

IF I COULD TURN BACK TIME...

Jonathan Cowie steps back in time with a race across the Arctic Circle from Finland to Sweden

Time travel has enthralled mankind for generations. From HG Wells to Cher, the ability to turn back the clock and skip across the space-time continuum holds a strange fascination. But you don't need a DeLorean or Tardis to travel through history. An event in Lapland gives you the chance to swim backwards through time.

A short flight from Helsinki, Kemi/Tornio airport is the gateway to exploring the outdoor playground of Lapland. Popular with winter sports enthusiasts and Santa Claus spotters, the region is also well set up for a variety of summer adventures, including lots of wild swimming opportunities. The area is no stranger to outdoor swimming: as well as hosting the International Winter Swimming Association World Championships in Rovaniemi in 2014, there is a strong tradition of sauna and swimming. No one will look oddly at you here if you strip off and jump in a lake.

I was in Lapland to take part in a unique event. Swim the Arctic Circle is a race from Finland to Sweden across the Torne River. And it takes place in the midnight sun. Oh, and it also crosses the Arctic Circle dateline, which means that if you are fast enough (and

believe me, you will be, thanks to the speed of the current) you finish before you start. There are actually two swims to take part in: a warm-up 2km at lunchtime, followed by the 3km main event at midnight.

Before the event though, there was time to be introduced to the Finnish summer experience. I was staying in Juoksenki with Anne and her husband, who help organise the Swim the Arctic Circle event, and whose house is by the river we would be racing down the next day. It was hot when I arrived, and we headed down to the river for a cooling dip. A small sauna on wheels sat on the riverbank by a jetty. We dived into the water and could immediately feel the strength of the current.

From downstream, a kayaker appeared next to us. Samuli, a local triathlete, was spending the summer at this parents' house next door, training in the river and the hills (as well as building portable saunas, including the one next door).

"Swim upstream to that tree," he said, "and I will film you."

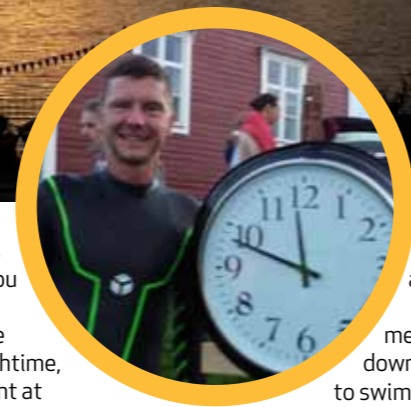
We set off with Samuli filming us with a GoPro. We swam. We kept swimming. And

swimming. We didn't get anywhere.

"When I train it takes me 15 minutes to swim downstream and 45 minutes to swim back," Samuli laughed.

Half an hour later we were sat on the riverbank by the sauna, drinking beer, as the sun didn't set below the horizon. With night refusing to fall I didn't feel tired at all: a very strange experience. Anne's husband, Juha, lit a fire and we spent the evening swimming, taking saunas and drinking beer. Samuli reckoned that five swims and five saunas were the optimum. Five beers may also have been consumed, before we feasted on barbecued sausages and salad in the midnight sun.

The next morning there was time to explore a bit before the first race began at 2pm. We visited local beauty spot Aavasaksa Hill and Tsar Alexander III's hunting lodge, perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking endless forest. Lapland is a true wilderness, with pine trees as far as the eye can see. It is a humbling experience to look out and see no signs of human habitation. I half expected to catch sight of a Moomin darting through the trees.



By lunchtime the glorious summer weather had unfortunately turned to rain. We took Samuli's little boat across the river from the Finnish side to the Swedish side, where the first race starts. Since the race was only 2km, and having felt the strength of the current the day before, I decided that I would swim skins (the water temperature being 18 degrees Celsius, similar to summer river temperatures in the UK). Around 25 swimmers were registered for the race, and they all seemed to be pulling on neoprene. I shivered in a downpour at the start line in my trunks, huddled under a towel next to fellow skins swimmer, my friend Päivi.

The start line was a rope held ingeniously, and somewhat unnecessarily, from a boat to a jetty. Samuli, who in previous years had won the race, was right at the front. As the starting horn went off we dived under the water then set off downstream, following a series of large buoys painted alternately in Swedish and Finnish national colours. I moved up the pack, really enjoying the feeling of speed from the current. The water was dark but navigation was easy: just swim in a straight line between the shore and the buoys. The race went quickly; very quickly, taking around 22 minutes. At the finish line we were met with biscuits, drinks, hot soup and a really warm welcome from the crowd of locals gathered to watch the race.

After the obligatory sauna (one each for men and women) and hot tub, we gathered in a wood-panelled club house for the prize-giving. I was

pleased to have finished in third place. Samuli came first and Päivi fourth. What a team!

Race one out the way, we sailed back across the river to Finland to rest before the midnight swim. Many competitors were staying on the Swedish side and would take a bus to Finland later that evening.

For us, it was a short walk through

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Juoksenki to the start line. Along with more than 50 other swimmers, we registered at 11pm before the pre-race entertainment began. This consisted of a series of competitions between Sweden and Finland: tug of war, throwing golf balls in a dustbin and the traditional relay of passing a baseball bat between your legs.

For the 3km race I chose to wear a wetsuit, although there were a handful of skins swimmers. As it neared midnight I took to the water for a little warm up, forgetting about the strength of the current. It was quite an effort to swim back to the start line, but I

MORE INFO

Swim the Arctic Circle
swimac.eu/en/

Swimming Holidays in Finland

Jonathan travelled with Swimming Holidays in Finland, who provide organised and bespoke swimming holidays in Finland. swimmingholidaysfinland.fi

Getting there

Direct flights to Helsinki then local flights to Kemi/Tornio.

Accommodation

Stay in either Finland or Sweden. On the Finnish side, Aavasaksa Experience is a holiday village that offers chalet, lodge and camping accommodation on the bank of the Torne River and a variety of adventure activities – as well as delicious reindeer sandwiches. aavasaksaexperience.fi

was definitely now warmed up. At the start I moved to the front, and as the starting horn went I raced ahead. The course sounded easy: head downstream until you come to a boat, then cross the river to the Swedish side, then swim further downstream to the finish line. As I reached the boat I was in third place, then I got a tad confused. The river was so wide and fast-flowing that I got a bit lost, and then made the schoolboy error of following someone else. I went over too far and had to be ushered back by a kayaker. It didn't matter, though; this swim was all about the experience rather than racing. And then at the finish line a bigger crowd than earlier were there to cheer us in before we returned to the saunas and hot tubs, after having our photos taken by a clock to prove that we had travelled back in time.

All that remained was the problem of how to get home. The bridge back to Finland is a long drive, and there wasn't enough room in the boat for all of us. Just one thing for it: swim! At four in the morning, Samuli and I headed for a point 500m upstream and let the current push us downstream to the jetty. Three swims done, we all sat up drinking and chatting in the midnight sun. Later, I drifted off to sleep, promising myself that next year I would definitely return to travel back in time.

