

**Editing** Sample – Magazine Feature  
Shelby Rachel Hilson  
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[head] Trekking Norway's Tundra  
[deck] One woman sets out on foot across beautiful and barren sub-Arctic landscape. Story and photography by Kate Harris

Nothing beats the shrill whine of mosquitoes as a soundtrack for adventure. At the northern edge of Norway, high above the Arctic Circle, lies the untrammelled expanse of Finnmarksvidda. This little known mountain plateau is undulating tundra pocked with lakes and stands of taiga forest. Long ago it was plowed and furrowed by glaciers since melted and today it yields a rich harvest of bloodsuckers. In winter, the plateau is stomping and chomping grounds for thousands of reindeer, which the once-nomadic Sámi people still raise and herd. In the summer, bogs and bugs are rampant and reindeer have the good sense to flee to the blustery coast.

My pals Sarah, Geir and I, however, lack such keen animal acumen. Armed with insect repellent, head nets, and a hefty helping of ignorance, we decide to strike off on a five-day mid-summer trek across the tundra. Geir, who is Norwegian, is unfamiliar with this stretch of his country. He's cheerfully pessimistic about what awaits: "Either a beautiful hike across a vast and fascinating landscape," he says brightly, "or an endless battle with mosquitoes in the most boring part of Norway." The only way to know is to go.

We don our backpacks and mosquito head nets and trudge up onto the plateau, following the soft suggestion of a trail on hummocks bouncy with moss. The sun swoops overhead, tireless and unblinking. Mosquitoes swarm all around, tireless and crazed for our blood. In ordinary, sub-Arctic circumstances, Sarah possesses that brand of bleeding heart that goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid harming other living creatures, insects included. While packing our gear at the mosquito-free hostel before our hike, she had explained her philosophy to me. "You see Kate, it's like bugs are these oblivious, innocent beings and we are these capricious gods who either strike out or spare their lives on a whim. It's our choice. You know?" I said that I did, then surreptitiously stuffed another bottle of DEET into my pack. Noble principles sometimes need the reinforcement of heavy artillery.

During summertime in the high Arctic, even compassionate convictions follow the reindeer in fleeing the omnipresent buzz and sting of Finnmarksvidda bugs. Within minutes of hiking, Sarah evolves into a slaphappy savage and I murder mosquitoes with unrepentant glee. Of the three of us, Geir proves the most gracious of gods. When he isn't outpacing the bugs with his sweeping Viking strides, he is impervious to them freckling and feasting on his entire body. "They are really not so bad," he tells us like a true Scandinavian stoic.

Later that day we set up camp on a ridge. Sarah seeks sleep and shelter from bugs, Geir tries his luck fishing in the ponds scattered on the plateau and I wander off to explore the nearby Sautso gorge, often dubbed "the Grand Canyon of northern Norway". This claim seems comparable to calling a gentle slope in Saskatchewan "the Everest of the Canadian Prairies", but in reality Sautso is a deep gash of a gorge at shocking odds with its relatively flat and featureless surrounds. I sit on a ledge tucked below the rim of the cliff and stare out at the light-soaked, water-riven land.

A minute—or perhaps an hour—later, I am startled into vertigo by someone exclaiming, "Oh, hello!" It is Geir, who has stumbled upon the same random stretch of cliff, despite it being off the obvious, straight-line approach to the gorge. In the sweeping immensity of the Arctic, humans are ineluctably drawn to the same vistas, the same strange and subtle features of a lonely space. Early Arctic explorers were forever bumping into each other or stumbling on one another's cairns and caches. When Norwegian polar explorer Fridjof Nansen wandered in the Arctic, trying to make his way home after a failed attempt to reach the North Pole, he improbably ran into British polar

explorer Frederick Jackson in Franz Joseph Land. Clearly there are uncanny magnetic forces operating in the Arctic, where humans follow curiosity like a compass, and, in the end, find each other.

During the hours chosen for our first arbitrary night, I try to fall asleep in the tent despite a brightness eyelids can't block. With all the wind and the light, it is like living in a glowing neon lung: I am breathed through and through. The human conventions of calendars and clocks are upended by an Arctic day that lasts months. A midnight sun means we can dictate the rhythm of our own days, which works in Sarah's favor. She has flown over from America and must return right after the trip, so it helps that her body can remain roughly tuned to her usual time zone.

When we wake, clouds have curdled out of a sky gone sour. Sunlight lacks a distinct source and the landscape seems suffused from the inside out. The Arctic is infamous for its thick fog, which creates what one writer calls "a blindness that is not black but blank." During such a whiteout, you have to take it on faith that somewhere above and beyond the suffocating swaddle of cloud, the world, or something like it, actually exists. We are not fogged in to the point of disorientation, but the sulking skies make for uninspired hiking. Bogs frequently digest the trail and my sodden boots blow bubbles with each step. Sarah's feet are rubbed raw with blisters, and each step for her feels like walking on sandpaper. When we stop for a break, she says, "Whatever the map says, just tell me we are halfway there."

Geir and I peer at the map and pinpoint our position. We have at least fifteen kilometers to go. "Yup, not far now," I announce cheerfully. "Just over that next rise on the plateau." This is not entirely untrue, but it is misleading. That innocent bump highlighted against the horizon looks close enough to trip over, but the absence of landmarks on the plateau tampers with the calculus of space. Still, I figure that hiking toward a *fata morgana* is a more kindly torture than the truth.

Despite the mosquitoes and the melancholy skies, or maybe even because of them, I am strangely compelled by this landscape. Finnmark, like most Arctic places, is dignified precisely for its bracing indifference to human wiles and wants. The tundra is a world sufficient unto itself, an elemental arena of light and space that possesses a beauty inexplicit and unbidden. It does not exist for human enlightenment or edification – the tundra just is, harsh and honest, pagan and prehistoric.

But as pristine as it appears, Finnmarksvidda is not a land innocent of human appetites or ambitions. During World War II, the Germans invaded the area that was strategically valuable for its proximity to Russia and the north coast. The Sámi, a people indigenous to northern Norway as well as northern Sweden, Finland and parts of Russia, were caught up in a conflict that split their culture across national borders.

On the third night of our trek, we stay at Mollisjok, a state-owned mountain hut maintained by Klemet, a surly, elfin man with a face worn and fractured by many an Arctic frost. Klemet has both Sámi and Norwegian ancestry. When he was a small child during the war, the Germans used the scorched earth tactic to prevent the Russians from taking possession of the area. His family was told to evacuate south, but instead they hid on a forested section of the plateau where they built a temporary cabin and survived on the animals and food they brought with them. Their exile lasted a full winter. When they returned, Mollisjok had to be rebuilt from the ashes.

Sámi today have largely abandoned traditional ways and are more likely to be found herding reindeer by snowmobile than ski. After our trek I met a Danish medical student doing a clinical rotation in Karasjok, the nearest town and home to the Sámi parliament. I asked her if she saw many frostbite cases at the clinic in winter. After all, Karasjok is officially the coldest place in Norway, with a record low temperature of - 51.4 Celsius. "Very rarely," she told me, "snowmobile accidents are more common." The nomadic culture of the reindeer herders is now relegated to museum displays at the Sámi Amusement Park in Karasjok. At this surprisingly tasteful institution, an informational video features modern scenes of reindeer herded by helicopter. The narration over

the din from the choppers is reflective and sobering: "We can barely hear ourselves think. Are we lost?"

Back on Finnmarksvidda, we bid farewell to Klemet who tells Geir in Norwegian, "You can come back anytime—if you bring the girls." After two more days of hiking, tundra transitions to trees as we descend the plateau. The endpoint of our trek is a husky farm owned by Sven Engholm, a wilderness guide who was a serious contender in the Iditarod and who has won Europe's equivalent race, Finnmarksløpet, too many times to count. Sven hails from the warm south of Sweden: as a youth, his self-described "allergy to offices" and dream of becoming a dog musher lured him to northern Norway. He lives on the edge of the plateau where he raises huskies, leads dogsled trips and hosts travelers in hand-hewn log cabins.

In one of these cabins, with my backpack barely off and soaked boots still on, I am already dreaming of returning in the winter and retracing this route on skis, if not with one of Sven's dog teams. I think back to Geir's predictions about Finnmarksvidda—bland versus beautiful—and decide that neither alone is accurate but together both are true. As Sven charmingly puts it in his brochure, "it is a fascinating landscape, scanty and windswept." In winter the plateau would be another world entirely, home to herds of reindeer by the thousands, aurora borealis, no bogs and, best of all, no bugs.

HMMM. IS THIS PERHAPS WHERE THIS STORY SHOULD END? NOT SURE WE NEED THIS LAST PARA. THOUGHTS?

Speaking of the devils, a mosquito lands on my arm and poises itself to puncture. I raise my hand, intending to slap the pest out of existence, but then hesitate. The trip is over now. I am about to swap savagery for civilization and DEET for principles; I can afford to lose a little more blood. After all I have taken from the tundra – from that ineffable bounty of light, space and time – it seems only fair to give something back.

Pullquotes:

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