

LAPP DANCING

KEEN TO BUST A SIDWAYS MOVE? THE SECRETS OF THE PERFECT ICE SLIDE ARE NOW FOR SALE

ACROSS the alien landscape, crop circles radiate outwards, dark tread patterns soiling the pristine snow. In the distance, a lone car looms in and out of view through flurries of powder, its studded tyres punching concentric rings in the lake's frozen surface.

This is the arctic equivalent of Nevada's Area 51: isolated, imposing, hidden from the world. But instead of that site's secret military testing, this location in the Arctic Circle is dedicated to testing still-secret new cars.

The tiny town of Arjeplog in Swedish Lapland redefines 'remote' – more than 8700 lakes, barricaded by seemingly endless snow drifts, ensure its anonymity, while the -30°C temperature freezes out the curious eyes, and lenses, of motoring journo and spy

photographers. Which is precisely why car companies settled on this frozen wilderness as the ideal place to test vehicles in extreme cold.

From such desolate beginnings 30 years ago, cold-weather testing has become a multi-million-dollar concern for the residents of Arjeplog. Each year, some 90 car companies and component suppliers freight in tens of thousands of engineers to do the durability work that ensures cars and their components can withstand a flogging in even the most frigid of environments.

For the 3500 or so permanent residents of the oddly named little town, it's a unique relationship that they work hard to maintain, as even the best bounty for a top-selling spy photo pales against the \$370 million pumped into the town by the auto industry each year.

WORDS SAMANTHA STEVENS PHOTOS NICK WILLIAMS



Author Stevens discovers that circle work in Sweden is the same powerful courting ritual as it is in Australia



Once students master the big drift on four wheels, holding a snow mobile sideways is a walk in the frozen park. Apparently



wheels 113





PEOPLE DO GO STRAIGHT THROUGH, SAYS ÖRJAN, THE ICE GROANING UNDER 1.5 TONNES OF AUDI



With ABS and ESP rigged to be switchable, we regret to report that a number of witches hats were harmed in the making of this story

But while Arjeplog was once a virtual no-go zone for anyone other than vehicle testers or locals, paying members of the public have recently been able to access this unique test centre. And, as the story goes, it's all thanks to a tailgating German tester and a reindeer.

Word is that the frisky deer leapt into the path of a convoy of multi-million-dollar prototypes, causing one of history's most expensive rear-enders. Fearing a repeat, and possibly a visit from OH&S heavies, car makers quickly moved to teach all their visiting personnel the basics of ice driving. And who better to teach visitors the traps for young players than the experienced winter drivers of Arjeplog?

A defensive-driving offensive was launched, and the good burghers of Arjeplog soon discovered that, in addition to the auto industry's training, there was also a tidy dollar to be made teaching ice-driving tricks to the paying public.

Speaking in near-perfect English, despite the small bag of tobacco – known as 'snus' – tucked under his top lip, quietly spoken 30-year-old instructor Örjan Holmström is one such local who has spent his life sliding around the icy extremities of Arjeplog – the last seven as an official VW/Audi test driver.

The Audi A4 2.0-litre turbo quattro wagon he has chosen for a series of handling exercises, designed to test the car's active

and passive safety systems, is standard, save for a handy switch that disables both ABS and ESP, and studded winter tyres, inflated to 42psi to discourage traction. Both bumpers are scarred with the tell-tale tiger stripes of brushes with a witches-hat, giving a fair indication of what I'm in for out on the lake.

"On warm days like this, it is not uncommon for people to go straight through the ice," says Örjan dryly, as our cars slips out onto Lake Hornavan's frozen surface, the ice groaning eerily under 1.5 tonnes of Audi.

The ice is actually 60cm thick, but the mild spring sun and toasty -2°C temperatures are melting the layer of snow that normally provides some grip on its glassy surface.

The deepest lake in Sweden at 221m, and the size of 140 Olympic ice rinks, Lake Hornavan would be an excellent venue for some serious circle work, should the Swedes ever choose to adopt B&S balls as part of their social repertoire. At the lake's centre, but looking like mere specks on its leviathan surface, lie an airstrip and two freshly ploughed, two-kilometre long circuits.

On the airstrip, the morning's first exercise is a basic swerve-and-recover under brakes through a chicane of cones. Whether out of bravery or misguided optimism, Örjan stands by the cones and requests a 70km/h run with traction control and ABS disabled – ideally, without hitting him, or the cones.

It sounds simple enough, but, at just 20km/h, the car is squirming erratically and I'm having difficulty preventing it from spinning. There's no feedback whatsoever through steering or chassis, and I'm virtually a passenger as it glides silently across the ice. There's no grip, seemingly no resistance to the slide, and with no time to react – and no idea what to do, anyway – I cream every cone before lurching to a halt. Örjan smiles and casually continues calling instructions while pulling cones from the beaten fenders.

Having *not* mastered that skill, the next test is a Scandinavian flick, of sorts – another chicane that turns the car right, then sharply left, slapping it into a long, sweeping slide.

"The handbrake is for parking," scoffs Örjan at my suggestion of using it to break the back-end loose. Forget opposite lock, too, he advises, pointing out that it will bring the car back into line too early. Instead, Örjan recommends getting the timing right with the throttle. Remarkably, bang in the middle of a 60km/h four-wheel drift, a smidge of steering feel returns. The ice immediately begins to feel more familiar – vaguely like the powdery dirt of an Aussie backroad, and I begin to sit back and enjoy the slide.

By midday, the sun is bouncing blindingly off the snow walls as Örjan punts us out onto the circuit, calmly talking his way through corners while sliding wildly sideways at 100km/h.



Having mastered the art of sliding an Audi quattro, *not*, Stevens gets to try her hand in a 911. As you would...

Tyres for a snow-go zone

By their very nature, ice tyres are not designed for speed. Standard winter tyres are narrow and inflated high to counteract the lack of heat, and are either deeply grooved or have a light tread punctuated by steel studs to slowly gather grip. Ice racing requires far more stability and speed, so hardcore racers

make their own tyres. Typically, a retread is buffed down, and metal spikes – approximately 23mm in length – are pushed through from the inside, and held by glue and 70 pounds of pressure. Alternatively, holes are drilled into deep-tread tyres and the spikes are glued into place. Best to be well out of range in the event of a blowout...



Yee-haw! Porsche GT3 RS, Swedish ice-racing champion at the wheel, low-grip surface, and not much to hit. Frostbite is a small price to pay...





Left: With hundreds of sharp spikes protruding through the tread, blowouts require Braille, rather than a jack



HOW, WHAT, WHERE...

When: December to April
Stay: Hotel Silverhatten, Lake Hornovan, Arjeplog

Fly: Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) from Stockholm to nearby Arvedjaur Airport

Eat: Reindeer (sorry, Santa)

Arctic Driving School:

One day 'Driving by Kottulinsky' course, one day snowmobiling, return airfares and accommodation in Stockholm and Arjeplog, from \$2970 twin-share

Porsche on Ice: Two-day ice drive, return airfares and accommodation in Stockholm and Arjeplog, from \$7010 twin-share

Info: www.MyPlanet.com

It's a strain to hear him above the staccato pings of ice shrapnel ricocheting off the car's underside. The 2.0-litre turbo is doing its bit as well, the engine buzzing near its rev limiter as the rear wheels lead the fronts into every apex.

We swap seats and the noise inside the car is different now. "Wait, wait, and throttle now!" yells Örjan, as the nose narrowly misses a wall on the first corner.

Snow banks reaching both window sills create an imposing, almost claustrophobic environment, but Örjan points out that they can also be used like a bumper to help straighten the car. As the quattro pinballs through this tunnel of ice, I gradually grow in confidence, gathering speed as the slides get longer and more controlled. The car waltzes from one drift to the next – albeit with all the finesse of an awkward teenager at a school dance.

Örjan's face is impassive. "Another day of this, and you could be a car tester," he says.

Hmm, nice line, but I bet he says that to all the girls...

A Volvo wagon plus trailer emblazoned with Porsche livery arrives. Five-times Swedish ice-racing champion Benny Larsson begins unloading his race-prepped Porsche 911 GT3 RS and 911 Carrera. I'm instantly drawn to the RS, with its malicious-looking 16-inch, metal-spiked ice tyres and smaller Carrera brake package, designed to fit inside these nail bombs.

Before long, Benny is hammering the RS down the circuit straight at 160km/h, talking calmly, pausing only to wrestle the wheel through tighter corners. Just as the RS brakes begin to smoke, he announces it is my turn, and I'm soon burbling out onto the track, thankfully in the less highly strung Carrera. Benny aids my nerves greatly by explaining that this is his daily driver. Terrific.

A patch of treacherous, exposed ice suddenly appears on the track ahead, causing the otherwise unflappable Benny to stop mid-

sentence as the rear-end breaks loose. A mad scramble with wheel and throttle brings the Porsche back from the brink. Nonplussed at my startled Muppet expression, Benny politely resumes his chatter.

Later, in a blinding fog of snow, we turn to leave the lake. I pause to reflect on life as an ice-driver. Four months a year, Örjan, Benny and hundreds more like them defy physics to control the chaos that is cars and ice. You'd really need to savour living on life's freezing edge.

Not five minutes later, I find the edge. Of the road. A patch of black ice snaps the Carrera's back end away and I slip sideways into a snowdrift. Fortunately, the only damage is a dented ego, and the locals enjoy a laugh at my expense before picking myself and the Porsche out of the powder.

"This is where the German testers park their cars," jokes Benny.

Perhaps I do have the makings of a car tester after all... ❄️

I'M INSTANTLY DRAWN TO THE RS, WITH ITS MALICIOUS 16-INCH, METAL-SPIKED ICE TYRES

