

Björkliden Arctic Mountain Marathon (BAMM)

19th-20th August 2011

By Duncan Archer (partner: Jim Mann)

<http://www.bamm.nu/>

It all started with winning elite on the LAMM this year with Jim. First prize was very generously sponsored by the LAMM and BAMM organisers: a free entry to the BAMM in Northern Sweden, including flights, car hire from airport, hotel and food the night before and after. With the exhilaration of winning the LAMM in our heads how could we refuse!

So, after three flights and a day's travelling we landed at Kiruna, the nearest airport. The hire car came with a welcome letter from the organisers saying: "Watch out for reindeer on the road!" We also noticed a large crack across the bottom of the windscreen – was this?! Björkliden was 110km up the (only) road, and we had little reason to linger in Kiruna, whose main industry is iron ore mining and the most striking feature an enormous slag heap. The town is apparently subsiding from mining activity, and they are taking the radical step of moving the whole town to a new location. Well there is certainly no shortage of space up there!

The night before the race was occupied with buying meths for the stove (couldn't fly with it, but fortunately the sports shop had some), a pasta feast, and packing race sacks. The mandatory kit had a few variations: No head-torch as it never really got dark. But a sleeping mat was required "of 5mm thickness and of length from neck to bottom" – Jim was ready with an old foam mat and a pair of scissors, wondering what was the least he could get away with. There was also the curious requirement for "long underpants to a dry change (sic)" and much discussion ensued about what this might mean! Terra Nova had kindly given us a Laser Elite 20L sack for the race, into which it all fitted, and at only 232g it was great for an elite MM, and has everything you need and none of the features you don't.

There are a few differences in the BAMM to surprise the UK mountain marathon enthusiast:

- The first day is a mass start. Not to everyone's taste, but it did allow us to have a good battle with the eventual winners, swapping the lead several times on the first day.
- There is a generous prize for the first team in each category to the first control, 2km away and 300m uphill – what a way to get the muscles warmed up! After 100m we were about 10th, but as the flurry of sprint starters faded we steadily pulled our way through the field, although never quite caught the first team.
- The map is 1:50,000 with 20m contours (1:40,000 with 10m contours is more normal for UK MMs). This means quite a wealth of detail you might expect is missing on the map.
- The BAMM is held in a similar place every year, always finishing at the Björkliden hotel, although sometimes competitors are bussed away to the start on day 1 to get some more variety. Local knowledge probably helps a bit if you come several times.
- The event is relatively small, limited to 200 teams. There are three courses: 30km / 50km / 70km (over two days). A nice touch is that on the 30km the organisers transport your tent and sleeping bags to the overnight camp, which allows a gentler introduction for novices – needless to say it was obvious at camp who was doing the 30km from the size of their tent. We were of course in for the full 70km, complete with Jim's Terra Nova Laser Ultra 1 – only 500g and a "cosy" night guaranteed!
- The organisers had hired a helicopter to film the start and leaders on the first two legs, which was a novel (if slightly windy) experience. They had been filming for a 5-minute slot on Swedish national TV after the weekend, but sadly Sweden had done sufficiently well in the World Orienteering Championships that week and stole their spot.

The terrain mostly offered good running: short grass (tundra), although quite rocky in places, more so on the tops. There were several climbs each day, a couple of them very steep, and one in particular

requiring some mild rock climbing (Jim took the lead up this, if I hadn't been quite tired at this point I might have been mildly concerned that either a large rock, or Jim himself, might come hurtling back down past me). The rocks also served to trip up tired legs, and we both took a couple of tumbles. Jim's worst cracked the housing of his compass, although it still spun, just round in circles without any damping liquid, but we reckoned that was good enough to get through the kit check. On my worst I banged my hip rather heavily – it is amazing how the adrenaline makes you forget something like that during the competition, but 30 mins after finishing and I was a hobbling wreck (and developed a comical walking style through airports on the journey home).

We saw a variety of wildlife including half a dozen reindeer, a hare, and a stoat- / weasel-like creature that seemed particular adept at hopping over rocks.

Day 1 went well, 2nd and only 8 minutes down on the eventually leaders, who we'd last seem pulling away up the final big hill of the day, with the stronger of their pair carrying both bags and little we could do to keep up. The overnight camp was comfortable, once we'd found a flat spot (it paid to run well and arrive early!), with the only worrying moment being the small number of matches Jim had brought. Oh well, the rules only said you needed enough fuel to boil a litre of water at the end, not anything to light it with! On day 2 we started well, and, with the mass start going off 15 minutes before the hour of chasing starters, we passed a lot of teams on the first climb (one of them exclaiming: "You run so fast – do you not like our mountains!"). However on both days the navigation was harder than I'd expected, partly due to the map (see above), and partly because we had many controls on hill tops and lakes at 1200m – 1400m, and the visibility was ~100m in the cloud above about 1000m on both days. On control 3 we made a nav error in the mist and lost ~10 mins. The next three controls we kept plugging away up and down some big hills, but then lost ~20 mins on control 7, with lots of confusion and hesitation in the mist, senses saying go one way and compass saying go the other, small lakes and large cliffs that weren't on the map etc. Eventually a sigh of relief when it was clear we were climbing up to the hill-top control at last, and the penultimate control was down the hill and would surely be out of the mist – no such luck as the cloud had come down further and another ~5 mins lost. However, a quick blast down to the last control and the finish, and we were welcomed by cheers and cowbells as the second team home.

Was it worth it? Well for prizes it probably was 😊: a Primus Eta Solo stove each, and 500 SEK (~£50) to spend in the sports shop. But more than that it was a great experience, a fantastic place to run, and the organisers were extremely friendly and welcoming. However it wasn't over yet – there was still the evening "banquet" to go! Perhaps not quite as much filling food as one might want after a big race, but there was plenty of atmosphere and chatter, lots of standing up, presentations, talking in Swedish, applauding organisers / volunteers etc., Q&A for winners (in Swedish), more cheering, more stuff in Swedish we didn't understand etc. Finally the "Durham Fell Runners" were invited to the front for a special prize (or was it some ridicule?). The organiser proceeded to do a yodelling / singing thing, as if calling in a herd of reindeer, and culminating in presenting us with a leg of dried deer meat – apparently this "fifth leg" should ensure we never came second again. Just what we needed.

Many thanks to the LAMM organisers for contributing towards our flights, and the BAMB organisers for paying for everything else, and being so welcoming. I would thoroughly recommend the BAMB to anyone from the UK seeking a bit of a different MM experience in a totally wild place.

Photos:

- First control on day 1:
http://www.bamm.nu/archive/2011/bilder/kontroll_control_1/index-Pages/Image2.html
- Halfway round day 2, still smiling:
http://www.bamm.nu/archive/2011/bilder/control_46_56_day2/index-Pages/Image9.html
- Finish on day 2 (check out that blood on Jim's leg...):
http://www.bamm.nu/archive/2011/bilder/finishpics_malbilder/index-Pages/Image52.html