

TALES FROM THE RIVERBANK



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Great Expectations



The cast:

Kate Ellison, me and four other expats who you probably don't know so I won't bore you with unnecessary detail.

Not quite the same level of class as that Dickens chap but still not bad. My wife and I moved over to Sweden in April and pretty much since then have been trying to get on the water. We've been defeated by weather, by poor navigation and most frustratingly by canoe hire shops not being open. So it was most definitely with great expectation, that I approached this trip.

As it's now June, Sweden's outdoor summer life is officially open and with that, a sudden rush for canoe hire, which resulted in our planned trip being cancelled and replaced by a trip to Lake Vattern, or more specifically, the archipelago at the northern end of Lake Vattern.

Vattern is the second largest lake in Sweden at 90 miles in length. In the words of Sten from 'Vattern Kayaks': "The northern section of Lake Vattern is a nature reserve. Rising above the surface of the lake there are at least 50 rocky islands, all sparsely vegetated. With the exception of 2 small cottages the entire area is uninhabited.

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There are, at least for the time being, no summer houses or tourist facilities. The area is a paradise for those seeking an unspoiled natural archipelago.” To be honest, the boy was spot on the money!

My initial disappointment at paddling on a Lake was soon dispelled when we pulled up at Sten’s beach house just north of Motala. The wind was strong and had whipped the lake up to create a healthy swell. Some intrepid kayakers were having some difficulty getting in and staying dry (always good for a giggle). Feeling a bit hard-core amongst my novice companions, I asked Sten if he had a less stable kayak for me to play with. I was rewarded with a Swedish designed boat which was extremely long (5.5m), fast and comfy. Sten tried to convince me that it would make a wonderful souvenir, as we loaded it onto the trailer along with the five Rainbow Oasis kayaks.

Incidentally, the Raindow kayak was a very good tourer, stable with a large amount of storage space, that provided good speed and tracking. Not sure what they would be like in

the rough stuff but nevertheless, for this trip and standard of paddler, they were ideal.

All loaded up, we headed north. 20 minutes later and we’re trundling down some dirt track and emerge in this tiny harbour. The clouds had cleared and the sun was beating down as we hurriedly unloaded the canoes and got packed up ready for our two day adventure. Sten kindly provided me with a map. The archipelago is basically contained within a 19 km area, few of the islands are named, but thankfully the channels and hazards were marked which would prove useful for getting back.

All packed and changed, just time for a quick loo stop before we go. Round the back of this big shed was one of Sweden’s specialities; primitive “hole in the ground” shed style toilets. There is no running water, no electricity, just a chemical toilet covered by a plank. If you’d have taken your matches in you could have lit the candle, but I fear it may have been the last thing you did! My apologies, this is not a tale of toilets from around Europe, you’ll find those in the more

specialist magazines. I'm here to talk about paddling.

Our first passage took us from Bastedalen to Grönön, which incidentally was one of the few islands big enough to have been given a name on the map. A gentle broadside swell bounced us steadily along our way across this 2k stretch of open water. We headed for the southern tip of Grogan with a view to exploring the outer islands of the archipelago.



Rounding the southern tip of the island felt like paddling out into open sea. The sheer size of this lake was just so impressive. There were several smaller islands further south, so we decided to paddle around the southern part of Grönön and then dart across to the nearest islands. The islands were basically rocky outcrops covered with trees with a carpet of moss and lichen. The trees on the larger islands were densely packed, making it very difficult to spot a suitable camping site.



We stopped for a snack on the furthest island on the edge of the archipelago, this was our first mistake. It was a lovely sunny day, but the wind was up so we took shelter on the

leeward side of the island. As soon as we were out of our boats, flies descended upon us. Only by walking round into the wind were we able to shake the little blighters off. The flies stayed by the boats, exploring the cockpits and waiting hungrily for our return. It was horrible, you couldn't put your spray deck on as you'd trap them in your boat so we all had to paddle out into the wind and try and kill/encourage them out. Amazingly, we only suffered minor bites. Top tip; stay in the wind, works for Caribou!!

We paddled about admiring the scenery, watching the birds and keeping an eye out for a landing spot (negative flies). By about 4 o'clock we felt like we'd paddled far enough. Miraculously, the perfect camping spot just happened to be on our left. A brief foray ashore confirmed that there was a sufficiently flat(ish) area to pitch three tents and provide good access to a clearing for a BBQ.



After emptying the boats and pitching up, I ventured back onto the water for a little play with the shiny canoe. I was pleasantly surprised how easy it was to roll and the speed was outstanding (Sten may yet have that deal).



When I got back to shore I discovered that some fool had opened the wine. We ate well, drank better and listened to the birds on our own island paradise as the sun eventually sank below the horizon.....the rest is a bit of a blur!!



Sausage sarnies and Alka-Seltzer for breakfast. Nice!! About 3 hours after rising we're back on the water, a little less energetic. We slowly cruised around the Northern end of the lake, a few fantastically positioned beach huts and the odd yacht were the only indication of civilisation. With no fixed timetable we just relaxed and enjoyed the breathtaking scenery. Our casual approach to paddling was rewarded when one of the group spotted an osprey in a near by tree.

The huge bird took off and for a horrible moment, looked as if it would dive bomb us. Taking the Italian approach, we beat a hasty retreat to a respectable distance and then sat back and enjoyed the spectacle of a pair of ospreys soaring above us. Absolutely gorgeous.



An hour later and we were crossing our start point and heading back into Bastedalen having enjoyed a fantastic leisurely two days on the water. We set out with a limited agenda and exceeded in all departments - a superb trip.

As I'm likely to be out here for two years I will happily arrange a trip (well it's a while since I had my name on the calendar) possibly for May half term next year or towards the end of the season this year. Alternatively, I would be happy to help you arrange your own trips. The paddling opportunities are endless, kayak hire is relatively easy and the boats we hired were of good quality. If anyone is interested then please let me know. I'm keen to paddle the Baltic Archipelago but the trip possibilities really are endless so there really is something for everybody.

Getting Here

Fly direct with Ryan Air from Prestwick or Stanstead to Stockholm Skavasta (NYO), prices vary but Kate and I have return tickets for £138 for two in July. The trains are really good or alternatively hire a car; the roads are an absolute delight to drive on, mainly because they're so empty. The flight time is roughly 1hr 50mins from Stanstead.

Accommodation

Sweden has a multitude of Hostels, which are cheap, and of good standard. Alternatively you can use one of the many campsites, which are of excellent quality. When on a trip, the only alternative is camping. You'll want a tent which is not reliant on pegs, as many of the islands are just rocks with trees.

Websites

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