

Findhorn (not-Stockholm) Tour 2021

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As the train rolled through the August dusk, finally pulling into Inverness station at the end of a very long journey, I looked forward to the week ahead of me. Finally, another orienteering tour! The yearly Stockholm tour, aimed at M/W17s, usually is based at the OK Ravinen club hut near Stockholm, though due to international travel restrictions, this year we were in a village called Findhorn, situated on the beautiful Moray coast and conveniently next to the fabulous areas of Roseisle and Culbin.

Due to a number of late arrivals on our first night (the contents of the minibus tumbling into our dorm at 1am), the first morning was a slower start than usual. We remained at the youth hostel and began the planning for a local event that we were planning, organizing and controlling for Moravian orienteers and other nearby junior tours. The event was to be run on Wednesday evening, so we only had three days to pull it together. But many hands make light work, and there were 18 of us to do the jobs of 3.

That afternoon we headed to Roseisle for some orienteering. A very pretty sand-dune area, with lots of little lumps and bumps for me to sharpen up my contour interpretation on, and a selection of very dark green bits. The green bits were another focus of many of the exercises, forcing you to stick dead on the compass and know precisely what lumps and bumps you were running over, as visibility was non-existent.

Day 2 we headed another sand dune area, Culbin, but rather than taking the minibus, our transport was a little different. From the entrance to the youth hostel, you can look across the river Findhorn and see Culbin forest. To take the minibus would mean driving a long way upriver to cross a bridge then driving back down the over side, so to get to Day 2's training area, we went down to marina and caught the little ferry across.

The actual training was good fun, in an area very similar to the day before. I focused even more on improving my contour interpretation, so spent most of the day using 'brown' maps – maps with only the contours printed on.

At midday we took a lunch break on the beach, spotted a herd of seals, then jumped in the sea and swam with them.

The afternoon was more race-based, taking our technical development from the morning then putting them into practice under pressure in a tournament of head-to-head mini-races.

Day 4 we took the long minibus ride to Glen Affric. Our first challenge was before we even left the car park. The nearest car park to our start area was the other side of a 6-mile-long loch, with no road round, so proper bear-hunt style, we couldn't go round it, couldn't go under it so had to go through it. Pete, our tour leader, pulled out some inflatable kayaks and set us to work inflating them, setting up a pulley system, then crossing the loch.

After the crossing and a long hike through tall bracken, across stony beaches, over fallen trees, we reached our start. We'd already seen what a beautiful, almost untouched wilderness Glen Affric was, and were about to see much more.

It had been the location for WOC long in 2015, and the evening before we'd analyzed various legs, including the absolute beast of the 2.2km longest leg, which would be part of our training today.

There was an 8-leg long course – all long, route-choice type legs, including that legendary 2.2km leg.

We ran as a pair, in co-ordination with another pair that we would meet at each control and discuss which route choice to run, then run them and see which was faster.

It was a huge but rewarding physical and mental challenge. The sweltering heat, rugged terrain, 350m+ climb and complex navigation made it tough. But the views from the hilltop were sublime: curves of open hillside scattered with great rocks, swathes of deep evergreen trees, the loch glittering far below, and the sheer sense of untouched isolation. The whole day was grueling (the Garmin claiming the run burnt 1500 calories) but an insane experience.

The next day was a middle-distance race, which we ran alongside the nearby Not-Gothenburg and SYO tours. While my performance wasn't perfect, I felt my training from the past week coming into place and was pleased with how I did.

We spent the afternoon swimming in a nearby river, then did some group analysis of our runs, alongside GPS tracking on Routegadget and footage filmed while we were running. Then dusk came and we all piled onto the minibus to do what I see as the highlight of the tour.

We returned to Roseisle at nightfall, headtorches on and excitement in our hearts. The 'night fancy dress not-peg peg relay' sounds like a complex event, but the idea is relatively simple. We all start together in a mass start, with the same course on our maps. Running head-to-head as a pack at nighttime, through the lumps and bumps of Roseisle, was exhilarating, but when we all reached the third control, things got interesting.

Stacked at the third control was a number of fancy-dress items (wigs, dresses, scarves, gloves, etc..), a few less than the number of the people running the course. When you reach the control, you scramble for a fancy-dress item, put it on, and continue the course. However, if you don't get a fancy-dress item, you follow a shortcut marked on the map and get a few controls ahead of the other runners.

This furious, head-to-head, torchlit scramble continued throughout the course, pausing only at the spectator control, where we were surprised with having to chug a plastic cup of Irn Bru and eat a painfully bone-dry cracker, before continuing the furious scramble.

The winner was the first one back with the highest number of fancy-dress items. It was an absolute blast.

The final day was a sprint race in Forres. Complete change of pace from the week of forest orienteering, but another absolute blast. We slept that night, grabbed an early morning, then had one final race some distance towards Edinburgh, before driving on through Edinburgh, where I was dropped off at the station, climbed on the train, then began the long ride home.