

Swedish Wonderland

By Ian Blackwood



Cadets preparing their Sled for Wilderness run – Ian Blackwood

As an ÖAV Übungsleiter Tourenführer, Army Adventurous Training Officer, and Winter Mountain Leader I felt privileged to be able to organise, and take a group of junior Austrian Alpine Club members, who are all Cadets from the Oldham Hulme Combined Cadet Force, on their expedition to NE Lapland in Arctic Sweden. Here is their report.

This once in a lifetime opportunity was greatly enjoyed by all members. We expected to learn how to drive a sled team but came away with an array of skills and an appreciation for the sport. From day one we had to arrive early at the dog kennels and complete a series of tasks such as feeding the dogs and cleaning the kennels. These were physically challenging jobs that taught us responsibility and discipline.



Cadets Robyn, Ben, Stephen and Grant preparing breakfast for the dogs
- Ian Blackwood

We spent time bonding with the dogs as it was important that they trusted us when we were driving the sleds. At first we were apprehensive about driving the sleds and the chaos of harnessing and preparing the dogs for a trek was overwhelming. However, throughout the week we improved greatly with the help of our instructors, Nigel and Ian, who taught us how to be more confident and efficient when working with the dogs. We went on many small day treks in preparation for the overnight expedition to the Arctic Circle. By the day of the expedition we were all competent drivers and could handle mishaps efficiently and effectively.

There was a strong sense of team spirit amongst the group and many times a member would help another driver who was struggling with his team. After learning and mastering all the necessary skills, such as putting a snow anchor in and assembling a team of dogs, we set off on our expedition. We spent an enjoyable night in the wild sleeping in a *lavvu* that we built as a team. The temperature got down to minus 12°C but despite this we managed to keep spirits high. We provided for ourselves and the dogs, making sure that the dogs were fed, watered and bedded for the night ahead before caring for ourselves. We constructed a fire pit from the deep snow and collected fire wood from the forest.

After a surprisingly warm night in the tent we fed the dogs, packed up our camp and made our way back to the kennels. It was a very enjoyable first expedition and we can't wait to go on another overnight camp in the wilderness. One of the highlights of the trip was playing and cuddling the many small puppies that were all friendly and playful. It was very difficult not to take them all home with us.

One day we hosted a Finnish family at the kennels, where we set up four sleds and acted as temporary handlers. We also had the lovely experience of introducing them to the dogs and supervising the children while they played with the puppies. The family thought that the kennels were amazing and said how good the day was. The day after this we helped Nigel to harness some of the puppies above one year old so that they could have their first sled ride. They were a bit rocky at first but they soon got the hang of it. On the same day we also got to ride a ten dog sled; this was a lot different as we usually have a team of six and this let us appreciate how strong the dogs really are as a team.

Sadly the day after this we had to leave the kennels. None of us wanted to leave behind the adorable puppies or our favourite dogs but we had to, although we couldn't promise that we wouldn't try to sneak one of the puppies into our luggage. It was a very sad but happy time because we had learnt so much and progressed in that one week we were there and we felt as if it was home. After this we spent the last two days looking around Luleå and Stockholm; both of which are very beautiful.

Overall we feel that the trip was a great success and it has definitely made us want to go on another trip with cadets next year: the trip was so enjoyable but still taught us practical skills that can be used in later life.

I know that for the rest of my life, I will feel lucky to have been given the opportunity to take part in this Cadet /Austrian Alpine Club trip. I'll never take it for granted: it was a thrilling, exciting and memorable trip that has created memories I will cherish forever.