

My Life as a Swede

Steven Lade

Snow drifts down past your window as you wake, groggily. The view out your window is a dull white, the sun having risen and set while you slept leaving behind a -30°C twilight. You hurt in the wallet as well as the head, having paid \$10 per beer at last night's party. Trudging out to the kitchen, you are confronted by a Swede grinning behind a thick tobacco sludge that cakes his teeth. Why study in Sweden, let alone the goddamn freezing north?

Re-energized with potatoes and meatballs, you boot up your computer and search for trains to your new friends from France, Germany and Spain this summer—and wonder whether you'll ever make it to the ones in the US, Mozambique, Turkey, and Korea. As the snowstorms—outside the window and inside your head—subside, you smile at the memory of last night's dinner, with the Swedes, their funny songs and funny food. Later that evening, you rug up and share half an hour lying on snow with some friends and the giant aurora pulsing across the sky. Skis, standing in the corner of your room, beckon; you decide to take the ten minute walk tomorrow morning to the groomed ski track, if the weather's a bit warmer, for a workout, and the promise of another fiery sunrise/set rolling around the horizon.

I was lucky enough to spend my year at LTU (Luleå University of Technology) split between two campuses. The first half of 2005 I spent at LTU's main campus in Luleå. Here I met people from all over the world, learnt about the cold and accustomed myself to living out of home, and for that matter Australia, for the first time. After a summer touring Europe I returned to LTU's Space Engineering campus, jointly run with Umeå University, in Kiruna. In contrast to my 'international experience' in Luleå, Kiruna was my 'Swedish experience'. Here I was almost the only exchange student (though the proportion varies wildly from semester to semester); my knowledge of Sweden, its people and their language improved considerably. I also found others sharing my interest in the outdoors and regularly went walking, cycling, skiing, skating and (indoor) rock-climbing in the premier outdoors region of Sweden.

Though big in landscape, Kiruna is not in population. Think carefully about studying in Kiruna if you're a big city person. The town often felt more like a ski resort or remote research station. There are, for instance, a total of two nightclubs, one of which you wouldn't want to visit more than once. The university campus often has fewer than 100 students. But this suited me fine: this just made it easier for me to make friends with the students that were there, quicker to get out into the wilderness, and the lack of nightspots bothered me not at all.

Luleå is less extreme. Considerably bigger, away from the hills down on the coastal plains, it has a decent range of shopping and a much larger university with a decent student social scene, topped by exchange student parties almost nightly. If not a house party, Friday night was always at a nightclub in town; Saturday night at the student restaurant/club at university. Instead of being surrounded by wilderness stretching unbroken for hundreds of kilometres, as in Kiruna, the park with the cross-country tracks are surrounded on many sides by houses.

Some tips you may find useful (or that I did/would have in your situation), related to Sweden, touring, living overseas, or none of the above:

- The weather. In winter it can get to -30 or -40°C , though I never experienced this; apparently it's been warming in recent years. I came to realise that a few degrees below zero is actually the perfect temperature—I'll leave you to discover why for yourself! Minus ten is fine if you're active: I would often cross-country ski in this temperature with just two layers on. Minus twenty is getting colder, and OK, minus thirty is freezing, but bearable with the right clothes. Make sure you at least have a top-quality jacket, gloves and shoes. In summer it regularly reaches $+20$ or even $+30^{\circ}\text{C}$.
- The light. Kiruna is actually north of the Arctic Circle, with a month of 'polar night', and Luleå isn't far away. If it's cloudy, yes it's dark, but if clear there can be up to six hours of the most amazing light, something I certainly did not expect. And the flipside is of course the midnight sun and all-night BBQs!
- A Swedish *mil*, which they will translate as 'mile', is actually 10km.
- The Eurail train pass is very hard to buy in Europe, and the version for Europeans, InterRail, is only available after you've lived there for six months. This leaves an unfortunate gap. If you have definite plans, buy your Eurail at home.
- As a rare Australian there you'll have considerable novelty status. Be prepared to play on this: bring some Vegemite, bone up on Waltzing Matilda, and practice your didgeridoo, or whatever, for dinner-time skits. They'll love it!
- In Luleå, the bargain supermarkets are Willy's (Centrum and Storheden), each of which has a second-hand shop next door. OöB bills itself as a discount outlet, though Clas Ohlson isn't too bad either. If you get used to frozen meat and vegetables, supermarket food will cost about the same as in Australia.
- Part-time jobs are difficult to get, even for the locals. But look out for the word *extraknäck*, meaning a casual, sometimes irregular but usually cash-in-hand job. Ask the library if they need someone to re-shelve the books.
- In my year, almost every exchange student had a bike. Though the bus network is good, the bike path network is even better. Now, exchange students are allocated housing closer to campus (you'll be 2.5 km away at most), but even if I was right next door I would have enjoyed a bike as a fun way to get around. Though there's plenty second-hand bikes around, they're always in high demand, so if you want one be on the lookout from day one, or consider bringing your own—with a top-quality lock. (And yes, cycling is fine nearly year-round, the exception being ice.)
- It sounds simple, but if you end up on Hagelvägen, go the next floor up and have a chat! It would have made some of my evenings much more interesting.
- As anywhere, get out and involved outside your classes. For instance, I unfortunately found out too late about an environmental conservation group, which would have been a great way of getting out and seeing the countryside. Within the university, there are a number of clubs and good sporting facilities.
- Speaking English is no problem, some Swedes can do it better than me. But if you want to try, Swedish is a fun and, as far as languages go, a relatively easy one to learn. And if you are lucky enough to make friends with a group of them, they'll of course prefer to speak Swedish amongst themselves.
- In electronics at least, the university has excellent facilities. I learnt many valuable things about the practical side of electrical engineering.

My year in Sweden, and especially the half-year in Kiruna, has been the best in my life so far, and won't be easy to beat. I've climbed many mountains, skied on frozen seas, rolled in the snow between stints in a wood-fired sauna, skated on frozen water hazards at a golf course, camped under the midnight sun, stayed in a beautiful house with a beautiful family in a beautiful suburb of Paris, partied with girls from Mozambique, been tobogganing with Spaniards and chatted in Swedish to locals on the way up a ski lift, as well as building a circuit or two. But of course—and if not LTU I urge you to at least go somewhere—what you do with your exchange is up to you.

You're more than welcome to e-mail me with requests for a chat, specific questions or concerns, or anything you like: [steven.lade\[replace with 'at' symbol\]gmail.com](mailto:steven.lade@replace with 'at' symbol]gmail.com).