



My first day dog sledding started with me face down in the snow, as the dogs literally pulled the sled from under me. Recovering my dogs and sled from a kind person who'd caught them, I tried again and was soon sledding through a beautiful snowy wood thinking, 'This is what I came here to do'.

It didn't last long. Rising onto a plateau we entered a white-out, through which we stop-started for what felt like years. None of us really knew what we were doing so we kept falling off, getting our dogs' lines tangled and generally being inept. It didn't help that my goggles froze over (further impeding my vision) and the mitts provided were so incredibly well padded that I had virtually no movement in my hands. The leader, Ceri, thought I was being very good doing the thumbs up to him regularly to say I was ok, but my thumb was nowhere near the thumb

of the mitt - that was just the shape the mitts were made in. The phrase that comes to mind is 'when hell freezes over' – it's still going to be hell, just incredibly cold. And it was - something like minus 20. Thankfully the kit provided was wonderful, so the cold itself wasn't a problem – it was the minimal visibility, freezing wind and driving snow that caused problems.

Removing my goggles helped, but then I had to keep brushing the ice crystals out of my eyelashes so they didn't freeze together. Then it got dark. It was one of those days when you have to tell yourself that it won't go on forever, and that you will get through it. The leaders were superb, patiently stopping and picking us up or untangling our dogs over and over and over again.

It was wonderful to get to the cabin where we were staying the night, stoke up the fire and have some food and hot drinks. Dinner that night was reindeer, including sharpened sticks to remove the marrow from the bones, and accompanied by cups of hot reindeer stock. The doctor was also kept busy dealing with a selection of bangs, bruises and frost nips.

The next day I was determined not to end up on my face without my sled. Instead I was dragged through the snow behind the sled for about 50 metres, with my open pockets filling up with snow. After that, we got into the swing of this dog sledding thing. There were fewer falls today, and some great hills and deep snow to go over and through.

That night we stayed in a cabin overlooking a frozen lake. It had no electricity or water, and we had to drill holes in the lake for water, and then carry it up the hill. The drill worked very well, but the hole and the ladle were rather small, and one of the buckets had a rather serious leak. The cabin was really cosy, and looked lovely in candlelight. The soft lighting was good as it didn't show up too harshly our rather unwashed state. Unlike some, I wasn't keen enough to go back down the snowy hill for a sauna, preferring my cosy sleeping bag.

Up early to feed the dogs. We took turns each morning and evening to give them each a bowlful of dog biscuits and water. In the evening they got the same, with the addition of a chunk of frozen meat – which they loved. Then we got them into their harnesses and set off.

My cunning plan this morning was to start right behind Per Thore, the Norwegian leader of the group, as he was definitely top dog, and there was no way my gang of four lunatics were going to pass him. This worked perfectly, and the day started off with a beautiful meandering journey through a wood. Then up onto much higher ground with expansive views, and for the first time a glimpse of a sunrise. Or, it might have been a sunset, there wasn't much time difference between the two and my watch was buried beneath layers of clothes.

This was the longest day – about 60km over hills and mountains. We were very fortunate with the weather and made excellent time, even getting to stop for a quick lunch, which was a novel experience. The only downside was that one of my dogs had a fit just before we got to our destination for the day. She had to be tucked inside Ceri's sled for the last wee bit, and fortunately recovered very quickly.



Delicious local salmon was provided for dinner that night – pre vacuum packed and cooked by Per Thore. We all got to have showers this night, which was wonderful. Then some of us tried out the sauna and rolling in the snow. It takes a bit of courage, but is fantastic, especially when there is a beautiful starry sky above you. Another alternative is just to take a bucket of snow into the sauna,

which makes a great cool rub-down when you get too hot and can't face minus 10 in your bikini. It's also good for throwing at other people in the sauna.

We were due to get a lie-in the next morning, but for reasons that shall remain undisclosed (apologies have been accepted) I was wide awake at 6:15am, and so got to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet and watch daylight gradually emerge. There was daylight from about 8am to 3:30pm, but little of that was sunlight. Breakfast, as usual, was porridge and bread and cheese, followed by sandwich making.

This day was the most straightforward of all of them, as we spent most of it sledding over frozen lakes and along frozen rivers – apparently the ice was 70cm thick... in most places. This gave us more of an opportunity to take photos and enjoy the sledding without having to constantly pay attention to what we were doing. We also saw sunlight for the first time today, with a wide range of beautiful pastel colours touching mountains and clouds.

When I say this day was straightforward, that doesn't include the time when all 15 of our sleds and 70 dogs converged on a group of unfortunate men ice fishing. There

was a wide expanse of frozen lake, but between us we managed to sled over their ice hole, get their nets caught round dogs' paws, and a dog stole one of their fish!

Dog sledding is a wonderful way to travel, with the swish of the runners, and the whistle of the wind the only sounds you hear. Unless you stop, at which point the dogs start up the most unholy noise. There's always so much to look at around you, and keep an eye on – you have to make sure you keep the gang line (the line attaching the dogs to the sled) taut so it doesn't get tangled round the dogs' legs or the sled doesn't run into the dogs. You have a foot break, which I had to use a lot to keep my dogs in line with the sled in front, and an ice anchor for when you want to stop. Neither of these work terribly well on ice, so stopping on the lakes and rivers was a tricky matter. Deep snow wasn't so good either, but at least you had something soft to fall on.



We were optimistic about seeing the Northern Lights at our next destination, but a sudden and random fog rolled in obscuring pretty much everything. Tonight's accommodation was two cabins with bunk beds – a boys' one, which was nicely heated, and a girls' one which was the same temperature as outside. Fortunately wood burning stoves are very efficient and we soon had it nice and muggy. Unfortunately, the drop toilets at this venue presented a fairly smelly challenge, and that was without trying to climb onto them (they were really rather high).

Then it was our last day dog sledding, which involved a fantastic mix of frozen river, twisting tracks through woods, hills and slopes. I took a final tumble when I hit a snow drift at the wrong angle and managed to get my sled trapped on one side of a tree and my dogs on the other. Soon sorted though. Then it was the end, tying up the dogs for the last time and feeding them a last chunk of frozen meat.

But it wasn't the end of the adventure. Some of us went snowmobiling – very fast! And halfway through the trip the leader asked if we wanted to have a go on the back of his fancy snowmobile. He took off, reaching about 100 miles an hour, with each of us holding on for dear life. This was followed by a sauna – with beer, wine, biscuits and snow (the civilised way to sauna), and then messing around in the hot tubs.

Then we all went off to the Norwegian ice hotel for a visit. It was magical, with ice sculptures, lights made out of ice, an ice bar and beds covered in reindeer skins. We all got drinks in glasses carved out of ice, and then it was back to our hotel for a final meal of salmon, and maybe a few more drinks.

Reluctant to let the day finish I spent ages that night looking at the most fantastic starry sky – but still no Northern Lights.

Never mind. I'll just have to back and do it all again.



Details

- I was away from Monday 19th January 2009, returning on Sunday 25th.
- There were 12 of us in the group, plus the Norwegian leader, a British leader and a doctor.
- We flew, via Oslo, into Alta in the very north of Norway, and well inside the Arctic Circle.
- Over the course of the week we travelled about 200km by dog sled, travelling for about 5 hours a day.
- Temperatures varied from -20 to -3 with average probably being about -10.
- We were provided with Artic suits, Artic boots, and the aforementioned very warm mitts.
- Each of us had 4 dogs pulling our sleds, with the leaders having a few more.
- At the end of each day we unharnessed, tied up and fed our dogs, and reversed the exercise in the morning.
- The dogs made a vast amount of noise any time they stopped running, and particularly when they were getting ready to start in the morning. They really did love running and pulling the sleds.
- Going up hills, if the dogs didn't think you were pulling your weight they would turn round and give you a look that very clearly said 'Oi, lazy bones, start pushing!'
- The dogs did poo as they went along, but didn't kick it up in our faces. They did fart quite a bit too.