

Searching in Sweden for Berries, Herbs and Understanding

For over a decade, Eva Gunnare has been trying to restore people's relationship with nature — by teaching them how to forage.



The haul from a forage in northern Sweden: cloudberry, bilberries and mushrooms.

By **Mélissa Godin**

Photographs by [David B. Torch](#)

- Published Aug. 15, 2023 Updated Aug. 16, 2023

A pot of birch sap simmered on Eva Gunnare's stove. It was an early morning in May in Jokkmokk, a small Swedish town in the Arctic Circle, and outside the snow was melting. On the table sat a plate of cookies made with dried bilberries, a native fruit that Ms. Gunnare had foraged the previous season.

"Most Swedish people eat blueberries imported from abroad," she said, pouring some sap into a small shot glass. "They do not know we have these delicious bilberries in our own backyard."

For over a decade, Ms. Gunnare, a 56-year-old Swedish woman, has been trying to restore people's relationship with nature by teaching them how to forage. Through her lessons on picking wild herbs, identifying edible plants and making dandelion honey, among many others, she aims to help locals and foreign visitors alike better understand nature.

Her approach differs from other tourist operators in the region, who often focus on outdoor expeditions such as trekking or skimobiling. These, Ms. Gunnare believes, do not always help people better understand or respect their environment.

"I don't want people to run through nature," she said. "I want them to crawl."



Eva Gunnare, center, foraging with her niece near her summer home in the village of Mjotrask.

Jokkmokk, with a population of about 3,000 people, attracts domestic and foreign tourists year-round. During winter, tens of thousands of visitors arrive for the [Winter Market](#), a 400-year-old event that celebrates the Sámi, the Indigenous people of northern Scandinavia, Finland and western Russia. Others are drawn by the promise of seeing the northern lights, or to ski and dog sled. In the summer, many tourists come to trek and canoe through national parks.

Part of the region's appeal is its pristine nature. Sometimes called "Europe's last wilderness," it is home to some of the last untouched old-growth forests on the continent.

"People come here to experience something wild and remote, but many people just rush through it," Ms. Gunnare said. "They don't stop to notice the flora and fauna. They don't always see that some of it is not doing too well."

Forests cover about 70 percent of land in Sweden. But primary forests, or old-growth forests, which consist of native tree species that are undisturbed by human activity, have largely been cut down. Now, the country's forests consist mostly of tree plantations used for logging, which can have [devastating environmental impacts](#). These plantations, usually monocultures, are far more vulnerable to disease and natural disasters than old-growth forests. They also store less carbon.

And the problem is only getting worse. Between 2003 and 2019, Sweden's remaining old-growth forests were logged at a rate of [1.4 percent per year](#). If those logging rates continue, the last remaining old-growth forests would be lost in about 50 years, according to some estimates.



Muddus National Park, in northern Sweden, is home to an intact old-growth forest.

Many tourists who travel through the region, however, can't tell an old-growth forest and a tree plantation apart. "I took a journalist up here a few years ago and asked him what he saw," said Nila Jannok, a local Sámi reindeer herder. "Where he saw forest, I saw destruction."

This is precisely the knowledge gap Ms. Gunnare seeks to address. Many of the edible plants she forages for can only grow in primary forests, which harbor larger numbers of species, and where plants and fungi, such as mushrooms, can thrive. By showing tourists the abundance of what can grow in a primary forest, she teaches them why biodiversity is necessary to sustain a healthy environment.



*Eva Gunnare handles a mushroom known locally as "tegelsopp," an orange-capped mushroom that grows near birch trees.
Credit...David B. Torch for The New York Times*



A small handful of bilberries, which are native to the region.



A reindeer crossing a road near Jokkmokk.

Originally from Stockholm, Ms. Gunnare moved north in 1987 to Kvikkjokk, a village about 75 miles from Jokkmokk, to work at a hiking lodge. She married a Sámi herder, and together they raised their child in Jokkmokk. Over the years, Ms. Gunnare worked various jobs in tourism. But in 2009, she felt a calling to engage with tourists, and nature, differently.

“It’s wonderful to hike or ski through this land,” she said. “But to really know it, you have to understand its flora and fauna, to see how all of it is connected.”

In 2009, Gunnare enrolled in a culinary class at the Sámi Education Center in Jokkmokk. She describes the course as one of the biggest turning points in her life. In the summer, when the Arctic sky was bright, she would stay out foraging until midnight and come home covered in mosquito bites, with splinters in her fingers and toes. “I really felt this would be my way to get people to care about nature,” she said.

Two years later, she started her own company, the [Essense of Lapland](#), and she has been giving foraging tours ever since.



A traditional Sami turf hut in Jokkmokk.

In Sweden, foraging has long been an important culinary and cultural practice. For the Sámi, foraged foods — including herbs, roots and lingonberries — are at the heart of their diet. In the rest of the country, non-Indigenous Swedes have been foraging since at least 1867, when a famine forced many to [use lichen to make bark bread](#).

Over the past two decades, however, interest in foraging globally has [grown significantly](#). In the mid-2000s, foraging saw a revival with the rise of New Nordic cuisine, inspired by the famous Danish restaurant [Noma](#), which puts local, seasonal and foraged ingredients at the heart of dishes. In recent years, a wave of [foraging influencers](#) has emerged; on TikTok, the hashtag [#foragingtiktok](#) has over 160 million views. Foraging educators say they have seen an [explosion of interest](#) in their work.

But even amid this renewed interest in foraging, many people remain disconnected from the production of their food. [One survey](#) found that 41 percent of Americans never or rarely seek information about where or how their food was grown. As people become more urbanized, increasingly eating nonseasonal and imported food, their [connection with nature is fraying](#).

“So many of us have become estranged from our own flora and fauna,” Ms. Gunnare said. “We’ve come to fear it.”



The result of a forage: a fresh mushroom omelet made with local eggs.

Reconnecting people with nature — and, in turn, raising their awareness about the forces that threaten it — is what motivates Ms. Gunnare’s work. “I’m not trying to turn everyone into a forager like me,” she explained. “I’m trying to get them to understand it, to develop a relationship with it.”

“It’s a simple but powerful thought,” she said, adding: “The more people know their environment, the more inclined they will feel to protect it.”