Learning to Be "Pokemon Ice"

From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—
Edgar Allan Poe

I. Introduction and Initial Preparation

As a child, I lived on a mountain over which passed the Appalachian Trail. Our home was surrounded by thousands of acres of wilderness area, which I used to explore alone until I was lost. When I got a bit older I hunted and fished on these lands. These explorations were formative experiences for me in a childhood that was rich in some ways but barren in others, and was generally quite difficult.

I have always been drawn to the wilderness. In my youthful travels through Europe and Asia I camped regularly, hitchhiking to the North Cape of Norway and camping all the way, then later hitchhiking across Western Tibet for two months at the beginning of winter. But I never made it a specific goal to cross wilderness areas on foot alone. So in the summer of 2017, tired of rock climbing in Chamonix each summer, I decided to embark on the project of becoming a competent autonomous hiker in real wilderness, carrying all of my food and my equipment and crossing various Scandinavian national parks. Over the subsequent years I accomplished this goal, hiking alone for hundreds of kilometers across Laugavegur and Hornstrandir (Iceland), Hardangervidda and Saltfjellet (Norway), Vålådalen and Sarek (Sweden), and others.

Sometimes in August in Scandinavia it snows at relatively low altitudes, and the weather can be awful. I have never been as cold on any of my winter ski treks as I have been a few times in the "summer". But seeing snow falling, and seeing névés left over on the north slopes of mountains, or the white vastness of glaciers, my curiosity was piqued and I wanted to see these same landscapes in winter. Thus began my quest. Of course, the conditions in winter in Scandinavian mountain ranges can be very harsh. And the only feasible means of transportation is on skis, snowshoes being much too slow and walking being generally impossible. The range of necessary skills is broader and also more specialized than for summer treks, and the consequences of errors are higher.

I therefore set about learning the skills necessary to do a ski trek, with the medium-term goal of being able to do one alone. The first of these skills is Nordic skiing. While I am a competent Alpine (downhill) skier, I had never done Nordic skiing. For those of you who do not know Nordic skiing (also called cross-country skiing), it is very different from Alpine skiing. Instead of heavy rigid boots and skis, with the boot fixed to the ski at the heel and the toe, providing excellent control and support, a Nordic ski is not attached at the heel and is attached at the toe without a release binding. Nordic skis vary from traditional "classic" skis, long, light and narrow, with no metal edge, to "skating" skis, a bit shorter, but still with no metal edge and a similar light boot and binding, to Nordic "mountain" skis, which are a bit wider, use a heavier binding and boot (like a hiking boot, and still not attached at the heel) and have a metal edge. These last skis are those used for long-distance ski treks. In preparation, I did a couple of mornings with a friend in Chamonix who is an instructor in this discipline, then went to Sweden for my first ski trek!

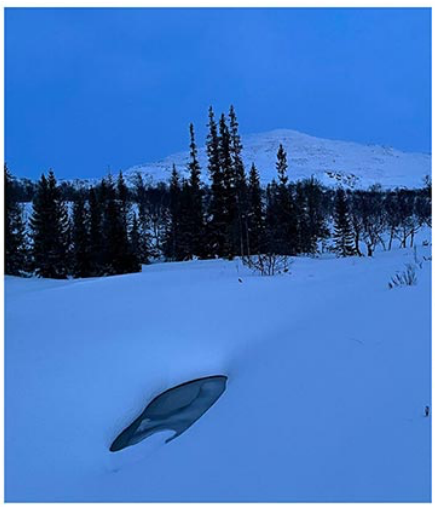
II. My First Ski Trek—Around Vålådalen (Sweden, February 2022)

Through some people I had met while in Ostersund, Sweden on a summer trip in June, 2021, I found a guide, Stefan, who agreed to give me a few half-day lessons and then to bring me on a 3-day 2-night ski trek, in February, 2022. When on a ski trek, the weight of one's equipment is much greater than for a summer trek. Even for an aficionado of "ultralight backpacking" such as myself, in winter safety absolutely demands heavy equipment: a warm sleeping bag, that will remain sufficiently warm even when dampened by condensation on successive nights; a very robust tent, as if the tent were to fail the results could be life-threatening; a well-insulated Thermos of at least 1 liter to provide hot water to drink in case of emergency; and another smaller Thermos for the mid-day soup, or coffee, or tea. For a three-day ski trek it would be difficult to carry less than 30 kg of equipment, food, water, and fuel. To carry this much weight one needs a sort of sled called a **pulka.** For a beginning Nordic skier, the pulka is the enemy, forever making you fall, knocking your legs out from under you in some cases, in others pulling you sideways off-balance and down the hill. With Stefan I used a pulka attached to my harness by rigid bars. Based on later experience, this type of pulka is easier to use for expert Nordic skiers, but is sub-optimal for beginners or intermediates. The first time I

pulled it up a hill, it occurred to me that this activity is like purgatory—Sisyphus in the snow.



Stefan and I chose a place two hours west of Ostersund, which I knew from having hiked nearby for a week the previous June. We set out in relatively mild weather (-5 C), warm enough so that there was some liquid water available in streams. This is important, as the single most annoying and time-consuming part of a ski trek is melting snow to make water, which takes nearly an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening, so 2 hours per day. On the negative side, the mild temperatures made the snow damp and heavy, and pulling the pulka through it with no tracks but those made by Stefan was purgatorial indeed. The first day went well, and we covered reasonable distance, around 12 km. We camped near the base of Saanta, a beautiful mountain of which I had run to the summit the prior year, a 36-km round trip from the lodge where I was staying. Our illuminated tents made a beautiful image in the night with the moon above them. Stefan suggested setting up the tent with the skis on, something that was utterly beyond my technical ability, so I stomped on the snow for a long time with my skis, to try to pack it down enough that I would not sink up to my waist while setting up the tent. This succeeded, more or less.




The first night showed me that the proper tent for a ski trek is significantly larger than for a summer trek. No matter what precautions are taken, in many conditions there will be significant frozen condensation inside the tent in the morning. If your tent is small, all you have to do is touch it once lightly and it "snows" on your sleeping bag! A larger tent leaves more space to move in without touching the tent walls. Additionally, the quantities of clothing and equipment are such that much extra space is needed compared to summer. And finally, in bad weather, despite all of the manufacturers' warnings not to do so, it is absolutely imperative to use the stove inside the tent to cook and to melt snow, so having sufficient space is crucial. I therefore use a 1-person tent in summer, but in winter I always use a 2-person tent for myself alone.

The second day we went south into a forbidding valley, Lunndörren. I had looked longingly down this valley from the summit of Saanta the previous June, but did not have time to traverse it. This time we were skiing into the teeth of a strong wind, around 15 m/s (50-60 km/h) in our faces. We went a few kilometers then turned back. We then crossed some steep terrain with very deep heavy snow, then a high treeless plain. We arrived at a steep gully, which Stefan confirmed was on our path. There was no way I would attempt to ski that gully with Nordic skis, even without the pulka. It was like a red slope in an Alpine ski area. So I put my skis on the pulka and crampons on my boots, and held the pulka in front of me as I walked down slowly. This technique, which I further refined later, worked very well for me.

Stefan told me that very close to where we were, a terrible tragedy had unfolded, the Anaris Disaster of 1978. Out of a group of nine young and healthy skiers who were caught in a storm, eight froze to death and the ninth had his hands and feet frozen. Stefan had studied this incident as part of his guide training, and he passed on to me some of its lessons. The most important one was, according to Stefan's teacher, to "have a *fika*" when you encounter a problem situation. A *fika* is a Swedish culinary tradition, where one sits and has a cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun or other light snack. Prescribing a *fika* in an emergency situation reflects the fact that during a ski trek it is unlikely that a split-second decision will need to be made. Excepting avalanches or bad falls, fatal accidents are almost always the result of a succession of errors, not of one single error. The victims of the Anaris tragedy made such a succession of errors, from waiting too long before deciding to bivouac (so their hands were already nearly unusable from cold), to not checking the depth of the snow where they chose to dig their snow shelter (so they wasted much energy for little actual protection), to not drinking the hot water they had with them, to not even using the sleeping bags they had in their backpacks. Most or all of these errors could have been avoided by stopping to think calmly. I have kept this deep lesson in mind throughout my ski treks, calming myself each time I encounter a problem and considering carefully the course of action to take.

Our second night camping was uneventful, and on the last day we skied through a winter wonderland of pine trees in deep snow, with more snow falling. A couple of times the pulka went faster than I did and caused me to fall, but I was slowly getting used to it. At the end of the trek Stefan and I took a selfie, and stopped on the way back to Ostersund for a cinnamon roll and coffee, a *fika*. After my departure we kept in touch for future adventures.

III. **Across Hardangervidda (Norway, March 2022)**

Before doing the ski trek with Stefan, I had signed up for a ski trek across Hardangervidda in Norway with Ousland Explorers, the guiding operation belonging to Borge Ousland, the premier polar explorer of our time. This was in March, 2022. The Hardangervidda ski trek was supposed to be feasible for people in good shape with relatively little experience of Nordic skiing. This turned out to be only partly true. Our group of 7 and guide Sebastian met up in Oslo, along with Lars Ebbesen, an accomplished polar explorer in his own right, who provided advice and many wonderful stories. We then took the train to Finse, from whence we would set out to the south to cross Hardangervidda, around 125 km. I had already twice crossed Hardangervidda in summer, by different routes, and wanted to do so in winter.

When we arrived in Finse there was a howling storm, with snow blowing sideways. We found our way to Borge Ousland's apartment, in which we were to stay the night, and did a briefing on the trip, prepared our food (provided by the guides), and went over our equipment. Sebastian looked every bit the polar guide. While we were discussing the trek, which was to take us 6-7 days, I asked him whether he could do the whole thing in two days. He answered that in the right conditions he thought he could do it in one long day, which did not surprise me at all, though it surprised most of the other participants. The next day we had breakfast in the Finse 1222 hotel, then set out. The snow conditions were ideal for expert skiers—a kind of frozen crust on the snow made it very fast. In Swedish and Norwegian they call this *skare*. For beginners it is a nightmare. The pulka overtakes you and makes you fall; the edges of the skis do not bite sufficiently to slow down; often the poor beginner ends up in a heap at the bottom of the hill with the pulka cord tangled in his legs. This time we used rope pulkas (a simple pulka which is attached to the skier with ropes instead of rigid bars). I prefer this type of pulka as it is several kilos lighter and allows for a greater variety of techniques to be used in various situations and terrain.

Four of the seven participants were training to cross Greenland, an expedition which Sebastian had guided several times. Two were very experienced Norwegian outdoors-people, who had been Nordic skiing since childhood. The other two were Dutch, fit and with some Nordic skiing experience. Three of these four actually did cross Greenland later in 2022. I was the oldest member of the group and one of the most experienced in general outdoor endeavors. After an extremely strenuous first day, with many falls due to the *skare*, we camped on a frozen lake. I learned that there is sometimes a layer of liquid water below the snow but above the ice on a lake. This can be very important to know if you run out of fuel to melt snow, for example, and it can also be important to know when pitching a tent, as if you dig down in the snow too far your tent will be pitched in a big pool of water!

Sebastian was nervous in the evening, as a powerful storm was forecast. We started Day 2 with poor visibility and moderately strong wind, around 10 m/s (35-40 km/h). As we continued the visibility worsened, and the wind intensified. Ousland has a policy of 50 minutes of activity then a 10 minute rest. I hated this, as I was faced each time with the question of whether to take out my down parka and wear it for warmth or just to wait and eat a snack and get cold. I do not need nor like to stop every hour. On the contrary, for both summer and winter solo treks I stop once each day around mid-day to eat a light lunch then move on, so 3-4 hours of continuous movement. I suggested to Sebastian that we could do 1:30 and 10 minutes rest, but he replied *"For some things, this group can be a democracy. But for this it is a dictatorship. So no."*

As the storm intensified, Sebastian pushed us harder to make progress. I learned later that he was guiding us to a mountain hut in case the storm became truly terrible and we were unable to pitch the tents. When we arrived the storm was howling, 20-25 m/s (70-90 km/h). I had slept the first night in Sebastian's tent, and was to do the same this night. The two Norwegians set up their tent by themselves, but I assisted Sebastian in setting up and helping to set up the tents of the other participants before we set up our own. Setting up a tent in a violent gale is dangerous. There is the risk of the wind taking the tent and sending it into the sky like a kite, never to be found again. There is the risk of the tent literally exploding and bursting all of its seams if it is opened in an untoward direction or manner. Finally, there is the risk of the tent poles being bent or broken by the extreme force of the wind. In the absence of a tent, an Arctic traveler's chances of survival are limited. In the best case you could make a snow shelter and then move the next day to safety. In the worst case you freeze to death during the night. All of the tents Ousland used had a cord at one of the corners. Before you even unpack the tent you attach the cord to your pulka or to a ski planted deep in the snow. I have adopted this practice for all of my tents, summer and winter.

Pitching the tents was back-breaking work, as you also have to shovel snow onto the snow flaps to hold them down, and dig out the snow in the vestibule of the tent to make a kind of sitting area and place to cook and melt snow. The cardio intensity of pitching the tent during a storm is significantly higher than that of normal skiing during the day. It's like fast running. Every minute counts. Making matters worse, if it is cold you need to do as many of the tasks as possible with gloves on or you quickly lose sensation in your fingers. This takes a lot of practice. After pitching the tents we retired

into them. Sebastian's tent was the biggest one, and was very comfortable. When the wind increased further in the night, 30 m/s so 110 km/h, according to Sebastian, the tent was battered by the wind, and the vapor from our breaths would remain stationary while the air mass enclosed by the tent moved back and forth with the movements of the tent itself. This made for a hallucinatory effect, immobile ghostly vapors illuminated by our headlamps while the tent shook and moved around them. I slept extremely well that night and a fair amount of the following day, as we spent almost 24 hours inside the tents waiting for the storm to abate, which it did mid-afternoon the next day.

The weather after the storm was magnificent, bright sun, light wind, and extreme cold, - 25 to – 30 C. We started out in mid-afternoon, and reached the only road that crosses Hardangervidda. One member of our party had to abandon the trek there, as she was not able to bear the physical demands put on us. I had very little Nordic skiing experience but I was able to compensate for this by physical strength, cardio fitness, and my generally high level of energy. We camped, and the next day the magnificent weather held. We left the marked trails and Sebastian took us across country, explaining basic navigation to the participants who did not already know how to do it. At one point we saw Hårteigen mountain from afar. This moved me because in 2021 I hiked 150 km across Hardangervidda and stopped to climb this mountain, the highest on the plateau. Revisiting, even at such a distance, a place that was previously important to me always moves me. Sebastian also explained various techniques for managing the roped pulka. He called his pulka "Magda", after a particularly noxious former girlfriend! This gives an idea of how annoying a pulka can be. Several interesting techniques he taught us are:

1. *Chinese Downhill.* I have no idea where this term came from, but it involves skiing straight down a gentle slope with the intention of skiing faster than the pulka so that it cannot catch up and knock your legs out from under you or cross your skis and make you fall. It is very economical in time and in energy but if used on a slope that is too steep or uneven for the skier's ability it can cause spectacular falls.

2. *Walking the Dog.* This technique is used for descending moderate slopes. Rather than allowing the pulka to run freely, you pull it up against one knee and hold it on

a shortened rope. Snowplow turns can be made in this position, and the pulka controlled by holding its rope but also by pushing it with the lower leg against which it is held. This is the most useful technique for descending most slopes.

3. *Riding the Bull.* There are two versions of this technique. One is to stand up and ski with the pulka between your legs. The skis are in snowplow position to control speed, and turns can be executed. A few times while trying Chinese Downhill my pulka caught up with me and I ended up with it in between my legs in this manner! (This is better than if the pulka catches up in an asymmetrical manner and runs across your skis!) The second version is that you sit on the pulka and ride it down like a sled, holding the rope in front and using both skis and one pole to steer. This is really fun and an excellent technique as long as the slope is sufficiently gentle, without obstacles, and tapers off into a flat plane. If there is an unexpected depression or bump, loss of control can lead to a barrel roll crash with the pulka rope wrapped around you and the pulka rolling over you. This happened to me once. When I am on a solo ski trek I tend not to ride the bull in this manner very often.

4. *Wimping Out.* This is my own technique, which I invented when I absolutely did not want to try descending a steep slope on skis with the pulka behind me. I rigged my harness with a carabiner so that very quickly I could attach the pulka in front of me instead of behind. Depending on the degree of slope and the snow condition I would either ski down with the pulka in front of me, slowing it by snowplow turns or stepping sideways with skis perpendicular to the slope, or else remove my skis outright and put them on the pulka, put crampons on my boots, and walk down with the pulka in front of me. This is fairly energy efficient and far less dangerous than trying to ski down a slope that is too steep for your abilities. I used it numerous times, especially when alone.

We camped the night on a frozen lake. The temperature that night likely reached – 30 C, as at a hut we passed the next day the hut keeper said it was – 28 C there. Since one member of the trek had left, and Sebastian had understood my solitary nature, I had a whole tent to myself for the rest of the trek. This suited me well, despite having to carry the whole tent and cooking gear myself instead of being able to split it with a partner. I woke up first that morning, and came out of the tent just as the sun was rising over the frozen lake. I turned around after looking towards the sun, and saw long ice crystals, nearly a full centimeter, on everything, my skis, the lines of the tent, the ground. This unexpected and ephemeral beauty moved me to tears and I just stood there crying, filled with the sublime beauty of the world.



The storm had delayed us by a bit more than a full day, so we had to make up some of the lost time in order to arrive one day later than originally planned. Sebastian kept our pace very deliberately. At one point on a long uphill I noticed that he had increased the speed, which caused our group to string out, increasing the distance between the faster and slower members of the party. I managed to catch up to Sebastian, but doing so tired me out. When I get really tired and have to draw on an extra source of energy, I recite poetry which moves me, and the energy of the emotions I feel is transformed into physical energy to do what I need to do. So as I caught up to Sebastian I was reciting a poem, *La Mort des Amants* by Baudelaire. Sebastian asked me what I was saying and why, so I explained it to him. I said that it seemed he had increased our pace, and he said he had, from 3.5 km/h to 4.0 km/h. We kept that pace for a couple of hours before slowing down.

The last days of the trek were uneventful, and as they went by my perception of the physical demands being made on my body went from quite extreme to bearable. We can get used to anything. We arrived at Haukeli, and had a debriefing, first all of us together and then individually with Sebastian. He suggested that to do solo ski treks I should buy a Garmin inReach satellite communication device, made a couple other small suggestions, and invited me to join the trek across Greenland that summer, but I declined. And he told me something that stayed with me *"Some people harvest energy by being with other people. Others harvest energy by being alone. I can see that you are one of the latter. If you ever come back on one of our treks you are welcome to bring your own tent and stay in it alone if you prefer that."* The group then broke up. I felt that I had learned a lot, nearly enough to do a ski trek alone, which was my goal when I started this project.

IV. **Through Sarek (Sweden, March 2023)**

In the winter of 2023 in France my wife and I did two weeks of Nordic skiing with an instructor, which I used as training for my ski treks, as I realized that lack of technique was costing me enormous amounts of energy. I had posed this question to Sebastian and one of the expert Norwegian skiers and they thought that I probably spent 10% more

energy than they did going uphill, but *four or five times as much energy* going downhill. The lessons paid off, as even at age 57 it is possible to acquire new physical techniques, so on my next ski trek I was no longer terrified of going downhill, and on the one after that, solo in Hardangervidda, I even found the easier downhill sections fun!

Sarek is the wildest and most remote place in Europe, the closest thing you can find to Alaska on the European continent. There are no marked trails at all. No huts and a single emergency shelter in the middle of the enormous park. And most significantly, there are only two bridges across the myriad rivers in this vast wilderness. In the COVID summer of 2020 Sweden had no lockdown, so I chose to go to Sarek. I hiked alone approximately 150 km through and around the Sarek National Park, in 8 days. I saw around 15 people during the entire time, sometimes no one for several days at a time. My memory of Sarek is that of a deeply moving pilgrimage to somewhere sacred. I wanted to return there in winter.

Stefan, the guide from my first ski trek, had recommended Laponia Adventures and its owner Christian Heimroth to me, telling a story of how Christian had learned of an oncoming snowstorm and hastened to lead his group nearer to the edge of the park and safety. Getting caught in a storm in Sarek can be trying and dangerous. One YouTube video I saw by a Swedish solo ski-trekker recounted how he had skied one day into the park, then was caught for 8 days in his tent in a terrible storm. On the 10th day, having run out of food, and the storm having abated, he was able to return to the place he had started.

I joined the Sarek group in Kvikkjokk, staying in the wonderful STF guest house there, which is better than any of the hotels in the town. The night before meeting, I invited Jon Tomas Utsi and his wife Marie to dinner. I had met them while searching to buy a hand-made Sami knife during my trip in August, 2020. Jon-Tomas is one of the pre-eminent Sami craftsmen, and was kind enough to invite me into his home for lunch when I visited his workshop to choose a knife. I hope to be able to reciprocate and invite them to our home in France if they manage to travel this far south. We were six participants for the trek, and two guides, Christian and Jonas. Everyone besides me was Swedish.

We were each allocated equipment (skis, poles, and pulkas) and we did a short outing to practice pitching the tents, as the other participants used tents provided by the guides. I had brought my own tent, which I knew how to pitch, as well as my own sleeping bag, stove, and all the other outdoor equipment. The next day we set out by car for Ritsem, where we rode around 25 km by snowmobile to the entrance of Sarek. The ride on the snowmobile was utterly freezing, with the ambient temperature already cold (around - 20 C) and the wind whipping us. After arriving, we skied for a couple of hours and made camp at the head of a narrow valley.

On the second day the weather was grey. I was up early and ready to go, but several members of the group were very slow, and made the rest of us wait for over an hour. I would have much preferred a more military sort of discipline (such as that which Sebastian had exercised on the Hardangervidda crossing the previous year) but Christian was more gentle in the way he managed his team. We left and skied at a slow pace then made camp after a relatively short distance (roughly 12 km). I found this frustrating as I was raring to go. The next morning the weather was significantly worse. A storm was brewing and we were skiing into it. Around noon we were in a white-out with almost zero visibility. I was navigating using my phone and its Gaia GPS app, and I went up to the front of the line with Christian who was navigating with a hand-held GPS device. I told him the heading I thought we should take, and he confirmed it was correct, which pleased me, as it is always good to know that one is not lost. Navigation is primordial. I actually enjoyed the 30-60 minutes during which we could not see anything, as it added a touch of excitement to what was otherwise slow going, as the fitness level of the participants varied widely and we kept the pace of the slowest of us.

After lunch, I felt a serious upset in my stomach, and had to rush behind a rise to dig a hole in the snow and relieve myself. Having to do this 4 or 5 times per day in the freezing cold is extremely unpleasant. A day later I ended up taking metronidazole, which cured my stomach bug but prevented me from drinking the flask of whiskey I had brought for evening nightcaps. Terribly annoying! During the fourth day we reached and passed Skarja, the location of the sole emergency shelter in Sarek. From this point one is roughly 3-4 days skiing or hiking from safety. We camped that night and I ate just plain rice in my tent rather than eating the complex meal with the others. Christian and Jonas make excellent food on their treks, much better than one would expect given the limited kitchen facilities.

The next day the storm had passed, and the weather was clear and cold, around –25 C. We opted to turn east off of Rapadalen instead of continuing down that main valley, as the snow there was apparently extremely deep. I was disappointed at this decision as I wanted to pass the junction of Sarvesvagge and Rapadalen, which I had seen from a distance during my 2020 summer trek. Christian suggested a compromise, to leave our pulkas after lunch and ski a few kilometers up to a ridge with a good view of the Rapadalen-Sarvesvagge junction. I was very happy with this, and thankful to Christian. Additionally, from this vantage point I was able to see the "ghost plateau" of Luohttolahko and its mountain summit, Naite. I had crossed this plateau on foot, and even in August it is so barren and forbidding that I wanted to get off of it as fast as possible. Skiing down from the ridge was pure fun—great snow, no tracks but ours from

the way up, and not too steep. For the entire week-long ski trek through Sarek we saw no ski tracks at all but our own. We saw exactly five other people. Two park rangers on snowmobiles from around 2 km away. One solo trekker far away (hats off to him!). And a Finnish couple who were following the same route as we were and with whom we spoke briefly.

That night I felt somewhat better. The metronidazole was having its intended effect. I was in my tent after dinner, relishing my warm sleeping bag as the outside temperature was very cold, around – 30 C, when Christian called to me from outside to come out and see the aurora borealis. I came out of my tent, put on my down parka and my camp booties, and was awestruck. The aurora was everywhere! The entire firmament was filled with slowly changing iridescent colors, like ethereal draperies blown by a gentle breeze. I marveled at this spectacle, standing still and turning slowly to take in all 360 degrees, and taking photographs. I do not know for how long I did this. I just remember that after a while I realized that I could no longer feel my fingers and was unable to use my phone to take any more photographs. So I returned to my sleeping bag and rubbed my hands together for a half-hour until I could feel them again. The following night we had almost equally beautiful aurora again. Christian said that in 20 years of guiding he had never seen it as powerful or as beautiful. My cup runneth over….

The last two days of the weeklong trek were trying. We crossed a very long valley full of huge boulders. These were buried in snow, creating very steep, short, and irregular obstacles that had to be surmounted. Pulling a pulka over such obstacles is about as physically demanding an activity as you could imagine. At one point I pulled so hard that I broke a steel attachment loop on my pulka and we had to stop to fix it. Choosing the path through this hellish landscape was also difficult and several times we had to return on our tracks and try a different way. We camped for the night then continued this trying work the next day. Finally we came into sight of Slugga, a conical mountain near the edge of Sarek that looks like Mount Doom in the *Lord of the Rings*. It was on the lower slopes of Slugga that we were picked up by snowmobiles, having crossed Sarek.

V. **Hardangervidda Alone (Norway, April 2023)**

I left myself only a couple of weeks between Sarek and my first solo ski trek. For this I chose Hardangervidda, along a route which I had hiked the previous September so I had a good general idea of its topography. Since it was my first solo ski trek I decided to stay within one day's journey of a road or mountain hut at all times. Still I have to admit that when the taxi dropped me off some 50 km west of Geilo, in a barren and empty place, I felt somewhat at a loss as I started south pulling my pulka!

The weather was beautiful but too hot! I ended up wearing only my base layer, and on my lower body I wore my Gore-Tex pants with no base layer, which ended up chafing my thighs. Worse, I was sweating and drinking more water than I had expected, yet there was no liquid water available. I did not have enough water bottles, so I ended up converting my half-liter Nalgene marked "PEE" in big black letters to a water bottle! When I crossed paths with some people I felt embarrassed, wondering if they would notice the bottle marked "PEE" hanging from my harness! I always use a pee bottle in the night because in bad weather getting out of the tent to pee is a very bad idea.

Being alone I could set my own pace. I did so without any rest stops until lunchtime, 3-4 hours, and kept this rhythm on the following days. Again I saw Hårteigen mountain in the distance. It is visible from much of the Hardangervidda plateau due to its height. I passed a camp of two dog sled teams in mid-afternoon and spoke with the mushers. They explained that the weather was too warm for their dogs and that they could only function properly in early morning and late afternoon, when it became cooler. They also said dog teams could manage a maximum of 20-25 km per day in normal conditions, which seemed surprisingly little. I personally had counted on 15 km per day for myself at an unrushed pace, but I was easily managing 20 so my 80 km trek ended up being a day shorter than planned.

I camped on a long gentle slope, with a boundless view into the distance. There was no wind so I built a beautiful kitchen with snow blocks and set about leisurely melting snow while setting up the rest of my camp. If you melt the snow inside the tent it requires almost full attention, so takes much more time, but when done outside you are free to do other tasks as long as you make sure to empty the water into your containers when it boils, pump the stove to maintain pressure, and add new snow to melt. I slept well the first night in my tent. Unlike the previous three treks, I brought the second-warmest of my four sleeping bags, not the warmest. It was amply sufficient. Around the time I was finishing my dinner, I saw the dog teams pass by and vanish into the infinite distance of the snowbound plateau, in utter silence and illuminated by the westering sun.

The next day was similar weather but a bit cooler, perhaps – 5 C, whereas the first day must have been close to freezing. I continued on my way, and where the previous September I had left the marked trail to go over a pass and down the other side, in avoidance of a mountain hut, on skis I did not dare. I was worried that the way down the other side of the mountain was too steep for me. If I were to do it again I would go over the pass as my skills have improved. I saw a long ski track in the distance crossing a vast snow plain (with a lake underneath it), and a vapor trail in the sky above it. I then saw a bridge with ski tracks across it. In 2019 I crossed this bridge coming from the south, my first crossing of Hardangervidda. I never imagined that just 3 ½ years later I would have acquired the skills to come to this place alone in winter. It made me feel content in the success of my project. This was one of the rare permanent bridges in the park, most of the others being installed in early July and removed in early September to prevent the bridges being damaged or destroyed by movements of snow and ice.

My camping place that night was not very pleasant, as it was only 2 km from a mountain hut and I saw a couple of other people pass by. I prefer if I see no one, and usually choose to go around huts and not camp near them. The next day I continued, and went down a very steep hill. I was enjoying normal downhill sections, as my skill in managing the pulka had increased greatly, but this slope was steep. I used an innovation which I developed, a knotted cord which I attach with carabiners to the front of the pulka and which drag underneath it. This slowed the pulka to a manageable speed and I was able to ski down without difficulty. On a subsequent steep section I got my ski caught in an icy rut and took the only bad fall of the trek, right on my face. I found a wonderful place to camp, near the summit of Ustetind. My tent, alone in the vastness. I skied then hiked to the top of the mountain, and looked over Hardangervidda. Hårteigen was again visible though it is very far from Ustetind mountain. I again had good weather and made an outdoor kitchen, had my dinner and slept.

The last day of the trek turned out to be something of an adventure. Hardangervidda is a vast mountainous plateau, 700 or 800 meters above the rest of the land around it, and coming down can be tricky. I was worried that if I followed the marked path I would end up in the wrong part of the valley and have to go back up again to get to Geilo on skis. So I decided to leave the marked trail and cut across country. This was stressful as some of the terrain was steep and it is always more challenging to navigate your own path than to follow signs. It ended up being the most rewarding part of the trek. I came out at the top of a very steep slope above an emergency hut, just as I had intended to do. I took off my skis and put them on the pulka, put crampons on my boots, and hiked down with the pulka in front of me. The slope was as steep as a black slope in the Alps and there was no way I would have skied down it with Nordic skis, with or without the pulka.

I reached the mountain hut near my final destination of Geilo, and enjoyed a beer, a shower and a nice meal. The next day was a moderate snowstorm and I skied down from the hut into Geilo on Alpine ski slopes which I had reconnoitered before starting the trek. This solo ski trek was a reasonable start, and was successful. For my subsequent

trek (March 2024) I chose something much more challenging, almost perhaps "biting off more than I could chew".

VI. Holkendurrie Alone

Unlike 2022 and 2023, for 2024 I decided to do only one ski trek. I chose the region of Jämtland in northern central Sweden, for the right combination of natural beauty and remoteness, without being totally remote like Sarek. Furthermore, Stefan, the guide whom I knew from my first ski trek, is based there and agreed to provide logistical support and advice for the trek.

Stefan and I discussed in detail the planned route, and agreed on a roughly 120 km path from Rundhögen southeast along various marked routes (while avoiding mountain huts), and going through two valleys which were to be the highpoint of the trek. The first of these, Holkendurrie, had no marked paths at all, and was to be the most remote point of the hike, two full days travel from the nearest road. Fortuitously, a beautiful blonde "Valkyrie" woman I had met in June 2021 recommended that I hike this valley in summer, and I followed her advice. I saw no one in 48 hours while I was there. Holkendurrie was the main goal of the ski trek. The second valley was Lunndörren, which I had seen twice previously but never traversed. This valley runs north-south, is very steep and narrow, and is therefore subject to a marked venturi effect when the wind is from the south, which can render camping in the valley impossible with a strong south wind. I thus planned on a possible "escape route" in case of bad weather, which would take me further east and then north to the trailhead at Vålådalen.

After several days of training sessions based in Ostersund, Stefan drove me to Rundhögen early on Monday morning March 18th. We were both concerned about the weather, as high winds were forecast, 20 m/s (70 km/h), roughly the limit for safely setting up my tent. No storm was forecast, however, and if one had been I would have delayed my departure. It is foolish and mortally dangerous to set out on a winter trek if a storm is in the forecast. I felt alone as Stefan drove away and I started down the trail.

There was a fork ahead, one trail going to a mountain hut and the other, less traveled by, going over a pass. I chose the road less traveled by, following my plan. After a couple of kilometers, I came to a sign which disquieted me. It said that the bridge ahead, across the Enan River, was damaged and unusable. I could have gone back and taken the other path, but I did not want to abandon my planned route so early in the trek. So I accelerated my pace to see the actual state of the bridge, not knowing how old the sign was. The bridge was indeed damaged. I crossed it on foot, holding onto the cables in case the floorboards gave way. To use it I would have had to empty everything from the pulka and make 6 or 7 trips. I considered the state of the snow-covered river. There was one vertical rock section near the shore where moving water was visible below, not a good sign. On my map there was a small island slightly off-center from a straight line across. I probed the snow over the river. The surface was hard and difficult to pierce, and once pierced the snow was quite deep and dense, so I decided to take a chance and cross. I did so quickly, doing my best to spread my weight between my skis and my poles. I breathed a deep sigh of relief on reaching the other side, but not for long.

The river valley was steep-sided. Dragging the pulka up it was a Sisyphean task, absolutely horrible, like grappling with a stronger adversary. I should have taken off the skis and used crampons but I did not, and stopping in the middle to change was not a viable option. I made it to the top after a long struggle, then the upward slope flattened out, with fewer and fewer trees and more and more wind as I neared the pass, close to 1000 m in altitude. The temperature was not cold, approximately – 5 C. The strong wind and bright sun counterbalanced each other and I was able to remain at a thermal equilibrium with relatively light clothing. I continued without stopping for several hours, over the pass and down a fairly steep descent. I crossed a path perpendicular to mine, and saluted three men who were following it. They were doing the Jämtland Triangle, a famous path, and sleeping in huts along the way. I stopped for lunch at a moderately sheltered spot then continued, hoping to find a sheltered place to camp in a few more hours. There was no such place. I selected a very mediocre camping site, and set up my tent with 20 m/s wind. This was not pleasant, as some gusts were even stronger. One of my tent poles bent due to stress from the wind and from my not having positioned it quite correctly. And I had to light the stove inside the tent to melt snow for water. I put

boiling water in a Nalgene with an insulated cover, and put it inside my sleeping bag. Such a hot water bottle can help to keep a person warm all night, especially if placed between the thighs near the femoral arteries. I ate my dinner, sent Stefan a message saying I was OK and giving my position (from my Garmin inReach satellite device), and slept, with the tent occasionally buffeted by strong gusts.

The wind continued all night, and into the next day without respite. I rose early, melted more snow and re-boiled the water for my large Thermos. This is a safety measure, to always start out with a Thermos full of boiling water. It can make the difference between life and death if you have to stay in a snow cave or huddled against a rock overnight in a storm. I ate my breakfast, and realized, between breakfast and last night's dinner, that I had brought too much food. The day was sunny again, with the same strong southeast wind, so it was right in my face. Around noon I passed the three men from the day before, now on the second leg of their "triangle". They had stopped to have a snack, and I spoke with them briefly again. I assumed that they would pass me quickly after their rest, as they had neither pulkas nor heavy equipment, but to my surprise they did not pass me for two hours. When they did, I spoke with them again, and recommended Christian Heimroth's Sarek ski trek to them, as they said this was their first experience and they wanted to do more. The wind was still quite troublesome, and I resolved to push on until I could lose some altitude and camp in a river bottom which was some distance ahead. As I had the previous day, burdened by fatigue, I asked myself why I was doing this. *"This is that which you have chosen"* came to me as the answer. I managed the descent well enough despite being tired, and set up camp in the river bottom, still in strong wind.

My sleep was full of troubled dreams of danger in Holkendurrie Valley once I left the marked path (as I intended to do): ice on the river breaking and dropping me into the freezing water; getting stuck in terribly steep icy terrain and sliding down uncontrollably; losing my way in a blizzard. The only thing to do in such a case is stick to your plan and see how things actually are when you reach the center of your fears. I set out in the morning. It was a grey day, cold and windy. I left the marked path, heading south into Holkendurrie on a gentle upward sloping valley with a meandering river, on which I skied most of the way. I was making good time on this terrain, as it was very regular. The wind was constant, but perceived more or less strongly due to the changing topography, and it was not coming from in front of me, for a change. A marked path crossed the valley I was following after a couple of hours. No one was on it, and only a faint old track. And on my way no tracks at all. I reached the headland of the valley, a pass that separates one watershed from another. It was full of large boulders. Somehow I did not remember this place from summer. Everything looks so different in the winter. I did remember the great beauty of the valley below this point, which is why I wanted to come here.


I continued up and over the pass, becoming tired. *"Why am I doing this?"* answered by *"This is that which you have chosen."* My dreamt fears not realized. The river ice was frozen solid and bore my weight easily. Looking ahead brought some new fear but each time as I advanced it receded. Fear of the unknown, dissolved by moving ever forward to know. At one particular moment there was a break in the clouds, an epiphany. The sun shone through onto the snow-covered mountains. It was a sublime moment of beauty, one of those which I seek on my treks and in my life in general. Tears began to well up in my eyes and I took some photographs, hoping to capture the light, the wind, the landscape, and above all the feeling of being dissolved in eternal beauty, of being part of it and no longer existing separate from it.

Descending from the pass, a chaotic jumble of hills and ridges created a tactical game of path selection. Luckily, the conditions were not too icy. My aim was to ski down the valley remaining as long as possible on the ridges of the network of hills. Some were so steep that if my pulka had gone over the side it could have pulled me all the way down the slope, perhaps 50 m of elevation. I was very careful and shortened the pulka's rope to keep better control of it. Finally I could remain no longer on the ridges, and descended. The snow was deep and good, and I was able to ski down unencumbered, the snow slowing down my pulka so I could effectively ignore it most of the time. My worry now was to come to a dead-end gully, as the sides of the ravine I was in were so steep that getting out onto a ridge top would be somewhere between exhausting and impossible, due to the heavy pulka (it weighed around 40 kg). Luckily the network of ravines continued down the valley without any dead ends.

The wind strengthened as I descended, with varying directionality, but as strong or stronger than the previous two days. I remembered from hiking here in 2021 that to the west of the network of hills and ridges there was a large section of flat swampland. I aimed towards it, skiing obliquely along a hillside in a beautiful long arc through deep powder snow, with the pulka meekly following me. What pleasure! I made it to the swampland and then covered the few remaining kilometers to the place where the valley crossed a marked path which I would follow. It was afternoon, so I had spent most of the day in the trackless valley of Holkendurrie. I was ready to stop and camp, but when I came out of the valley the wind intensity increased. There was no shelter and the wind was viciously strong, too strong to set up a tent. The risk of a tent being damaged or

destroyed by wind increases exponentially with the wind speed. Stefan told me that above 20 m/s (70 km/h) for a free-standing tent like mine and above 25 m/s (90 km/h) for a tunnel tent preferred by Arctic trekkers, setting up the tent is too risky, the result of the tent's loss or destruction likely being freezing to death. Stefan added that in consequence, if the wind is too strong, you have only one choice: **keep going**. Several times he has had to do this, even into the night, stopping every hour or so, getting inside a bivouac sack, eating something, drinking some hot liquid, resting for 5-10 minutes, then starting out again. So this evening, though I wanted to stop for the night, I kept going for several more hours. I progressed slowly around a mountain that was between me and the wind direction and then found a sort of depression behind a small hill, and set up my tent there. As each evening, I wrote to Stefan using my satellite device to confirm that I was OK and give my GPS position. This time, however, for some reason he did not receive my message.

The next day the wind had decreased somewhat. I received a message from Stefan that, not having received a message the previous night, he had called mountain rescue! I immediately wrote to him again and said I was fine and to call it off, which he did before the rescue team had wasted precious time looking for me. I then made good progress along the mountainside I was following the prior evening, and went down a long steep slope zig-zagging back and forth. This tired my muscles and I took several rests. I also took one fall due to fatigue and the pulka tripping me. I passed a mountain hut and spoke briefly with the hut manager, ate my lunch, then waited for several dog teams to leave. They were ahead of me and left a noxious trail in the snow. As I had had a long previous day I resolved to stop early today. I found a nice spot in the forest, as I had come down below the tree line. I stomped back and forth on a large area to compact the snow before setting up my tent but it was insufficient. As I was setting up the tent I sunk in up to my waist! I was worried that if I put too much weight on one place while inside the tent I would sink into a depression and get stuck there! I managed to avoid this by carefully controlled movements.

There was a storm during the night and my tent shook despite being protected by a copse of trees. In the morning the wind had diminished but the weather was colder and grey. I communicated with Stefan regarding the route to take, and we agreed that attempting to traverse Lunndörren would be imprudent. Wind was strong and from the south, and with the venturi effect could make trying to camp in the valley too dangerous. So I took a photograph from near the entrance to the valley, and called it "The Forbidden Valley". I will go there and traverse it eventually. I passed a mountain hut and struggled up a horribly steep slope with deep snow, the same slope Stefan and I had struggled up two years earlier on my first ski trek. Due to the grey skies and flat light I then totally missed a meter-high drop in the level of the slope I was descending, and went face first into the snow with the pulka in "walk the dog" position. I was fortunate as the snow was soft and I was not injured. Then a flat plain with reindeer in the cold gloom, and then the same steep descent as two years ago with Stefan. This time I removed my skis and used my crampons as I had before, but with no anxiety at all. I camped in a nice flat place sheltered by trees. The wind was, for once, negligible.

The sixth day was also grey and cold, with snow flurries and light wind. I passed through a narrow and beautiful vale, with wonderful designs in the ice of a frozen pond I crossed. One looked like an alien breaking free from its egg. I turned north on a snowmobile path and was quite anxious as it was now Saturday and there were some snowmobiles, and they went fast. Dying by getting run over by a snowmobile was not in line with the ethic of my solo treks. As soon as possible I left these paths, but not before I did another face plant, this time on hard packed snow, almost ice. I had to arch my back violently to avoid actually smashing my face on the ice, and my back felt it. I arrived at a nice camping spot, and this time set up my tent while wearing skis, as the snow was deep and hard to pack. Last small adventure, I left the tent and skied to the top of a small mountain, around 200 m elevation gain. From this vantage point I could see a good part of the region I had crossed, including the mouth of Lunndörren, the forbidden valley to which I will return. I felt content, having accomplished the goal of doing a serious solo ski trek. The next day I met Stefan in Vålådalen, and he brought me a fresh cinnamon bun and coffee, a *fika*, which hit the spot.

NDR

Note: "Pokemon Ice" is a nickname given me by one of my climbing friends who noticed that as the wind and the cold become more intense my energy level seems to increase rather than decrease.