the Sahara!



With each different gear and each practice exercise my leg muscles burn, my heart pumps and my limbs struggle to provide the necessary coordination. That said, I am constantly motivated by shouts of encouragement from Bjorn and Jimmy who tell me that I am doing amazingly well and that due to my successful efforts we will attempt the fourth and hardest gear where solely the arms and core muscles are used to provide the necessary traction. After four

kilometres of determined effort this proves a real test and a reminder that I will need to work on those core muscles when I get home.

Overall, the lesson is a real joy, the most surprising part is the importance of balance brought about by the very thin ski's on which the coordinated movement relies. At the time of my lesson Bjorn explains that the conditions have not been good and that the cross country skiing in Bjornen is currently restricted to the frozen lake. When more snow arrives the Bjornen area is well covered with trails including a four kilometre journey to the area of disused Coppermines and a welcome mountain restaurant. With the option of interchangeable ski hire from the Skistar locations I make a promise to myself to return and undertake this journey in the future, all be it with a little more strength and coordination next time around!

Later in the afternoon I decide to reward my efforts with a Hot Chocolate and when I order "two more Hot Chocolates" at the hotel it is perceived to be an order for two "Hot Shots" a Scandinavian winter warmer of Galliano, Coffee liqueur and cream. The waiter is highly amused when he hears of the actual request, he returns with two more Hot Chocolates and is delighted to inform me that I may enjoy the wrong unintended strong stuff on the house! Needless to say I go on to an early evening nap while the Children enjoy the facilities of the superb hotel spa.

Are may lack the range and height available in many Alpine locations but it still offers a good range of skiing across the four ski areas, and where the resort really does come into its own is its surety of snow (and Christmas!) brought about by its Nordic location.

For the next two days our activity is focussed towards downhill skiing and helping my daughter overcome her fear of the steeper

slopes. The pistes are awash with families arriving in numbers for the Christmas festivities and both young and old are out together enjoying the newly arrived snow. The Mountain lodges that serve excellent warming lunches are packed with Scandinavians families seemingly at home with the joy of the festive season in the mountains. Over the course of the two days we leave the hotel at first light to enjoy the virgin snow and finish our days on the floodlit slopes that permit extended skiing for those with energy still to burn. After a difficult final afternoon the floodlit facility allows one final journey down the mountain and thankfully my daughter finishes her skiing with confidence and ability much improved.



And so the day arrives and we have to steal ourselves to pack our cases and return. First we have to leave the Copperhill Mountain Lodge at the point that our fellow guests are adorned in their salopettes and all set for a day on the slopes. Then having forced our way from the warmth of the hotel we walk out to falling snow as light begins to appear to reveal the beauty of the valley below. As we navigate the snow covered road out across the mountains, with the twenty fifth of December just two days away it seems that this year we have left part of Christmas behind for another year.

Report by Lee Jackson of Bliss Travel