



Travelogue

Finland:
Reindeer stew,
learning the wax,
and a week
of welcome saunas

'Living vicariously through the adventures of our friends'

'It is billed as the longest cross country ski event in the world. I heard about Rahalta Rajalle Hiihto in November, immediately wanted to do it, and booked my trip. I had some apprehensions but rationalized that I since I am not getting any younger and am a cancer survivor, that this was the trip for me.'

Border to Border ski: Finding solitude and friendship in a week's Arctic Circle trek

By JULIANA CUYLER DOLAN

The Rahalta Rajalle Hiihto is a classic (kick and glide) cross country ski event that crosses Finland from the Russian border to the Swedish border along the Arctic Circle. It is an event similar to Cycle Oregon and is now in its 32nd year. Rajalta Rajalle (RR) skiers sign up for one of four consecutive departure dates in early March and ski up to 440 kilometers (km) in seven days. Each RR group consists of up to 100 skiers from all over the world and from all ability and experience levels. Mileage each day ranges from 40 to 88 km. There are service points along the trail every 15 km or so. Most service or rest stops have a campfire and a table of snacks. Some have teepees ("Lapland tents") or a warming hut inside of which skiers can shelter or rest.

I have never traveled with so much luggage in my life. My bags include a giant suitcase, a small suitcase, a ski bag stuffed with two pairs of skis, poles and boots, a giant jacket that won't fit in anywhere so I have to wear it, a carry on and a small knapsack. When I check in for my flight in Seattle, the giant suitcase is overweight so I ditch a couple of 2-pound bags of trail mix and dried cranberries. It turns out that I will use everything I brought and buy another bag to transport souvenirs back home. It also turns out that the Helsinki airport has a bag storage office and I happily trade Euros for the opportunity to ditch my largest suitcase and my ski bag while in Helsinki.

I fly from Seattle through Iceland to Helsinki, Finland, and arrive the next day. Ruth Berkowitz (from Portland and part time Hood River) joins me at our hotel later that evening. We spend the next two days being tourists in lovely Helsinki. We both agree that people who live there "have it made." Everything works so efficiently, from hand towel dispensers in the bathrooms to the trolley system. The air is clear and clean, there are beautiful landscapes in the city with lots of fresh and salt water access, and everyone seems to be physically fit and bursting with health.

Friday, March 6 — Destination: Oivanki

After two days, we return to the airport, pick up and consolidate our stored luggage, and board a plane for an hour and half flight to Kuusamo, which is a tiny airport on the Arctic Circle near the Russian/Finnish border and a gateway to ski



resort country. As we exit the plane, we see lots of snow, a welcome sight after a barren winter in the Pacific Northwest and the visit to an unusually mild and snowless Helsinki. In fact, it's snowing, foggy and blowing, and it's cold! I feel like I've landed on the North Pole and wonder if I can handle this trip at all.

We get transport to Oivanki, a summer/winter "sports camp" where the RR is to begin. Ruth and I check in to our bunk room and are excited to take a late afternoon ski around the trails ringing the camp. It's flurrying lightly and the air is crisp and cold. We discuss skiing out on the lake near the cabins but decide not to when we see an open water hole in the ice near the shore, not knowing if the ice is frozen solid. Later I see a naked woman sprinting for this water and realize it's a cold plunge for the sauna.

After more ski exploration, taking a sauna and, of course, the cold plunge, and dinner, we meet for our orientation and formal introduction to our fellow skiers and support staff who have been arriving all day. Our group, the "RR #3," consists of a mixture of skiers from Finland, Spain, Andorra, Slovenia, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. Ruth and I are two of six Americans. English is the most common language, but not everyone speaks it. I am happy that I am able to speak some Spanish as well. Every RR group has a different national makeup. We are the RR #3, leaving on the third of four consecutive days.



After a weather report for snow in the afternoon the next day and changeable temperatures, we head to the waxing room. Once there, I quickly decide to give the snooty wax guy my Euros and skis to be waxed for the next day, rather than jockeying for wax table space. I end up taking nightly advantage of the waxing service supplied by various professionals from the communities through which we travel. The RR is a big event for this rural area of Finland and is a short opportunity for people to earn extra money, the hotel workers, waxers, trail groomers, massage therapists, and bus drivers who support and attend to us. The RR provides a little bump in their winter economy.

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Near and Far

This spring and summer, Hood River News' Kaleidoscope will feature places in our own backyard. Look for places as disparate as Finland and Borneo, as we begin a new rotation of "Travelogues" written by local residents. This recurring feature strives to go beyond a vacation report, and looks at adventures, service projects or other involved experiences that readers would be willing to write about and provide high resolution photos. If you would like to submit your idea about recent travel or a planned adventure for Travelogues, email hrnews@hoodrivernews. Since we rely on the traveler to write the article, we ask that the suggestion come directly from the traveler; if you have a friend you think did something interesting, ask them to contact us.

JULIANA CUYLER DOLAN, top right, and her friend, Ruth Berkowitz, prepare for a day of skiing. Dolan writes at one point: "The morning is a bluebird day — about 4 inches of new snow and blue skies. We take a big group photo and we all set off together in a line of skiers, which is an unusual event on this trip. The snow covered birches are breathtaking today and we are often on a narrow single track through the woods. This is the kind of skiing I love." She would find delightful solitude for hours each day, while enjoying food and friendship at the overnight stops and on the support buses. Days were tiring, yet the experience was invigorating: "At some rest stops, local people come to visit and interact with foreigners. One woman brought her two preschoolers and her teenage son to see if they could meet some Americans. One elementary school class arrives in two taxis to meet us. There is a polar bear mascot at one stop and one boy brings his pet reindeer for us Arctic tourists to enjoy." Dolan works as a Speech Language Pathologist and English Language Learner Program Coordinator at Stevenson Carson School District. She moved to Hood River in 1994 with her husband, Joe, a teacher at HRMS. They have two daughters, ages 15 and 18. Juliana, who is a breast cancer survivor, learned to ski at age of 3; the whole family skis downhill and Nordic and the girls race for HRV Nordic Team.