



# WAY TO GO, ST. OLAF

ÖSTERSUND

St. Olaf's Way is an ancient pilgrim's trail through Sweden and Norway that is as satisfying for the adventurers of today as it was for the religious devotees of yesteryear

WORDS BY JÖRGEN VIKSTRÖM PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICKLAS BLOM



**T**hemed hikes covering everything from food and wine to literature, culture and adventure have become increasingly popular of late. Scandinavia's answer to northern Spain's El Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James) is St. Olavsleden, or St. Olaf's Way. The pilgrimage trail leads from Selånger, near Sundsvall, on Sweden's east coast to Trondheim on Norway's west coast: 564km winding through cities and towns, farmland and wilderness.

The trail follows the route along which the canonized Norwegian king Olaf II Haraldsson (995-1030) led his army in 1030. Olaf's plan was to reclaim the throne and convert pagan Norway to Christianity. The war was savage and Olaf was killed in the great battle of Stiklestad, 90km north of Trondheim. The saint was buried in the mighty Nidaros Cathedral, which is also the end of St. Olavsleden. The trail has been used by pilgrims on the way to Nidaros for hundreds of years, and in 2010 was

declared a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe.

Today, you're just as likely to bump into runners, mountain bikers and horse riders as pilgrims. Hotels, hostels, restaurants, adventure companies and city councils have joined forces in recent years to make the trail more accessible. While some stick to the pilgrim theme – a slow, contemplative walk that earns a certificate in Nidaros (if you walk at least 100km) – others spice things up by biking or kayaking. And when you stop for lunch there's the knowledge that another weary traveler sat in that very spot 1,000 years ago.

### Good to know

Hiking season in Scandinavia runs May through October, with July and August the busiest months of the year. Generally speaking, St. Olavsleden is pretty easy-going and you don't need to be superfit to manage a longer section. Children 7-8 years of age can keep up, but don't expect them to carry a lot in their packs. You will need good wet-weather gear, ▶

Drifting downstream (anticlockwise from bottom right): Hugo, Martina, Alice and Johan pick up the trail again after catching their breath at Ristafallet





Stepping stones: Hugo, Alice, Martina and Johan negotiate the banks of the Indal river

THE SECTIONS BETWEEN ÖSTERSUND AND STIKLESTAD ARE PARTICULARLY STUNNING. THE DRAMA OF NATURE IS TANGIBLE HERE



Pilgrims' progress (from left): Ristafallet is 14 meters high and 50 meters wide; Stenvalbroarna, a stone bridge just outside Skalstugan in northwest Jämtland, close to the Swedish-Norwegian border; Lingonberries are ripe for picking August through October

including hiking boots or shoes. If you're cycling, think repair kits: there's a lot of ground to cover between bike shops. Take warm clothes, a hat and gloves, especially for the Skanderna mountains on the border of Norway and Sweden. There's no shortage of accommodation so tents are unnecessary, though bedsheets are good for hostels. You don't need to carry too much food since there are stores along the way. The official website has maps so you can plan your hike.

[www.stolavsleden.com](http://www.stolavsleden.com)

### Into the wild

Most people don't walk all 564km, settling instead for one section of the trail. St. Olavsleden is divided into five sections, each just over 100km long. The sections between Östersund and Stiklestad are particularly stunning. From Järpen to Åre, the trail follows some of the Indal river's mighty rapids and waterfalls. The drama of nature is tangible here, and you can understand why Astrid Lindgren's *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter* was filmed here, with the impressive Ristafallet as the Greedy Falls. The towering, dense forest combines with the spray and steam from the

waterfall to create a luxuriant, almost-tropical setting with foliage in all the colors of the rainbow.

In Åre, Sweden's premier ski resort, you can veer from the trail and take the cable car up to the peak of Åreskutan. From an altitude of 1,420m, you look out across miles of mountains to Norway in the west, and over the lakes and forests around Östersund and the great lake of Storsjön. Once the trail passes the Jämtland mountain village of Skalstugan and enters Norway, the landscape becomes treeless, harsh and dramatic, with spectacular formations. The trail here presents two alternatives, one over the mountains and one along the country road 322. The mountain pass reaches 550m above sea level at Mt. Brekka. The hiking here can be arduous but you are rewarded with incredible views down toward the valleys to the west.

### A well-deserved meal

Hiking doesn't necessarily mean a diet of soup and packed lunches. In Östersund a small detour takes you to the Japanese restaurant **Take Mikado**, where Tsukasa "Tim" Takeuchi serves tradi- ▶





Country fare: Lunch at Kretsloppshuset in Mörsil could be a plate of crispy waffles or a lavish smorgasbord that makes the most of the local produce

WHEN YOU STOP FOR LUNCH THERE'S THE KNOWLEDGE THAT ANOTHER WEARY SOUL SAT IN THAT VERY SPOT 1,000 YEARS AGO



Creature comforts: The Steward's House at Wängen Inn, Alsen, has bags of old-fashioned charm



tional dishes such as sukiyaki (thin slices of meat, tofu, and vegetables cooked in soy sauce and sugar) and shabu-shabu (thinly sliced beefs and vegetables in broth). Mörsil has **Kretsloppshuset**, a sustainable building with a lush garden that extends right into the restaurant. They bake their own bread here and make excellent vegetable soups and salads from organic produce.

Although well off the beaten path **Fäviken Magasinet**, 25km northeast of Åre, is a must for foodies. Magnus Nilsson's super-local food includes crispy lichens with dried egg yolk and smoke-dried brown trout with a mild garlic cream; salted and air-dried duck breast; and scallops "in the shell out of the fire" cooked over burning juniper branches.

In Åre itself there's **Villa Tottebo**, a hunting lodge and summerhouse built by wholesaler Lars-Eric Lithander in 1897 that has since been hauled from the shadow of Mount Totthummeln down to the train station. The kitchen offers local delicacies such as arctic char and lamb, but go for the game meatballs.

**Take Mikado** Infanterigatan 12, Östersund.  
Tel: +46 63 209 08. [www.mikadosweden.com](http://www.mikadosweden.com)

**Kretsloppshuset** Kyrkvägen 5, Mörsil.  
Tel: +46 647 665212. [www.kretsloppshuset.com](http://www.kretsloppshuset.com)

**Fäviken Magasinet** Fäviken 216, Järpen.  
Tel: +46 647 401 77. [www.favikenmagasinet.se](http://www.favikenmagasinet.se)

**Villa Tottebo** Parkvägen 1, Åre. Tel: +46 647 506 20.  
[www.villatottebo.se](http://www.villatottebo.se)

### A good night's sleep

The right of public access in Sweden and Norway means you can set up camp almost anywhere you want, except on private plots and land used for farming. But the trail is also lined with more comfortable alternatives, from hostels to hotels and pensions. Don't miss **Wängen**, 30km west of Krokom, which is the national headquarters for harness racing in Sweden. You can rest comfortably here amid the pastures and stables. Ask for a room in the fin de siècle *Förvaltaren*, or Steward's House. You might get a tour of the stables and you can go for rides in the ▶