

TRAVEL

Continued from Page B1

**Saturday, March 7 —
Destination: Kuusamo**

The next morning we load our gear on two buses—the “fast” bus and the “slow” bus. At the Russian border, we shuffle around with last adjustments, use the out-house, take photos, and hit the trail. It starts with an immediate two track downhill. Ruth and I have started at the back of the crowd and have to slalom through the carnage of fallen skiers. After a few kilometers of riverside and hills, we actually take our skis off to hike up a very steep ridge. From the top, we chat with our “guide,” who is resting and overlooking the valley below. He says, “That’s Russia — they used to make sure we did not take photos from here.” Nobody prevents us from taking photos, however, and we eat a snack and ski off. From here the track follows a winding, hilly road. It’s fairly fast, but if you step out of the track its immediate “clumpage” on the base of your of skis. I end up stopping to scrape my skis at least seven times. Everyone is in the same situation this day, no matter what the wax, as the snow and temperatures are so changeable. I decide the snooty wax guy did fine — I’m not complaining. When I stop to scrape, I drink, eat snacks, pee, or readjust my clothing. By this time, I am alone on the trail. It is very well marked. Every five km, there is a sign that checks off the mileage and I have passed my first rest stop where I am fed hot juice, dill pickles and raisins by some kind snowmobilers who are volunteering their time to stand at a snowy, windy, cold trail intersection with a small fire and snack table. I cross my first lake while watching a blizzard blow across it towards me. There is no shelter and the squall hits me head on, but I don’t lose the trail and eventually I turn up into the woods again. I see a sign for another rest stop in 2 km. We joke constantly all week about these “Service Stop 2 km” markers which can actually be two to five km to the next stop. At this stop I am surprised to see that the bus is there! I did not expect this, but jump on to change my sweaty socks, shirt, and gloves. But best of all, I am able to change my skis to my waxless ones. They are slow, but I don’t care as I won’t have the clumping problem anymore today. As I ski away from this oasis, I will have at least 12 km to go until the “lunch stop” where I will see the bus again. This will be at 41 km and I definitely plan on getting on the bus here and forgoing the 62 km total for the day. For a few moments, I wonder if I’ve made a mistake by not getting on the bus now and wonder if I will make it 12 more kilometers. It’s snowing harder now and it’s absolutely beautiful in the woods. We have intersected with a Nordic trail system that was the site of recent World Cup Nordic skiing event. The trail winds up and down through the woods and again I am alone. I start to listen to my recorded book on my iPhone. It’s “Anna Karenina” by Leo Tolstoy. Listening to this story provides me pleasure and distraction for the next seven days. I realize I am doing fine, am enjoying myself, and can make it. Soon I hear the “chug chug” of a snowmobile which pulls up behind me. This is the “Sweep” and he tells me solemnly, “You are the last.” This was one of the fears I had while training and planning for this trip. I don’t want to be last! What if the bus leaves before I get to the next stop? I worry about this briefly but as the only thing to be done is ski, I continue my trek. I am enjoying my ski and this curvy, hilly, woody trail and don’t want to get on the snowmobile. No problem. The driver drops back and gives me space and



LONG-DISTANCE SKIER

Juliana Cuyler Dolan is at the happy to see the support bus that meets her and companions at the end of a long day. Comfortable, if communal, sleeping quarters awaited the skiers each night, along with plenty of hot food and showers.

I continue. I finally see the “2 km” sign, which is of course meaningless and misleading. By now there is an occasional skier heading my way, using the Nordic Center groomed trails. I worry that I may have passed the lunch stop as there is a downhill ski area and ski cabins somewhere in the blowing fog around me. There is a turn we are supposed to take as the rest stop is at the base of the ski lifts, but it’s possible I have missed it. Suddenly, I arrive at a teepee (Lapland tent) and the bus is there! Someone hands me hot soup and bread. After being alone for hours, I see other skiers happily warming up and hanging out in the tent and it turns out I wasn’t that far behind after all. No one is in a hurry or impatiently waiting for me. Some skiers are even planning to ski the last 21 km of the trail. It’s now snowing really hard and as I gratefully ride the bus I can feel the wind gusts blowing against the side of the vehicle. Ruth attempts the full mileage this day but is picked up by the Sweep snowmobile as the weather deteriorates to a full on blizzard and dangerous skiing conditions.

When we get to the “Hotel Tropicale” (a misnomer at the Arctic Circle), I find our luggage stored in a downstairs room behind the bowling alley, the Angry Birds indoor park and a sports bar (sports bars in Finland show Nordic skiing, ski jumping, and ice hockey). It becomes a familiar daily struggle with my monstrous luggage to get it from one end or floor of a motel to another after a long day of skiing. This is another reason I decide to pay someone else to wax my skis. I’m just tired and want a sauna and dinner! Most of our dinners are buffet style and are delicious and filling. We are usually given potatoes and meat (including reindeer), root vegetables and sometimes salmon. Dessert is always yogurt with jam.

Breakfast includes eggs, bacon, sausage, oatmeal, potatoes, bread, salami, and smoked salmon. There are usually apples, pears or oranges, which was a pleasant surprise. I did not expect fresh fruit at the Arctic Circle, which is why I brought so much dried fruit. We are also encouraged to make sandwiches every morning from the breakfast foods. We tell each other, “Don’t forget the snack.” As we pile food into our fanny packs, Ruth and I decide that we eat more than others on the trail. I have dried fruit and nuts, energy gels and a couple of sandwiches with me every day. I don’t notice

other people stopping to eat, but then again I don’t see many other skiers during the day anyway.

Just as Ruth and I are dropping off to sleep that night we realize that we have hardly any cash and we are probably at the last town with an ATM that we will travel through. If I want to pay for waxing and get a few massages, I need cash. So I get up, dress, go down to the lobby, have a cab called and ask to go the nearest ATM. It costs 20 Euros to do this chore but it’s snowing and beautiful on the night drive and we need the cash. The cab driver is happy to practice his English. He has three teenage daughters and loves to ice fish, but not ski. However, his daughters ski with their school PE proms.

**Sunday, March 8 —
Destination: Syote**

The next morning we have a long flat ski along an old World War II German-made railroad bed, passing many lakes. I am using my slow fishscale waxless skis as the weather was supposed to continue to be unpredictable. It is cloudy and at times lightly misting or snowing and the temperature is around the freezing mark. I choose the bus again today after about 30 kilometers. I would have liked to ski longer, but this is the only bus stop option today unless I want to do 60 kilometers, which I don’t, so I get on the bus. By this time I am recognizing and am friendly with about 25 skiers, who are skiing at about my pace and are the slow end of our RR 3 group. And even as part of the “slow group,” I only ski with others a few hours every day. Most of the day, I am alone in the woods, listening or not to my recorded story. I figure I am spending at least 3 hours alone every day. I mention this to others and it turns out this is true of everyone. Even when comparing photos at night, I realize that everyone is having a completely different and individual experience, seeing different sights, and even different people at the rest stops. The rest stops or service stations are staffed by lovely, friendly volunteers. They are members of local snowmobile or service clubs. Some of the rest stops are at road/trail intersections, two are at truck stops off a main road, but many require snowmobile access. Volunteers set up fires, the teepee-type tents, and snack tables. They serve us hot juice and dill pickles, and sometimes bread, salami and cheese, hot soup or chunks of chocolate. They repair broken poles, dig out-houses for us in the snow banks and provide cheerful company.

That night the hotel has a pool. Since I have only skied 30 km, I arrive early, happily take a sauna, swim in the pool and have a massage from Henri, who is a bear hunter, not a skier. This hotel has “drying closets” in each room, in which you can put your wet clothes, shut the door and turn the thermometer on. Its perfect timing as our clothes are wet from the misty wet day and I wash out some shirts and socks to dry them along

with my boots. Keeping boots dry is a bit of a challenge for everyone on this trip. Ruth and the others who have chosen to do the full mileage come in later and are really tired as the last 10 km was uphill in soft snow. Tonight we play Bananagrams in English, Finnish, Swedish and Dutch and drink beer from the bar.

**Monday, March 9 —
Destination: Taivalkoski**

Because of the wet weather yesterday, the ski tracks are icy and fast this morning and we are all using klisters. I walk down the first few hills, deciding that I want to come home intact to my family. It’s a hilly day and we start on a ski area Nordic trail system which has a hard fast groom.

I reapply some klisters after lunch and have a blast double poling in icy tracks along long frozen lakes. I feel like I’m flying and our group coins the phrase of “double poling across Finland.” I imagine the trail unfurling like a ribbon behind me as I move across the landscape. I also realize I can skate ski on the frozen lakes and bogs as it’s more open and a hard surface. It feels good to change between kick and glide, double poling, and skate techniques. I am taking care of a few blisters but nothing serious and I am still changing my socks in the middle of every day. We have several very long icy downhills this day. I am slow and cautious while descending, especially as there are many right angle turns at the bottom of hills. At about 2:30 pm, I start to fantasize about riding on the sweep snowmobile. We are going up and down steep little hills and crossing icy roads. I keep eating snacks but am tired. I listen to my story and see a bald mountain in the distance. I realize that this is my destination but it looks really far away. There is lot of debris on the trail today and if you have momentum and ski over a pine cone or something like that you can get an unpleasant “whiplash” feeling as your leg is stopped suddenly and your body jerks. Later my Swedish friend says, “We must clean the forest from our skis,” as we have lots of the debris stuck to the klisters on our skis. This is the first day I feel that I have taken a wrong turn and this adds to my fatigue. We all have our names and safety contact phone numbers on badges that are pinned to us and I briefly wonder if I may have to use it if I ever see any people to help me. Late in the afternoon things really start to ice up and I am walking down a few steep hills when I hear the sweep snowmobile and see my Swedish friends riding on it. I get in the sled with Henrietta, and Cecilia rides behind the driver and holds the gasoline can. This is a cold, but fun, ride! I take a selfie of us hooting and grinning as we roller coaster up and down hills. The driver stops and Cecilia gets off with the gas can. I think the driver must want to put gas in the machine but he wants us to get out! We refuse! We don’t want to get out because we are tired and

want a ride! He throws up his hands in defeat and we continue onwards giggling in relief. However, after about 3 km total, he kicks us off the sled for good as he has others to pick up as it is quite late. We have about 5 km to go, which seems like a lot as it has been a long day. It is sunset and the temperature is dropping. I have dropped a ski pole down an embankment while taking a photo and must climb down to retrieve it. We trudge on and make it to a T bar at dusk, which we take up to mountaintop lodge. I collapse on my bed utterly spent. I have skied 58 km and it has taken me all day.

I happily pay my euros to this night’s waxer, and eat everything in sight at dinner. The sauna closes at 8 p.m. but Ruth and I poach it at about 10:30 p.m. and have it to ourselves.

**Tuesday, March 10 —
Destination: Ranua**

The next morning is hard and fast again. We are on Nordic Center trails with interpretive signs as we are also in a National park. Warming shelters for skiers are interspersed along the trail. We are mostly in the woods and it is lovely and sunny day with ominous clouds on the horizon. Later in the day it starts to snow, but I am getting on the bus after 44 km. At one of the last rest stops the wax has to change with the new snow. Ruth attempts the full 80 kilometers but is stymied by snow build up on the bottom of her skis and under her boots, so ends up riding the snowmobile for the last part of the day.

**Wednesday, March 11 —
Destination: Hosio**

We have a special rest stop today with a sausage roasting party near a bend of a river. It is really fun to relax and visit around a campfire in the sunshine. After lunch there is more double poling and skating over lakes and marshes. The surface is firm, with a few inches of sparkly snow on top. These snow conditions last through the next few days and provide perfect skiing surfaces. Even though the days warm up to the freezing mark every day, the snow never deteriorates. I wear sunscreen and feel warm around noon every day and think about peeling layers, but because the Arctic sun never gets very high, the temperature drops again fairly quickly in the early afternoon and I am always glad for my layers and hat. I ski 44 km this day. At our last rest stop we have a reindeer to pat and a polar bear mascot with whom to take photos. I’m tired but eat a sandwich and have energy for a lovely afternoon ski to an old school house in the middle of nowhere. The sauna is wood fired and situated across the parking lot overlooking a view of field and woods. Women are sleeping upstairs tonight and my luggage must be hauled up three flights of stairs. I can’t handle this tonight so I just leave it in an alcove at the bottom of the stairs. This is not a motel, so we grab beds and mattresses in communal

rooms. We have an amazing meal of beef and reindeer stew and enjoy the sauna.

**Thursday, March 12 —
Destination: Honkamaa**

Today I take the bus 22 km to the first rest stop where the volunteers are just setting up and making a fire in advance of the first skiers. I set off for my 38 km trip and within an hour am passed by the first group of faster skiers. This is actually the first time I have interacted with these people on the trail and I chuckle to myself — it’s a whole new crowd! At the end of this day, we ski onto the grounds of a summer camp. There are a few rooms with bunk beds as well. The building is separated into a men’s side and a women’s side, but by this time, no one cares who is sleeping where. I decide to pay for really good glide wax that night as I want to glide serenely and effortlessly to the finish. I want to go as fast as I can on this flat part of the route.

**Friday, March 13 —
Destination: Karunki and Tornio**

This is our last day. We all ride the busses over a river (Kokoemaerjoki) as wide as the Columbia and start on the other side. We are on established wide and well-groomed Nordic routes this whole day. There are many warming huts and outhouses along the trail designed to be used by Nordic skiers and we do see many other skiers who pass us in the other direction. I never see the bus this entire day so cannot change my socks and shirt and as a result I feel sweaty and tired. At the last rest stop they have put up a “ski through” tent and there is chocolate! So I know I’ll make the distance as I fill my mouth and pockets with this perfect energy food. I’m really tired today after seven long days of skiing. I keep track of the kilometer signs, counting down the distances. I have tears in my eyes as I cross the finish line at the Finnish/Swedish border town of Karunki after 55 kilometers of skiing.

We all board the bus and proceed to a fancy hotel in Tornio. It’s a border city where part of the city is in Finland and part is in Sweden. At this hotel, they serve us dinner by the plate and it doesn’t seem like enough for us hungry skiers! Ruth and I are still hungry several hours later, so we go out for hamburgers at 11 p.m. after our hilarious and poignant skit night and award ceremony.

**Saturday, March 14 —
Back to Helsinki**

The next day the busses drop off skiers at the bus station, the train station and one of two airports. We relax at the modern and comfortable Oulu airport on bean bags and couches and wait for our flight. We say goodbye to our Spanish, Swedish, and Danish friends and return to snow-free Helsinki to decompress and rest for a day before returning home to the Northwest. I am amazed and proud of myself that I did it! I skied across Finland!