

20 years of Rajalta Rajalle Hiihto

It was the autumn of 1983. The new issue of an outdoor magazine wrote about a border-to-border ski event being planned. Although we have skied as long as I can remember, a trip this long sounded like quite a challenge. What about giving it a try. At first, Väinö thought it to be impossible but with a little persuasion, he agreed to give it a try. Luckily we had a lot of snow in the south-west Finland during the winter 83-84 and we were able to train enough. We booked our holidays for March and grandma came over to look after the children.

Early on Sunday, March 10, 1983, we stood on the bus station in Kuusamo. There were 22 brave skiers ready to go. The bus took us to the eastern border and our group started climbing up the slope of Saunavaara. The first year we had one German with us, called Lutz. He joined us in several years and in the summer of 1987 some skiers visited him while hiking in Germany.

The first 10 years the route was a bit shorter than nowadays, 370 km and went through Kuusamo, Posio, Ranua, Simo, Keminmaa, Kemi and Tornio. Our little group skied persistently the whole trip in a single file behind the slowest skier, after all, hadn't we come here to experience all of it together. It was joyful to reach our destination! Never before had we skied such long distances and seven days in a row on top of that. Great, we had to do it again. Väinö and I were very pleased with all the arrangements and were very happy to have met such a wonderful group of skiers. We decided to go again the next year.

It was March 1985 and we were back on the bus station in Kuusamo, only this time there were no more than 16 skiers. The Germans, Lutz and Manfred, had joined us again. Kauko Salmela from Ranua acted as our guide, since he had taken part already the previous year.

The future of RR looked grim, it was no use to organise such a big event for only a handful of people. Tuomo, the sports secretary of Keminmaa, said that if there were no more people the following year, we should take a helicopter over Keminmaa, since it was no use making tracks. The skiers who were there for the second time asked the organisers to give the event one more chance. Each of us promised to lure at least one new participant for the following year. We were promised that there would be RR in the year 1986.

The third RR took place from March 23 to March 29, 1986. There were 59 participants. Hooray, the event would go on. Teppuli and Simo, among others, joined us that year. The year 1986 was one of the most difficult when it came to the weather. Stormy winds, sleet so thick you couldn't see the tips of your skis, the track disappeared in seconds, snow caking at the base of the skis. Especially the longest day of the week, 65km was a very stormy one with sleet pouring down, the last ones reached the destination, Ylikärppä school in Simo at about nine o'clock. They had to ski the rest of the way with the lights of a snowmobile illuminating their way. When we reached Tornio, it was raining hard. We skied the last day all together. It was nice to reach our destination together with the whole group. This was the wish of the organisers, but for a skier it is a little bit agonising to ski in a single file for 70 km with the slowest skier leading the way.

So, the event went on, The amount of participants was constantly around 50 people. Camaraderie and good spirit followed us during all our experiences. In the 80s, the event was not yet very well known outside Finland. In 1988 we were joined by Joan from the US and a French journalist who wrote a story about RR in the magazine "La Neige". This year

there was a possibility to spend a night camping. We sat around a log fire and slept in army tents. That was a wonderful experience!

The 90s brought new participants from all over the world. Jean-Pierre from France was one of the newcomers, as well as some Italians, Germans, Austrians and one Japanese. The amount of participants kept growing. The 8th RR in 1991 had almost a hundred participants, of which 36 were from abroad and they skied as a group of their own, which continued for the next few years.

In the 11th RR in 1994, the route was changed and at the same time it became longer. We did not go to Posio anymore, but skied from Kuusamo to Taivalkoski, Pudasjärvi and Ranua. The latter part of the route remained basically the same. In our opinion, the old route was more beautiful with more variation in the scenery, it went over the fjälls Riisitunturi and Karitunturi. The new route was much more level. We also used to have more energy to do things in the evenings, for example we often had a dance to loosen up our tired muscles, or we went out to see the local sights. On the other hand, the longer route offered more physical challenges.

The 13th RR in 1996 was the first one where the skiers were divided into two groups. The first group started on Saturday and the second on Sunday. It was nice for the skiers to have smaller groups. The size was not a problem on the track, but sometimes it was a bit crowded in the sauna and sleeping quarters. We always did manage to settle everything amiably and everybody was able to get washed and have a mattress to sleep on, sometimes in a hotel, sometimes in a classroom with sweaty clothes drying above the sleepers' heads.

The popularity of RR kept growing year after year. The amount of participants increased and more skiers from North-America joined us. In 1998 the Slovenians discovered RR and since then there has always been a large group of them with us. 2001 was the first year when three groups started their journey from east to west. This year we have again reached a new record even though it is not possible to include everybody who wants to participate.

In the beginning there were ideas of other RR events, such as cycling, flying, canoeing, car race, snow mobile safari and so on. RR-cycling has been organised on few years. We did not take part in it, but quite a few of the skiers did and enjoyed. Also ultralento ? was organised one year.

Why are we here for the 20th time? We were hooked from the first time. The event offers physical challenges and outdoor life for a week. The arrangements have always been commendable. The other skiers have been the best crowd one could hope for. We have made many friends in here. We keep in contact all through the year and also go and visit each other. We have received plenty of exercise tips and information on events all over the world. What stays in the memory are the difficult days and bad weather, I can look back with pride and say that I made through even that. It has been interesting to meet skiers from different countries and get to know them. It has given me a boost to keep up my language skills and even learn a new language. RR is a tradition for us and we hope to keep in shape in future years and be able to attend this event for many more times.

Leila and Väinö Voutilainen RR3, 21. time in 2004