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# SKATING ON THIN ICE

**MAXWELL ROCHE GOES SKATING ATOP A  
1,700-MILE ICE RINK IN NORTH SWEDEN.  
THE SEA SWIRLS JUST A FEW INCHES  
BELOW HIS BLADES...**

**Words** Maxwell Roche







**B**

eneath my trembling skates scrolls a dark, sleek and hypnotic blur. Like an eggshell gradually succumbing to the increasing efforts of its temporary tenant, the ice pulses on ocean currents, squeaking and whining as the extent of its elasticity are tested. As I stare down at the flickering reflection between my feet, a man stares back, an anxious man. His teeth are bared as though bracing for an ever-imminent impact his eyes are drawn to a tight painful squint... that man is I.

Up ahead our ever-diligent guide Claes-Jörgen Pohl of Bearfoot North Expeditions leans on his ice-testing spear (a wonky old ski pole). "Two centimeters of ice is more than enough" he calls to us. It doesn't sound like enough I think to myself. "If my spear breaks through on first joust," he says "We go the other way." I'm not entirely sure what I expected with regard to my life and the

preservation of it, whilst skating atop the fragile sea ice of Sweden's frozen North. I had supposed, or had rather hoped, that it would be a bit more, well... scientific. With little or no choice in the matter I purse my lips and nod to my compatriots, feigning satisfaction. I mean, if the ice did break, and the dark frozen liquibyss did reach up to consume me, at least it would be quick, right? Entombed below a flawless window to the sky, I'd likely perish from hypothermia long before I took my first suffocating gulp of the frigid drink.

For just a few weeks in November each year, before the snow falls, the sea around Piteå in North Sweden's Baltic Bothnian Gulf becomes a radically reflective and right roomy rink of perfect ice. Seventeen hundred miles from the fenced off alabaster ovaloids of England, the Tarlatan tutus of Torvill and the dazzling diamantés of Dean a paradisiacal playground forms where sea and sky, like dancers, emulate each other and become as one. If like me you're a semi athletic and boundlessly enthusiastic character, who lusts





eternally for the thrill of expending energy in the world's wildest of places, this fleeting opportunity to glide for hundreds of kilometres at a time, atop a sun burnished silver surface, will indubitably stir your cauldron of courageous creativity. I caught wind of the aforementioned opportunity just three weeks prior to the November window, courtesy of the lovely ladies at Visit Lulea, and a man named Hakan at the Swedish Lapland Tourist Board. Regardless of the last minute nature of things, my excitement was such that flights got booked and preparations were made, in a mere matter of moments.

As the car creeps, tyres crunching, up the frozen gravel near the long pontoon from which we are soon to depart, our guide and driver Claes holds his hand up, and announces matter-of-factly "And now we arrive." As we bundle out of the car a raw wind carries with it across my face the smell of earth and pine, and I look up at the high stratus clouds that are casting a very typical arctic light upon the landscape; not a shred of yellow or red here, just a cold azure. I jump up and down on the spot and blow some warm breath into my hands whilst Claes opens the boot and starts to divvy-up the equipment.

My associates for the trip, who happen to be three young ex-professional speed skaters, dive either side of Claes in search of their leotards (brave boys considering it's minus five Celsius). The story goes that in Holland, people love to skate. For hundreds of years Dutch enthusiasts have competed not only on indoor hockey rinks, but outside on natural ice that forms tracks 200 kilometres in length along the canals, rivers and frozen lakes in an annual event called Elfstedentocht. For the last sixteen years however, global warming has seen to it that the canals of Holland remain un-frozen, leaving young skaters like Marco, Tim and Huub frustrated. This

***Unbeknown to me the ice, which earlier looked so solid and opaque, is now completely translucent***

frustration has forced them to chase the natural ice further and further north. To which end they find themselves teamed up with the likes of me, an average at best rollerblader from Twickenham, with a total ice skating experience of er... once.

With the laces of my skates tied together, I sling them over my shoulder and trot down to the jetty in pursuit of Claes and the boys; I find them sat along its length, like birds on a wire, eyes down, pulling up sock and boot. Claes, who is somehow already fully kitted, scoots a few metres out onto the ice to join the semi circle of experienced local skaters who are stood like ancient stones, smirking and jesting at such a disparate band. Deciding to abandon my skates for the time being, I walk gingerly across the ice to shake hands with each of the crew in turn. To my grave embarrassment, on approaching the last of the chaps, hand outstretched, my slippery soled shoes loose friction and I start to jog frantically backwards on the spot. Fortunately for me, and my male pride, Claes is quick on the uptake and he dives across the ice in time to steady me shouting "Woooooahhh... sitta ner I baten." This I translate later that evening to mean "Sit down in the boat." With the help of Claes, I regain my composure, and walk tentatively back to the pontoon to don the rest of my gear, starting with the skates.

Perhaps the most notable difference between a Swedish long distance/natural ice skate, and the traditional plastic-booted skates that are thrust across the counters of UK ice rinks, is that these boots and the

blades are separate entities. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the boots I'd been given were not dissimilar to a cosy pair of soft and insulated walking boots. so it was possible to wear them independent of the blades. In order to attach these, all I had to do was clip my toe in at the front by way of a bar and clasp mechanism. Once the skates were on I then gave attention to the fact that my heels were not attached, another dissimilarity between them and a traditional rink skate. This meant that whilst on the move my boot could flex giving a far more natural feel to the exercise, in fact one not dissimilar to running (or walking in my case). Once the skates were on I used the ski poles that I'd been given to hoist myself perpendicular. Beckoned immediately by my compatriots, whose patience is now dwindling, I lean forward and push-off after them.

Nothing but a high-pitched creaking emanates from below our venturesome feet. The last fifteen minutes since the pontoon have been spent scooting tentatively atop opaque and hard packed ice, along the perimeter of a small inlet. Suddenly the team ahead stop deftly and abruptly as we near the mouth of the bay. Having not yet mastered the snowplough ski-style stopping technique, I proceed to career into the back of Marco and cause a comedic "Newton's Cradle" style accident. Marco, bumped by me, then shoves into Tim, Tim shoved by Marco, then clatters into Huub, and poor Huub unfortunately, who has nobody left to clatter into, gets nudged clean off his feet and onto his Lycra clad backside with a dull thud. "Soooooory" I shout to Huub, still clinging to Marco, "My bad." With a smirk from the Swedish team we gather once again in semicircular fashion, all eyes on Claes, who's stance suggests he's about to say something of significance.

"Now listen," says Claes who's holding one palm up flat, and using the other to track along the frozen horizon, which now sweeps vast and uninterrupted before us. "It is now we go on open ice, thinner ice, so we need to be more careful." The smiles slide from our lengthening faces as we realise now might be the time for a little more concentration. "We go single file, with five metres between. I go in front to test the ice." As I look out across the blackness of the Baltic Sea, a sudden chill passes over me. My eyes fall from the horizon and I'm soon gazing down beyond my feet. Unbeknown to me the ice, which earlier looked so solid and opaque, is now completely translucent. Having strayed a certain distance from the shore it is now possible to see the water coursing beneath us. It would be impossible to recongnise the water, on account of it being so black, were it not for the various deposits, leaves and twigs etc that stream past on the current below. Despite being a man of modest imagination, I begin to ponder the possibilities of a plunge beyond the crust. Thankfully Marco jabs his ski pole into the back of my knee in jest, and my morbid meditations are cut short.

"Please listen," says Claes, this time with a new authority. "Because we go on thinner ice you have to know how to rescue yourself when you break through." I can't help but pay





*"It is now we go on open ice, thinner ice, so we need to be more careful."*







particular attention to his use of the word “when”, but console myself in the knowledge that English isn’t his first language. “When you break through,” he continues “Use the two ice awls around your neck (two ski pole style handles we have each been given, that are connected by a piece of paracord and adorned with a menacing point), jab both into the ice edge, and pull yourself out. Don’t pull up forward though, as the ice will continue to crack, just swing your legs out sideways, like a seal. Got it?” I frantically think back to all those David Attenborough shows I’d watched, where seals had been filmed swinging their flippers rear ends sideways, up and out, of icy holes. I muse a moment longer before Claes turns his back and begins to glide off toward the horizon, calling over his shoulder “Also don’t forget to listen to the ice, when the pitch gets higher, it gets thinner.”

Fortunately, none of us meet a frigid demise that day. The two-centimetre crust of ice supported us throughout, and we streaked for over twenty kilometres between, and around, various islands in the archipelago, stopping often for flasks of coffee and reindeer sandwiches that Claes had thoughtfully brought along. As Claes had warned, however, the ice did often quiver and sing at an alarming pitch when it became too thin to bear us (a sound that I can only liken to that made by railway lines when a distant train approaches) but when the pitch got to

breaking point, Claes used his instincts, and his wonky ski pole to great effect, steering us to continual safety.

There were a number of magic moments that day that I won’t soon forget. Struggling, as I often did to catch up with the Dutch speed skaters and the Swedish locals, I was left almost alone on more than one occasion but it was those that struck me. Clicking and gliding along effortlessly, with the ice mirroring the sky, it was hard to tell where

***Gliding along effortlessly, with the ice mirroring the sky, it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.***

one ended and the other began. The faint smells of the sea and the sight of passing gulls silhouetted in the half-light, created a setting of supreme singularity... I felt in awe. At the beginning of winter, just 100 miles from the Arctic Circle, alone on a sea of ice, peace is almost certainly what I found. Peace, quiet and perfect solitude, accessible only by ice skate; a mode of transport that, when brought out of the confines of a man-made rink, and into the Scandinavian wild, makes sense beyond all measure.

So, if by some miracle or another you’ve arrived at the end of the summer, still in possession of a few days annual leave, I highly recommend you tag them onto the back, or front, of a weekend this November and set off for North Sweden in pursuit of natural ice. The skating itself, being for the most part, in a straight line, takes only a very basic level of coordination to get the hang of - but the rewards once you’re out there, gliding upon a godly mirror, experiencing that “walk on water” feeling whilst being surrounded by nothing but frozen sea and silence, are incomparable. The delicate and transitory nature of the ice, and the environmental factors that herald its creation, make it all the more unique, a treasure to behold and pursue. That is why I hereby charge you to contact the right honourable Claes-Jörgen Pohl, before it’s too late. Claes’s guiding company Bearfoot North ([bearfootnorth.se](http://bearfootnorth.se)) offer a bespoke package for skate tours out on the Bay of Bothnia and on the mountain lakes of Stora Sjöfallets National Park. He’s nothing short of a hero, and will supply you with an endless torrent of hot coffee, reindeer and lingonberry sandwiches, and anecdotes testament to his wild and eclectic Laplandic life.

■ For any more information on things to do while you’re out there please also visit [swedishlapland.co.uk](http://swedishlapland.co.uk) and [lulea.nu](http://lulea.nu)