

Cutting a trail
towards Soppero
in Arctic Sweden

All creatures great

Trend report
Animal adventures

Primitive forms of travel – relying on animals – are now the way forward. Will Gethin races ahead

S

o here we are racing across Europe's treasured Arctic wilderness – the wild heartland of the indigenous Sami tribe – which extends across Norway, Sweden, Finland and into Russia's Kola Peninsula, an area marginally smaller than England. It's a desolate world of meteorological melodrama, with a midnight sun that circles endlessly in summer and utterly vanishes in winter, when everything freezes and turns white, teased occasionally by the Northern Lights flaring up their dazzling beams of green and rose.

Snowflakes are sparkling in the night air and the hounds are howling, crooning, their necks skywards. I am poised at the back of a procession of sleds, my huskies tugging restlessly, yelping and pulling at the reins. We glide into a soft expanse, cutting a line through a vast white wilderness illuminated only by head-torches and a shimmering half-moon. The dogs scamper lithely along the trail, panting happily and at peace. We pulse silently through an ocean of stillness, but for the sound of jangling harnesses, pattering feet and the *sheeck sheeck* of the sled against the ice.

Frozen lakes and rivers, dense evergreen forests, fields of snowy nothingness; in the following week – when we cover around 22 miles a day – we scootch through them all, part of an expedition born out of an artistic partnership that in turn was born out of a love of wildlife.

Olly Suzi Expeditions is the nature-travel arm of the art duo Olly Williams and Suzi Winstanley (she is the long-term girlfriend of Blur's Damon Albarn). Inspired by 20 years creating wildlife art in the world's most remote places, they have now designed a unique platform to share their wild, off-the-beaten-track, in-the-eye-of-the-storm experiences. Diving with humpback whales in Tonga, tracking Siberian tigers in the wilds surrounding Vladivostok, fighting for survival with leopard seals in the Antarctic, hunting with eagles in Mongolia – no other trips today could be more on-message. They're low-luxe, high-thrill, wildly exotic and, almost more crucially, timely.

Soon we reach Soppero, the home of Sami reindeer herders Per Nils and Britt-Marie, and park the dogs



Our guide is
Sweden's
grand-daddy
of Arctic
survival...

Expedition guide
Lars Falt with Julius
at Jakala Camp

Lisa Williams, wife of expedition leader Olly, outside their cabin with their son Bear



amid igloo shelters and Sami cabins. For thousands of years, the nomadic Sami – self-styled ‘people of the sun and wind’ – have traversed this forbidding terrain, migrating with their reindeer (for whom they have multifarious uses: for food, making clothes and ornaments like knife handles) and attuning themselves to the seasons. Inside the house, reindeer hides hang on the walls. Over a delicious reindeer stew by a roaring fire, Per Nils – a deadringer for Charles Bronson – recounts how fierce wind storms once wiped out their entire herd of 18,000 reindeer. ‘The Sami lives the life of a gambler,’ he sighs. ‘We say the wind owns the reindeer, that they live and die by the wind.’

As the vodka flows, Olly talks about how he teamed up with Suzi at St Martin’s School of Art in 1987, duly sealing their bond while exploring Indian reservations in the wilderness of the north-east USA, where they

were inspired to combine their mutual passion for wildlife with their urban existence. ‘We thought, “Wow, what an interesting idea, to make endangered animals icons in contemporary art!”’ says Olly.

Over the following two decades they’ve travelled to Alaska, Russia, Botswana and a host of remote regions searching for endangered

animals to create art with. ‘We were skint in those early days,’ remembers Suzi, ‘but we’d find these incredible guides – conservationists, ex-hunters – who’d befriend and host us. In return we’d give them work – like Picasso would have done to pay for the next meal.’

It is these guides, this access, that is a main feature of what makes Olly Suzi Expeditions such a hot ticket. ‘The guides we use have an intimate understanding of everywhere we visit. They’re all at the top of their game,’ stresses Olly. On this expedition, for example, we are guided by veteran dog-sledding expert Kenth Fjellborg, who recently took Prince Albert of Monaco to the North Pole, and Sweden’s grand-daddy of Arctic survival, Lars Falt, who has taught wilderness-survival hero Ray Mears more than a few tricks.

But their other bonus is that what they’ve been doing for 20 years – exploring up-close and getting intimate with animals and places that might not be around much longer – is now so firmly in the spotlight. As Suzi marvels: ‘Suddenly it seems fashionable to talk about polar bears.’ Damon Albarn has joined Suzi on many of their art trips, inspiring a change of direction in his music. ‘Now he’s working in a similar way to us,’ Suzi reflects, ‘making beautiful music in Africa with local musicians.’

For Olly, pounding through the Arctic with the dogs is a near-spiritual experience. ‘There’s a silence, an intimacy with the environment, that’s absolutely critical to fully understanding it,’ he explains. ‘Even on skis your heart is pumping through your ears. But

In the Sami
cabin, we
eat reindeer
stew by a
roaring fire

I arrange the dogs two by two... the rest lunge at the snow

on dogs, floating over lakes – away, alone – you're liberated from earthly bounds and your mind is free to wander.'

In the morning, we harness our dogs, who are ravenous to get back onto the trail. We're heading to Olly's cabin, Bear's Nest, and will be travelling along the historic Tobacco Trail taken by smugglers roving between Russia and Sweden.

Julius's Arctic-blue eyes dart wildly as I stroke his black-gold mane. I loop the harness over him, feeling his heart beat in my hand as I lift his willowy legs into his racing kit and pull the straps along his slender back. As I arrange the dogs two by two, hooking them in line before my sled, Lucifer nuzzles his nose into my stomach as the rest lunge and impetuously paw at the snow.

This is a way of travelling that stretches back over 4,000 years, to a time when man relied on dogs for protection, companionship and transport. The dogs are descended from wolves who surrendered their fear and aggression to help man explore the harshest climes, bringing civilisation to the snowbound areas of the world.

Snow begins to fall in glistening specks. Up ahead in the birch woods reindeer quietly scatter. We float into the whiteness, the surrounding alpine forests

waving their frosty, hoary mittens at us in the breeze. We coast downhill, the dogs in freefall, their arched backs rising and falling, rising and falling, their feet kicking up sprays of powder.

'There are no roads north from my place,' Olly laughs from his sledge. 'It's pure wilderness all the way to the North Pole.'

We glide through a Narnia-like forest beneath towering spruce trees decorated with gargantuan dollops of snow. In these conditions – when temperatures can drop from 5°C to -40°C within hours – Lars teaches us the essentials for Arctic survival. Having learnt to make fire using scrapings of birch bark, we're now gathering wild food from the most nutritious of Lapland's 250 edible plants.

'Most Swedish people have lost plant wisdom,' laments the man who once survived for 10 days on lichens. 'Pine needles are a tonic for the immune system,' he says fingering a pine branch. 'Far richer in vitamin C than a lemon. Now... gin and pine needles – that's very special!'

Following our snowy-haired guru through the forest, cloaked in his Eskimo-style fur hood, we learn to read the signs of the wilderness. He points out anthills that reveal proximity to water and gauges the temperature by listening to cracking ice. 'Observe the way plants grow and where the trees grow longer branches,' he urges. 'These signposts give you direction.'

We learn how to build Native American-style snow shelters. Insulated with spruce branches, these domed

The expedition's Alaskan racing huskies, crossbred for speed and endurance





structures are warm enough to spend the night in, using candles for heat. But when the snow is hard, it's better to make an igloo shelter with ice blocks.

So after enlightening us on surviving frostbite, Lars divulges the remedial powers of the human armpit. He suggests – politely – we go for a barefoot stroll. Wincing with discomfort through my last paces, I scurry inside, scraping the ice from my soles.

'Pop 'em in,' grins Olly, hoisting four upper layers to slot my frozen feet in his underarm ovens.

'How's it feel?'

'Toasty!' I laugh with relief.

After a lunch of shellfish soup and moose stew washed down with lingonberry juice and wine, we wade through deep powder for a spot of ice-fishing. Drilling a hole in the ice with the twirling blade of an auger, I settle down on a reindeer hide, dropping a line baited with wriggling maggots into the harsh subterranean waters. I watch with envy as one after another, my fellow fishermen feverishly wave their

prized perch and return triumphant. I soldier on alone till, unable to withstand the cold a moment longer, I finally return empty-handed, cursing the loss of my maggots.

Communing for the ritual evening sauna and breaking into a hot sweat, I follow a celebrated Swedish tradition. Running outside, I roll naked in the snow, serenaded by

howling hounds in the fading twilight. Hurrying inside, I relish the icy-burning sensation and feel wildly elated.

Back on the dogs for a final day's sledding, we slither swiftly through woodland – winding and weaving like a bobsled trail – gaining pace around bends. Bursting out into the open, we emerge into the biggest expanse of white I've ever seen – a vast, untrammelled velvet void, fringed by forests on all sides. We blaze a trail across this four-mile lake, the sun streaking the sky above the trees with bands of crimson fire.

Stumbling upon a *lavvu* (tepee) at the edge of a forest, we stop for a break, settling down on logs around a central hearth. As Olly chops silver birch and lights a fire, we watch the flames. As we climb back behind the dogs, a ball of sunlight smudges the air above the silver treetops like a halo. Densely coated in snow, the trees appear threaded together by foaming-white webs. As the trail levels out, we glide before a flock of low-flying ptarmigan and Lars pulls alongside me astride his dog-chariot, pipe smoking in his mouth. 'The sky is clearer now,' he smiles, 'maybe tonight we see Northern Lights.'

UK reservations Olly Suzi Expeditions (tel: 07796 156087; ollysuziexpeditions.com).

Rates From £3,500 a person for a bespoke six-day trip (minimum four people per group). Price excludes international flights, internal flight from Stockholm to Kiruna and one night's stay in Stockholm. From April 2008, Olly Suzi Expeditions will run an extended dog expedition across the Arctic to Nordkap. □

We emerge
into a vast
void fringed
by forests
on all sides