

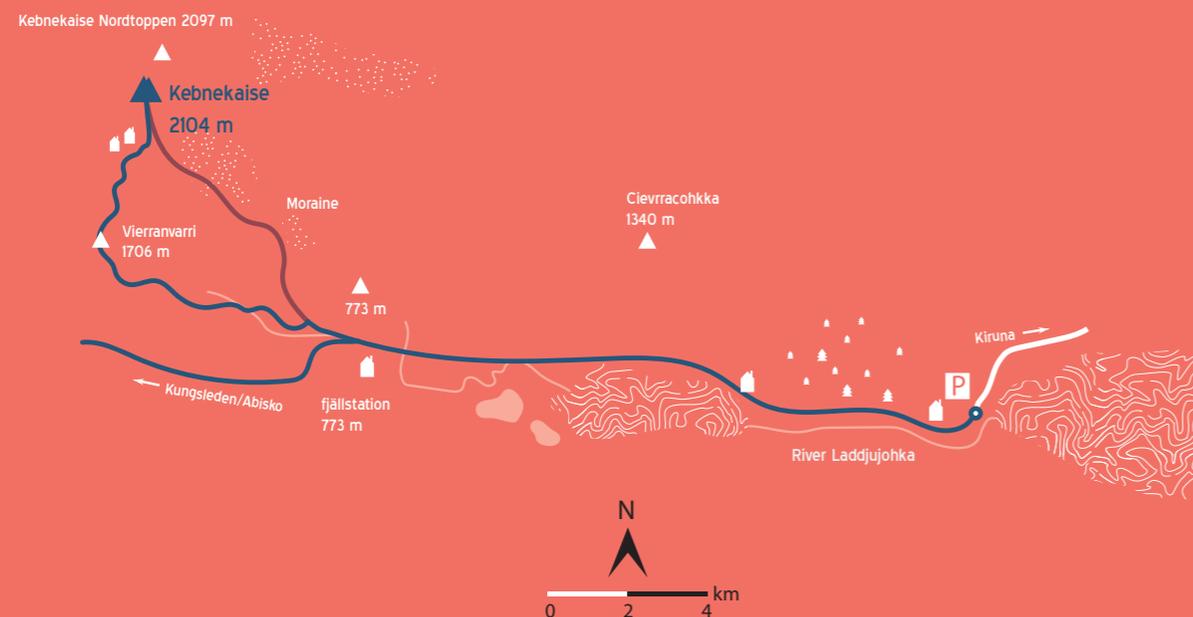
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# EUROPEAN PEAKS

Your guide to Highest points  
of every European country



# Kebnekaise



## The victim of global warming

From all the highest points of the European countries, Sweden's highest mountain Kebnekaise stands out by its remoteness. The shortest route from civilization to the summit is 29 kilometres long (one way), which is the longest of all peaks in this book. For this reason, it's almost impossible to climb it in just one day. The easiest way to reach Kebnekaise from the village of Nikkaluokta often takes three days. I took this route four years ago, so this time I decided for a bigger challenge - to hike a part of the famous route Kungsleden with a start at the village of Abisko. This means a seven-day pilgrimage through the real wilderness of the Swedish mountains.

After climbing the highest point of Finland Halti, we left our rental car in Narvik and took a train to Sweden. It was a picturesque ride. The train ran along the deep fjord Otot and offered beautiful scenery of Scandinavian landscapes full of lakes, colourful autumn forests and snowy mountain peaks. The Malmbanan railway (derived from the word malm - iron ore) between Swedish Kiruna and Norwegian Narvik was already built in 1903. Until today, it has

- 2104 m.a.s.l.
- Nikkaluokta – Kebnekaise Fjällstation – Kebnekaise
- 29 km
- June - September
- 1900 m
- 1<sup>st</sup> day Nikkaluokta – Kebnekaise Fjällstation (5 h), 2<sup>nd</sup> day Kebnekaise Fjällstation – Kebnekaise – Kebnekaise Fjällstation (10 h), 3<sup>rd</sup> day Kebnekaise Fjällstation – Nikkaluokta (5 h)
- Poppels Wit ★★★★★★
- No
- ★★★★★★
- ★★★★★★++
- ★★★★★★
- A lot of water streams up to 1150 m.a.s.l.

mainly been used to transport iron ore from the mines in Kiruna to the port of Narvik. A staggering 15 megatons are transported annually.

Joanne and I got off the train in the mountains in the small Sami village Abisko. There, we had to say goodbye to civilization for a week. It was time to start hiking the most interesting part of the Swedish trail Kungsleden. In seven days, my girlfriend and I were supposed to pass 130 kilometres through the wilderness carrying our own food and without mobile signal.

After the last careful thoughts about what to pack, we proceeded to the nearby scale which all pilgrims head to before their hikes. Other mountaineers were already weighing their backpacks there and removing the last unnecessary items. The weight of my backpack was 26 kilograms. Joanne's rucksack weighed six kilos less. The difference was the photo equipment (which had become scarce after the accident in Scotland - my back will thank me). We assessed that we probably had nothing to get rid of, so we hit the road.

## What food do

### I pack for a multiple day hike?

**Breakfast:** I usually cook oatmeal in the water with lots of dried fruit and nuts. Such a breakfast is healthy and full of necessary calories.

**Snacks / lunch:** nuts (various types), sweet bars (I prefer sesame seeds with honey), long-lasting sausages or cheese (they last a long time and contain a lot of energy) with bread (polar bread is an ideal option in Sweden).

**Dinner:** I cook dishes from Czech company Adventure Menu on a camping stove. I tried about 10 different companies that offer dried and ready-made outdoor food, and I must say that this Czech company cooks the most delicious ones. The freeze-dried dishes are light to carry and tasty. Perfect for a long pilgrimage.

**Liquids:** For breakfast and dinner, I make herbal tea with honey. During the day I carry two thermoses. In one of them I have boiled hot water and I continuously add cold water from water sources to the other one. I then drink the lukewarm water, which is the ideal temperature for



Tenting on Kungsleden nearby Sámi village Alesjaure

We were already leaving Abisko but the last building on the way tempted us by the smell of the daily lunch menu. Now I can repay Joanne the Luxembourg “luxurious kebab”. Finally, a proper meal. Let's get the last tasty energy. The Swedish hospitality showed itself all its glory. On the huge lunch buffet table, we could find selection of various salmon dishes, home-cooked meatballs with cranberries, many kinds of salads and pancakes. This I could eat every day. When we had filled our stomachs, we had no more excuses to start our hike. The first five days on the Kungsleden trail brought us a lot of experiences. I would like to describe them in detail, but that would be a story for at least one more chapter. I have a few excerpts from my diary for you...

Simply said, we experienced everything that an adventure through Scandinavian wilderness should have. It could just rain a bit less. Anyway, the hike from Abisko to Kebnekaise Fjällstation should be on the bucket list of every passionate nature lover.

Approximately two hundred metres from Kebnekaise Fjällstation (the starting point to climb Kebnekaise) we found a cool tenting spot with a beautiful view over the whole valley. We set

DAY 1: 2 km

... The sun is shining. We are enjoying the first kilometres on the road. The untouched rough Nordic landscape along the wild river Abiskojäkka is so beautiful...

DAY 1: 15 km

... The sun is setting at Abiskojaure. The last mosquitoes of this summer attack the last tourists coming to the first Sami settlement on the way. My back hurts. Why did I take that huge three-kilo lens with me?...

DAY 2: 15 km

... I wake up in the morning cold. I want to leave the tent, but the zipper is frozen and it's difficult to open it. At night, the temperature has had to drop by more than 15 degrees. Finally, I manage to get out of the tent and there is no wind and a clear sky. I am coming to a nearby lake and watch water evaporating from the surface. Before Joanne wakes up, I cook the last „luxury breakfast“ - toasted polar bread and eggs. What a morning...

DAY 3: 32 km

... We are walking through a beautiful deep valley. My back got used to the load, so I enjoy walking and looking at the wonderful landscape around. Along the way, I collect the so-called gold of the north - the cloudberry. I have never eaten sweeter fruit in my life. Glaciers and snow-capped peaks of mountains look down at us from both sides. Along the way we meet several reindeers...

DAY 3: 39 km

... We are walking through another incredibly long valley. Haven't we walked through here by chance? The weather is changing. Suddenly a strong wind blows and it's starting to rain. Today we have to make another ten kilometres. With a heavy and wet backpack, it's getting hard. After one hour walking in heavy rain, we stop at the first cottage in another Sami village, but it is full. „We can't accommodate you, try it in the next settlement Tjäktja,“ we hear. It's ten more kilometres...

DAY 3: 49 km

... The journey passes slowly. Joanne and I are in a low mood. It's not raining now; it's pouring cats and dogs. Too bad weather for setting up a tent. Even Gore-Tex jackets don't help in this weather. We're soaked to the bone. After the next endless hour in heavy rain, we finally arrive to the next hut. We knock on the caretaker's door: „Can we stay here, please?“ - „Nowhere. Unfortunately, our hut is full. The only way is to

sleep on the ground,“ we hear. Joanne and I agree: Still better than staying outside in the storm, so we lie down in the corner of the room on a borrowed mattress, where dogs usually sleep. But we are dry!...

DAY 4: 62 km

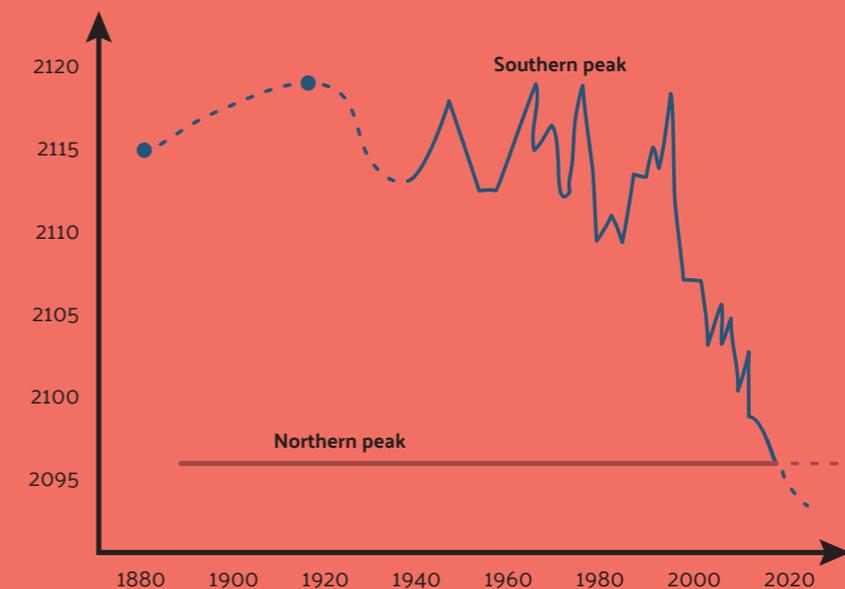
... It pours like crazy again. Why? What did we do wrong?

DAY 4: 73 km

... Sauna! It will warm us up. There is already a sauna master inside waiting with an already warmed up stove. Of course, there is no electricity in these villages cut off from civilization, so the sauna is heated up by wood. It smells amazing and the sauna is soon heated to hundred degrees. After the sauna, a jump into the glacial river is waiting for us. The water is so cold that I scream all over Lapland. It feels like thousand knives are stabbing you but after emerging from the water it is an indescribable feeling. I can't imagine a more pleasant regeneration after all rainy days...

DAY 5: 87 km

... Along the way we pass several waterfalls and walk along steep hills. The weather is finally great. It is unbelievable how quickly a nightmare hike can turn into an amazing trip. This part of the journey is definitely the most beautiful. Soon we can see the Kebnekaise Fjällstation, the base camp, from where we will head to the highest point in Sweden. Kebnekaise we are coming!...



up our tent and wanted to start cooking dinner. However, my phone suddenly started vibrating in my pocket. Finally, a signal. After five days! Welcome back to civilization! I felt ashamed of how happy I was, but it felt great after such a long time without my mobile phone. We forgot about the dinner and the beautiful view for a while and took a short break to deal with our correspondence with the outside world. But what was the most important thing the phone brought us? We got an up-to-date weather forecast. It looked like the bad luck of the last few days was turning around. The next day was supposed to be amazing for our climb. Sunny and almost no wind.

Kebnekaise Fjällstation offers accommodation and has a shop and a restaurant. We still had plenty of our own food, but we really felt like eating something tasty and salty. When we looked around the shop, we decided to get some chips. We bought two packs, one for the evening and one as a celebration after our summit.

Later we cooked our typical dinner Kungsleden dinner – freeze-dried food. This time we had tasty chicken tikka masala and then enjoyed our unhealthy dessert of chips. It was so tasty that we opened even the other pack. It's difficult to stop hungry hikers. When we were done with our fancy dinner, we finally decided to sleep even though it was just 6 pm. Why so early?



The beginning of snow line on the way to Kebnekaise

Sunrise above the lake Abiskojaure



If you are on a trip with a photographer, it is a sure thing that you must be on the top during sunrise. We have to wake up at midnight.

The early alpine start is always tough but this time we got a reward. We set off on our journey in the light of the aurora borealis. There are two routes to the top. The eastern route is a bit shorter but leads via a glacier. Unfortunately, we didn't have any glacier equipment, so we decided to take the longer but safer western route. After the first flat three kilometres, the path turned steeper upwards. In another half hour, we crossed a river and continued up on a new path built by Sherpas from the Himalayas. What an upgrade compared to four years ago when we had to scramble on large stones. We followed the Sherpa steps until we reached the top of mountain Vierranvárri. From there we could already see Kebnekaise. It was only 300 elevation metres up but unfortunately there was still a deep valley to cross.

It meant we had to descend 200 metres until we reached the foot of Kebnekaise. Time for the final ascend. It didn't take long before we broke through the snow line. Occasional pieces of snow turned to a complete winter paradise after a while. What a short walk to reach a com-

pletely different season! Meanwhile, the sun rose and shone over the surrounding mountains by a beautiful pinkish-red light. Now I wanted to take a picture but unfortunately, I had to deal with an inconvenience. I got a big sudden stomach-ache. I think it was the result of the chips. I needed to find a bathroom fast. But what a surprise! There was none nearby the top of Kebnekaise. I didn't see either any large boulders to hide behind. I asked Joanne not to look and backed up a few dozen meters off the marked trail. How fortunate I was that I had read a sign at the Kebnekaise Fjällstation how to properly perform a poo in the wilderness! Yes, you can indeed find such a sign in the hut. Here are the basic rules:

1. Go to the toilet in the mountain huts. They are free. (That didn't work this time.)
2. Bring a plastic bag for used toilet paper. In the mountains, the paper breaks down much slower due to low temperatures.
3. Walk away from the hiking trail, and if there are any suitable rocks nearby, hide your supplies under them.
4. Make sure there is no river or stream nearby. You don't want to pollute the water source.
5. Do not use wet wipes. They contain chemicals that nature can't handle.

Because of the chips we missed the sunrise, but I didn't even think of it that moment. I was glad the stomach-ache disappeared. I returned to Joanne, and we continued up the last passage. The final 30 vertical metres were very steep and since the top of Kebnekaise is a glacier, we put on crampons (no further glacier equipment is not necessary here since there are no cracks) which we rented at Kebnekaise Fjällstation. Everything went smoothly and in a minute we were admiring the snow-capped peaks of the surrounding mountains and the beginning of the red autumn in the valleys. What a view! A fog had even formed over the lake between the village of Nikkaluokta and Kebnekaise Fjällstation where we would be walking the next day. Beautiful!

### According to the mountain guides, the mountain grew up by 10 meters!

This is what our ascent to the current highest point in Sweden - the southern peak of Kebnekaise - was like. But if we had gone up a week earlier, we would have to climb the northern point of Kebnekaise. This was the first time in history that the northern peak became the highest point of Sweden due to the unusually warm weather in northern Sweden in recent years.

Global warming shows its full force here. But we were lucky. When we were getting soaked in the valleys of Kungsleden, it was snowing steadily at the top. According to local mountain guides the mountain had grown by an incredible 10 metres. I didn't believe that number myself, but when I compared my photographs with those taken during the hot summer, I could see a huge difference. And I was glad. That saved us from hiking to the north peak. I would not enjoy climbing the northern peak of Kebnekaise that day. The three-hundred-meter steep ridge between the two peaks didn't look safe at all.

At the top of Kebnekaise, the surface was slippery and there was a strong wind. That's why we didn't stay there for a long time. We took the obligatory selfie and a few more pictures and walked down to the nearby emergency hut. There the weather was pleasantly warm with no wind. Time for a second breakfast. It took us then four hours to descend and we arrived at our tent completely exhausted.

The name of the mountain Kebnekaise comes from the Lappish words giebnne (watering can) and gájsse (tall and peaked). Kebnekaise doesn't look like a watering can, but the neighbouring mountain Tolpagorni does. The Sámi used to think that the mountains were connected, so they named mountain Kebnekaise this way.

The next day we woke up completely broken, and we still had to walk the last 19 kilometres to the village of Nikkaluokta, where we would get to civilization again. We could overcome tiredness and pain, but Joanne's growing blisters turned out to be a big problem. They looked very unhealthy. They probably got inflamed. „Joanne, do you want to fly back to civilization by helicopter?“ I asked seriously. Many lazy tourists shorten their way to the top and back by helicopter, so this mode of transport has become affordable. Compared to other Swedish services, a flight is a relatively cheap affair (it costs „only“ 800 SEK per person (approx. 80 EUR), while for a double room at Kebnekaise Fjällstation you pay 1240 SEK (approx. 124 EUR). Just save some money by sleeping in a tent and you have a helicopter flight. But my girlfriend turned down my offer: „I've walked over hundred kilometres. I want to do the last nineteen, too.“ I was so proud of her. So brave.

It went well the first five kilometres but then Joanne's blisters began to hurt badly. „It is so bad. The pain is crazy. We're going too slow. We won't catch the bus and we will miss our flight! What are we going to do?“ Joanne regretted not thinking more about the helicopter. „Please talk to me. Tell me stories from your expedition so I don't have to think about the pain.“ I told her many stories, but it was not easy. I was forbidden to talk about places where I had a good time, where I ate good food, or places where I rested. Joanne preferred to hear the

stories in which somebody suffered as well. I returned in my memory to the car accident in Scotland, to the hike with my mother to the highest mountain in Romania where she twisted her ankle or to the hike to the German mountain Zugspitze, where Björn was so exhausted that I had to take his backpack. It worked! As a result of my stories Joanne had a better mood and bravely continued walking. In the last moment, we managed to catch the bus safely. Mission completed!

The sequel to the story was just pleasant. We booked our accommodation in a cosy hotel in the centre of Kiruna and we enjoyed a pizza with delicious reindeer meat and cranberry sauce. The day ended by falling asleep in our room while looking out the window at the northern lights.

## My tips for the visit to the mountain

- If you have time, enjoy the seven-day hike from Abisko to Nikkaluokta via the Kebnekaise Fjällstation. From there you can climb Kebnekaise. Don't forget the sauna along the way with a jump into freezing water.
- If you have experience with glaciers, head to the top by the so-called eastern route. You will shorten your journey and avoid unnecessary elevation meters. You can also book a guide for the route at Kebnekaise Fjällstation. Call there in advance.
- Do not sleep in the Kebnekaise Fjällstation. It is overpriced and overcrowded. Bring a tent with you.