

Discovering Jämtland

A Freeheeler's Guide to a Swedish Winter Paradise

words & photos // Kjell Ellefson

The customs agent said something to me, but I didn't quite catch the words he muttered. I had just exited my nine-hour flight from Newark and had hardly caught any sleep. Maybe it's all the free, recently released Hollywood movies available at my fingertips or the horribly cramped economy class seats they are packing into airplanes these days, but zombified was an understatement. Nonetheless, the customs official was still staring at me waiting for a response. I replied, "Sorry I didn't catch that." He smirked and replied, "Oh I'm sorry. I was speaking to you in Swedish because of the name on your passport. But clearly you only speak English." I quickly responded in the local tongue that I spoke a little Swedish as he nodded, stamped my book, and waved on the next traveller. I was proud I remembered what I had learned from my beginner's Swedish podcast, and entered the country grinning like a vacationer should.

Like most European airports, Arlanda, on the outskirts of Stockholm, offers trains and public transportation departing almost every minute. However, during the winter, the Snötåget, or Snow Train, leaves downtown Stockholm and Malmö on Friday afternoons for the northwesterly province of Jämtland. So I threw my ski bag above my assigned train seat and headed off into the night for a little town called Vemdalen. This quaint little ski resort offers the eclectic, traditional Swedish vibe, but with all of the amenities of a big resort you would find in the United States. Traveling to Scandinavia is not the cheapest vacation someone could imagine, but in my personal experience if you are going on vacation at all, don't sell yourself short; do it right.



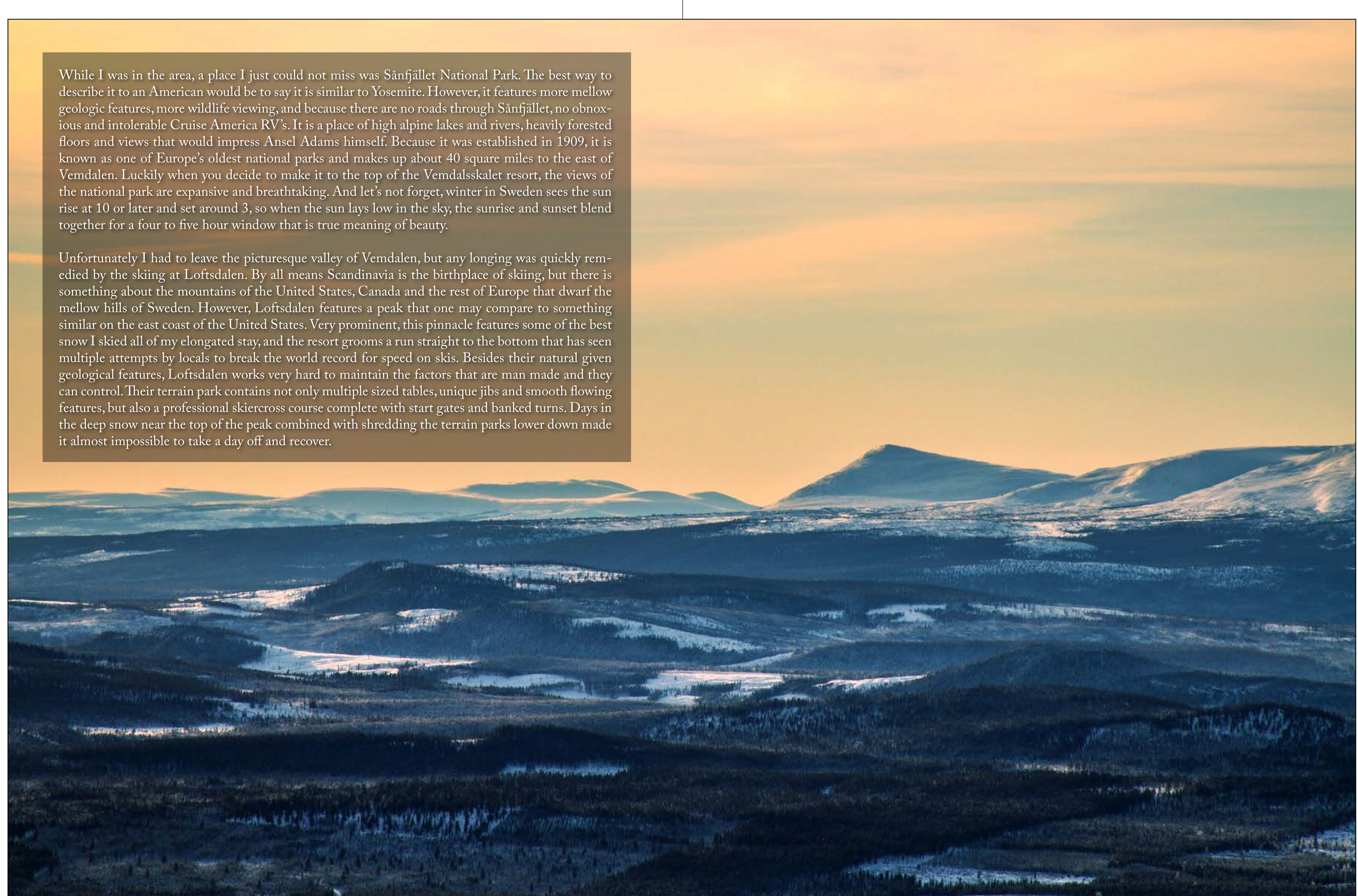


Without a doubt, the most comfortable and closest lodging to the ski hill you can find in the Jämtland province are the apartments at Skalets Torg in Vemdalsskalet, the mountain village located above the town. These cozy and modern styled accommodations offer top-notch quality with extremely close proximity to skiing. The penthouse apartment would comfortably sleep 10 and is built for royalty. It features a bathtub most would call a Jacuzzi, a dining and living room you may as well yell across and, of course, a sauna. I could not help but notice that no matter what room I was in, a ski lift was almost always visible. And when I wasn't looking out the window, I seemed to be admiring the decorations and attention to detail that Ski Star paid to make this palace feel like home.

After days of exploring the two peaks and the expansive trails of Vemdalen, I needed to recuperate. Because taking a day off of skiing on a winter vacation is considered a sin in my book, I headed down the road from Vemdalsskalet to the Högfjällshotell. Like the Germans, the Swedes like to slam what seems to be close to 100 words into one, so whenever I got scared with words that seem to go on forever, I would quickly calm myself and separate words like Högfjällshotell into pieces in my head: hög(high), fjäll(mountain), shotell(hotel). Not only was it a snug, wind tattered lodge with snow stacked up to the roofs, it also offered a very large spa and swimming area, jungle-like lounge space with bar and an all you can eat seafood buffet. I think my après-ski standards, or afterski as they call it, were raised a few notches. After a long soak, a couple local beers, and a belly full of räkor, the day was one to remember.

While I was in the area, a place I just could not miss was Sånfjället National Park. The best way to describe it to an American would be to say it is similar to Yosemite. However, it features more mellow geologic features, more wildlife viewing, and because there are no roads through Sånfjället, no obnoxious and intolerable Cruise America RV's. It is a place of high alpine lakes and rivers, heavily forested floors and views that would impress Ansel Adams himself. Because it was established in 1909, it is known as one of Europe's oldest national parks and makes up about 40 square miles to the east of Vemdalen. Luckily when you decide to make it to the top of the Vemdalskalet resort, the views of the national park are expansive and breathtaking. And let's not forget, winter in Sweden sees the sun rise at 10 or later and set around 3, so when the sun lays low in the sky, the sunrise and sunset blend together for a four to five hour window that is true meaning of beauty.

Unfortunately I had to leave the picturesque valley of Vemdalen, but any longing was quickly remedied by the skiing at Loftsdalen. By all means Scandinavia is the birthplace of skiing, but there is something about the mountains of the United States, Canada and the rest of Europe that dwarf the mellow hills of Sweden. However, Loftsdalen features a peak that one may compare to something similar on the east coast of the United States. Very prominent, this pinnacle features some of the best snow I skied all of my elongated stay, and the resort grooms a run straight to the bottom that has seen multiple attempts by locals to break the world record for speed on skis. Besides their natural given geological features, Loftsdalen works very hard to maintain the factors that are man made and they can control. Their terrain park contains not only multiple sized tables, unique jibs and smooth flowing features, but also a professional skiercross course complete with start gates and banked turns. Days in the deep snow near the top of the peak combined with shredding the terrain parks lower down made it almost impossible to take a day off and recover.



When I woke up the next morning my stomach was bulging. Was it from the previous night's dinner, or was it because it was the day I would feel like Santa Claus? Weird I know, but stick with me. Lofsdalen provides its guests with the opportunity to go reindeer sledding. Yes you read that right. There are domesticated reindeer that tow you around in a sleigh. As soon as I got over the fact that my transportation for the day was an animal that had rumors of flying, the ride and tour around the hilly slopes of Jamtland was incredibly enjoyable and definitely that once in a lifetime experience. I was looking for in a vacation to Scandinavia. I would also leave Lofsdalen with a new appreciation for the tradition and history behind the people of the Jamtland areas, and the magical animal that huffed and puffed, towing me through the forest.





Unfortunately, the respect and utmost admiration for this honored animal from the north would be tossed right out the window when I travelled west to Funäsdalen a day later. For dinner I planned to visit a fine dining restaurant called Skoogs. Owned and operated by head chef Emil Bertilsson, I would be exposed to traditional dishes like never before. Emil greeted me at the door and showed me around the dark, intimate, and cozy dinning room, bar and expansive kitchen. While snapping photos of the plates he was constructing, I realized what amazing attention to detail he took with every step of cooking every piece. Some appetizers were served on stone, wood or with other unique forms of display.

I was seated and overjoyed to finally taste what masterpieces Emil had been conjuring up in the back. He placed a dish in front of me and before I could ask what it was, he asked me to try it. With eager eyes, Emil watched as I cut a piece of meat off and savored the flavor. I masticated and pondered what kind of game this could be. He looked at me with a smile and explained that it was, yep, you guessed it, reindeer. How could I be eating an animal I had just grown so fond of? As my eyes spread wide and my chewing stopped, I was reassured it was a typical Swedish dish and I had nothing to worry about. However, the taste I was experiencing was unbelievable, and I had to finish what I had started. An additional shrimp and brussels sprout dish combined with an inventive dessert later, and I had forgotten all about the moment of terror just an hour earlier. How could his food taste so good that I was practically forgetting about the new friend I had just eaten? Right as I thought I began to understand the Swedish culture, I was completely blindsided by a man I had just met. But I wasn't even upset about it. The generosity of Emil, his warm and welcoming restaurant and my full stomach reassured me everything was ok.



Unfortunately all learning experiences and trips of a lifetime must end. As my good friend Andreas Sjöbeck, who was kind enough to be my tour guide through this crash course of Jamtland, and I headed north so I could catch my train in Östersund, we couldn't help but explore the city for some last minute urban rails. The city receives considerable amounts of precipitation during the winter and its hills require many staircases. Fortunately for us, this means a myriad of handrails, jibs and plenty of slope and snow to assist us. It was turn after turn along a road of rails and options that would have any jibber quivering in the car seat.

After hitting a couple different rails next to an office building that featured a dentist, I realized the largest difference in ski culture here. In the United States, it is more common than not for someone who saw you sliding handrails to inform the police. Trespassing, disturbing the public and vandalism are not uncommon charges for skiers who decide to test their skills on urban features. In Jamtland, parents taking their kids to the dentist would stop, point and clap even after a failed attempt. People would ask questions with a smile and nod. I believe we even spotted some office workers peeking out their windows to escape their cubicle-induced madness. The sport of skiing and telemarking is so ingrained in their culture that we were essentially seen as kids playing in the park, not hoodlums who were up to no good and needed to be dispersed. This notion of acceptance was a comforting feeling I will forever associate with the friendly country of the north.

After my bags were packed and the quick train to Stockholm was over, I checked in at the airline counter for my flight home. My luggage went down the belt and I headed towards security. I then walked passed the same customs booth I had entered the country through and saw the same officer stamping passports. I then thought back to my first minute in Sweden and how nervous and anxious I was about my trip; I barely spoke the language and was travelling alone. But then I realized I did not need to know the local tongue, every social custom or every detail of my trip. Jamtland is a place of opportunity and acceptance. The people will go out of their way to help you and their culture around skiing and winter activities is second to none. Through the lodging, food, experiences and, of course, skiing, I was able to find a little bit of myself on this trip to the subarctic north. But more importantly, Jamtland will always have a special place in me.