

Wish you were deer

From husky-scootering to hiking, **Laura French** explores Dalarna – the outdoor adventure hotspot in the heart of Sweden



I'm gliding down a deserted country road, wheels whirring, bike jerking, as trees glow gold in the afternoon sun and an opal sky glares bright overhead.

But this is far from a classic country bike ride: I'm on a half-scooter, half-bike, being hauled along by a husky. He tackles the gravelled dirt track with formidable strength as I grab on to the handlebars and lurch down the hill, flashes of forest whizzing past in a blur as I do my utmost to not fall off.

I'm in Dalarna County, in the rural heart of Sweden, trying my hand at dog-scootering. Husky owners Annika and Par Jansson are world champions in the sport, picking up a gold medal at an International Federation of Sleddog Sports event in 2019, after which they launched a business from their farmhouse offering excursions on scooter-bikes handmade by Par.

Afterwards we have *fika* (a coffee break) on a scenic hilltop overlooking exactly the landscape I'd pictured: all emerald forests, mirror lakes and

tumbling hills, set behind a firepit where smoke billows from a pot of steaming coffee.

This experience is a sign of things to come as I explore this little-known region – an adventure playground where lakes, forests, mountains and waterfalls all come together.

OH DEER

Our husky ride wasn't the trip's only wildlife encounter – farther north in Dalarna sits the mountain resort of Idre, a hotspot for hiking and skiing, and the most southerly place in Sweden where you can see reindeer.

The area is home to four Sami families. We visited the Renbitten farmshop to meet Helena and Peter Andersson, who tend to several hundred of the creatures. They also offer various activities, from a Taste of Sami culinary experience in a tipi to reindeer walks where you stroll along with the herd.

The Meet the Reindeer excursion took us ambling through a fairytale forest to a sprawling field where

DESTINATIONS

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TOP TIPS

🌟 **Capitalise on demand for authentic adventures:** Google searches for 'activity and adventure holidays' grew 400% from 2021 to 2022, according to holidaycottages.co.uk research. The Adventure Travel Trade Association's 2022 report, meanwhile, found the most popular motivations for travel were "new experiences, to go off the beaten track and to travel like a local".

🌟 **Get the season right:** The best time for hiking in Dalarna is June to September, with the latter month being ideal for autumn colours. The winter season is December to March, with skiing, husky-sledding and snowmobiling all popular.

🌟 **Use an expert:** Covering an area larger than Wales, Dalarna is big, so encourage clients to choose a trip with a specialist tour operator. Best Served Scandinavia, Regent Holidays and Original Travel all offer commissionable self-drives, as do local DMCs including Nordic Ways, Wild Sweden and Green Owl Travel.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Old Tjikko spruce tree; Falun copper mine; writer Laura and husky; Styggforsen nature reserve **PICTURES:** Visit Dalarna/Anna Holm; Shutterstock/Lasse Johansson, Maans Brandt

a cluster of six surrounded us, tucking into mossy lichen from our hands. Peter told us all about the lives and behaviours of these tame, endearing animals, talking us through the spring calving season when the family stay in a tipi in the mountains to tend to the herd – it gave us a fascinating glimpse into the Sami way of life.

WATERFALLS AND WAFFLES

Dalarna isn't only about wildlife, though. The mountains around Idre are criss-crossed with scenic hiking trails, while farther south, Fulufjället National Park is revered for its colourful landscapes.

We ventured into the park to see autumn trees cloaked in red, orange and gold, with streams trickling through rocky greenery. A gentle 2km trail took us to Njupesjär – Sweden's highest waterfall, which crashes 70 metres down a craggy cliff-face – before we continued on to Old Tjikko, a spindly spruce that's said to be the world's oldest tree, dating back 9,550 years.

Farther south still, we visited Styggforsen nature reserve, a lush forest dotted with crimson lingonberries, famous for its towering slate cliffs formed by a meteorite nearly 400 million years ago. Guide Lotta took us on a gentle amble

through the woods, telling us about local folklore, before we reached a cosy wood cabin, where we cooked waffles on a log fire against a backdrop of feathery pines. It's a magical way to take in this quintessentially Scandi setting (the 'waffle hike' is available to book for £58 for adults and £29 for children at greenowltravel.com).

HEAVY METAL

But the most impressive site in Dalarna for me was Falun – a Unesco World Heritage Site that was once the world's largest copper mine, supplying two-thirds of the metal in 17th-century Europe.

We took an underground tour, donning bright orange capes and helmets as we descended 67m through a series of damp, cavernous tunnels. Iron oxide-orange walls and inky-black pools sat beneath low-arched ceilings, as the sound of dripping water and chiming bells echoed through the chambers.

Our guide Johan recounted tales of the 'lady of the mine' – a spirit that miners believed commanded certain rules, including no whistling or swearing – and pointed out the Creutz shaft, a hauling system with a bucket that would carry up copper ore and work as a lift for miners, "who'd

perch on the edge and jump off mid-motion".

"Around 1,000 men would work here at a time in the 17th century," said Johan. "They'd toil for 12 hours a day, six days a week, descending up to 440m underground. It was a dangerous occupation, but miners had certain privileges and didn't have to go to war."

This fascinating experience provided another glimpse into the diverse region, and summed up my experience here as a whole. From the mine to the huskies, Dalarna is all about the unexpected treasures – and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to anyone looking for an off-the-beaten-track escape that combines history, heritage and adventure in one enchanting landscape. **TW**

BOOK IT

Best Served Scandinavia has a new eight-day Explore Dalarna: The Essence of Sweden trip, taking in Falun, Rättvik, Furudal and Fryksås, from £3,410 in summer/autumn 2023, including flights and accommodation and a rental car plus a tour of the copper mine and a husky kickbike tour. The operator can also put together tailor-made Dalarna trips. best-served.co.uk