

# BUSHCRAFT IN SWEDEN: LESSONS LEARNED IN THE LAPLAND

By Kevin Estela



Typical sunset in the north woods of Sweden.

**B**asketball enthusiasts have their Hall of Fame in Springfield, MA. Elvis impersonators have Graceland. Graphic novel fans have Comicon and just about every hobby and passion has a destination for faithful followers to travel to. In August of 2013, I traveled to Sweden with one of my best friends and fellow Survival Instructors Big John to discover what we could in a country

synonymous with survival, wilderness, and of course bushcraft. This country of course, is Sweden. Along the way, we would visit knife and axe factories, camp in the backwoods, sample the local cuisine, and add to our existing knowledge of bushcraft by seeking local knowledge. We did not expect to learn as much as we did and as we found out; sometimes the best lessons are those unexpected.

## PRE-PLANNING AND STOCKHOLM

Big John and I met in Stockholm, took in the local culture and got our bearings. We did not intend to spend a lot of time in the capitol, just enough to realize we were surrounded by beautiful Viking women and enough to help us find suggestions for where to go once we left the city. We spoke to workers at

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Throwing axes at the Gransfors Bruks Forge.



Essential equipment for bushcrafting in Sweden. Firesteel, axe and folding saw.



Artifacts in the Vuollerim open air museum.

a local sporting goods store and were given great advice as to what towns to pass through. We laid out the map, a massive accordion folded guide to the country, and made a tentative plan to drive to far enough north to reach the Arctic Circle and camp along the way.

## GRANSFORS BRUKS

Once we picked up our rental car, we headed north on the E4. Our first stop was the Gransfors Bruks forge, home to the premier axes bushcrafters covet. We arrived at the factory after hours and found a local campsite. You have to realize, campsites can be anywhere in Sweden. As long as you don't squat for more than a couple days, the government recognizes the right of individuals to use public land. This site was an old logging site just off the main road. It was filled with tart lingon berries, blueberries, strawberries and red raspberries; a forager's paradise. The next morning we made our way to the forge and were given a tour. We were allowed to pick out our own axes, in particular a model designed by Swedish Survival Expert Lars Falt, from the bins of finished models to ensure the best fit and finish. We were able to get right up next to the hydraulic hammers and watch ingots of steel transformed as the multiple dyes shaped the head with a violent yet rhythmic beat. Perhaps the most fun was throwing their double bit axes into targets set up right outside the factory. After touring the axe museum, handling all the historical bushcraft axes and dining at the campus café, we moved on with a new understanding of the tools we used countless times before.

## FALLKNIVEN

Heading north toward a city we knew only by name, Jokkmokk, we stopped by chance in the same city as Fallkniven. We knew it was along the



way but were surprised it was within 20 km of where we stopped for a 7-Eleven bratwurst or two. At Fallkniven, we met with Peter Hjortberger and his son Eric who were kind enough to talk to a couple of Americans who were in town. Peter told us about the development of the famous F1 Survival Knife and what the Swedish government wanted for its soldiers and pilots. He explained the durability of the knife and how few blades are returned due to breakage. He also told us anytime one is, it is usually when someone takes a knife and uses it as anything but a knife. He explained the knives featured an impressive display including high end Swedish Puukos to other previous incarnations of survival knives. We left Fallkniven and continued toward the Arctic Circle.

## VUOLLERIM

Going on a recommendation from Peter H., we visited an open air museum called Vuollerim. This museum features artifacts, displays and manipulatives from a 6000 year old Swedish settlement. At this museum we were able to handle rawhide food containers, salmon skin clothing, pump drills, and other primitive technology. Sitting in the center of the museum was a large fire pit with bow drill sets. While examining these sets, I noticed the misplacement of the all-important notch. The curator told me not many visitors have luck with getting a coal. Up for the challenge, I gave it a shot. I recut the notch and gave it a go. With a birch spindle on a birch hearthboard, I had smoke quickly and a coal after a minute or so. Seeing this demo, the curator pulled out her camera and recorded my efforts. After sharing my knowledge with her, explaining my background teaching bushcraft and survival, she gave us a private showing of a slideshow in English. The photos, set to a tribal drum beat, set the tone for the rest of the trip. We realized after seeing the photos of the local indigenous population, using ancient tools,



The author with Peter Hjortberger, Owner of Fallkniven.



Big John standing at the marker for the Arctic Circle.



The Sami market featured products steeped in traditional Scandinavian history.





A sunset as seen from the Arctic Circle.



This red fox approached the author as he took pictures of it from afar. Notice the winter coat.



Outside the Mora knives factory.

harvesting food and working as a group to survive, we would be camping where others have thousands of years before us.

## SAMI CULTURE

We passed the official line for the Arctic Circle, took the obligatory tourist pictures near the sign, and arrived in the small village of Jokkmokk. We toured the local Sami market and purchased kuskas, blades, and other crafts. We ate reindeer cooked in steak form and raw in local sausage variety and found a tranquil campsite near one of the many bodies of water. At 66 degrees north latitude, the sun doesn't set until near midnight and rises around 3am. Following local tradition, we made feather sticks to create our fire and were certain to leave firewood behind for the next camper. We used our axes and knives to keep the firewood supply steady in the late but twilight hours. Almost all of the wood we encountered was softwood, mostly birches and conifers, so despite extended blade use; our knives were nowhere near as stressed as they are when used on American hardwoods. They retained their edges and only light stropping was necessary for upkeep.

## MORA

On the way south from the Arctic Circle, we knew one of our final destinations was Mora, Sweden home to the MORA knife company. Along the way, we hoped to spot reindeer in the wild but were later told they spend that time of year in the mountains to escape the mosquitos. We did encounter a curious red fox that was not shy for the camera. Once we found Mora, we camped in a location with rolling hills and tall pines. We were able to find a campsite not far from the factory and in the morning we connected a notebook to Wi-Fi in town and reached out to my contact at the company, Debby. She gave us directions



and met us in the lobby. What followed was a private tour of the facility tracing the production phases of the knives most people think of when they think Sweden. We saw enormous bins of stamped blades from equally enormous steel rolls. You may be asking, “How many knives?” We were told they produce 13,000 per day and millions a year. This number is staggering to consider but when you see the efficiency of their production you understand the ability. We watched fully automated arms handle the knives through heat treat and grinding. No question was off limits and seeing the knives being made in front of me gave me a new appreciation for the dollar for dollar value they have. We had a chance to handle just about every model produced and both JB and I would fly home with more blades than we arrived with.

Some lessons cannot be anticipated during the quiet moments in the northern latitudes. Hours of planning cannot prepare an individual for the first time they witness a sunset late at night and listening to the sounds of the forest while tucked away in a sleeping bag. It is an experience, a feeling, words on paper cannot describe. What remains to be said is the guarantee of self-reflection in the presence of such rugged natural beauty. As someone who considers himself a deep thinker, answers to life questions were found where it is quiet enough to hear your own heartbeat and where thoughts of cell phones, social media, and other electronic connectivity don't enter the mind. Bushcraft is about connecting to the land and the history of its indigenous people. Camping night after night in the backcountry, eating local cuisine, interacting with the locals, learning from them, absorbing the beauty of the land and its energy, has given me great reverence for traditional skills rooted in Scandinavia. It is a trip I will never forget and recommend to any bushcraft enthusiast. 🏕️



Traditional Swedish gear. A Kuska (drinking cup), local Scandi ground blade, reindeer hide, lingon berries and yarrow.



JB processing firewood for the night.

