Day 5: Following the long day, the organizers smartly put the shortest (44km). The weather was perfect – crystal clear and calm – and the topography flat, which made for a mellow excursion, though my terrible waxing and tiredness from Day 4’s big trek still made things a bit challenging. Fortunately, there were many interesting things to see along the way: a lunch stop where we roasted sausages around a fire, an old school and reindeer farm, and gorgeous colors and scenery. I took a bunch of good pictures.

We stayed in an old country school house, which only added to the ambiance of the day. It was located on a river and the excellent sauna hut was very near to the river bank. I so liked this hut that in addition to taking sauna there, I snuck out and slept there alone after lights out. I must admit, however, that the loud snoring of several of my 20 roommates that night had something to do with this sly move.
Sausage roasting at lunch; 13 time Rajalta Rajalle skier and Frenchman Jen-Paul Klein takes a bite.

The sauna hut, where I took sauna and slept on day/night 5.
Day 6: Today’s ski was also flat, but it was rolling and the track was in poor shape. Still, the snow stayed hard all day, making for good double-poling. My ability to double-pole has increased a great deal over the week. I think that muscles that I developed 10+ years ago when I was doing a lot of kayaking have been resurrected.

There was a bit of a race to the finish since the first 44 finishers got to get bused to a hotel, while the others stayed at a rustic school house. I bought in to the idea that going to the hotel was a good thing, and of course, I also wanted to see if I could be among the first 44, but it turned out that the hotel was of an institutional nature – picture the “hotel” in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest – and the food was the worst of the week. In hindsight, I would have stayed at the school house, as I heard that it was quite a unique place, but I can’t complain.
Day 7: The weather this morning was disheartening: wet snow mixed with rain. The terrain in the first two thirds was rolling and the snow was slush, though my waxing was fine, and so I was able to make good progress through the clammy cold.

The warm weather has meant a logistical challenge for the organizers as many of the river and lake crossings of past years are no longer possible. Today this meant that a bus trip in the middle and end of today’s ski were necessary, though the total drop in kilometers for the whole trip wasn’t much. We have skied about 400km, or 250 miles, in these 7 days.

The last 20km after lunch and into the finish were pleasant. The sun came out, the terrain was gently rolling and beautiful, and I hooked up with an American and a couple of Canadians that have become friends over the past week.

Our hotel tonight is the best yet, and since Tornio is on the Swedish border, I was able to quickly walk over to its sister city in Sweden, Haparanda. The final evening information session included skits by each country. We combined with Canada, singing a variation on the American tune “We come from a home, where the buffalo roam …”

In Haparanda, Sweden trying to tell a Swedish speaking local to include all of the sign in the picture.

“Found Art” against the hotel wall on the last night.
Last Impressions: This has been a really great trip. I am so glad that I did it. The physical challenge was big, and because of that the ski itself was rewarding, however even better, and perhaps facilitated by the physical challenge, were the interactions with other skiers from all over the world. I will, in particular, recall fondly getting to know the three other Americans: Sally and Steve Swenson and Ken Kimball – my roommate most nights, a group of three Dutch fellows: Vendel van de Wijnand, Bert Verstraaten, and Eric van Remortel, the three Canadians: Jamie Sterling and Peter and Silke Gumplinger, a life-loving Italian fellow Stefano Truzzi, and two Finnish guys: Seppo Hämenniemi and Olavi Tikka, that spoke little-to-no English, but with whom I skied with a good deal of the week – much can be communicated without words. I also love what is Finnish about the Rajalta Rajalle: the food, the sauna, the crazy-for-skiing Finnish participants, and the beautiful, if monotonous, northern countryside of the route. I hope someday to come back, which is the truest sign that it was a good trip.
Not-So-Old Timers: I would estimate that the average age of the participants was somewhere in the 50’s. In fact, I think that there were less than five skiers in their twenties, and at 33, I was among the youngest several. More interestingly, some of the most competitive and fit individuals were in their 60’s. In fact, although I am in good shape, ski reasonably well, and go hard, I had no hope of keeping up with the fastest 60+ year old men, who were at or near the front all week, and I was never as fast as 62 year old American Sally Swenson. And a number of good stories came from Canadian Jamie Sterling, who raced for first-to-the-finish each day, battling it out at the end with the two fastest 60+ year olds: a former member of the Italian x-country national team and a stern looking German skiing machine. The Rajalta Rajalle has taught me that the 60’s don’t have to be old.