

# Rules For The Road When Travelling In Northern Europe

By Darcy Tyrrell

The Heks' home is far from Alta. *Everything* in Northern Norway is.

The witch's house is a long drive on a forest road. It goes through the mountains that host many of the less favourable forest beings. The witch had been gracious enough to provide a set of rules for the road. The rules were easy enough to remember; it was following them that would prove more of an issue.

The small car in my driveway sighs and putters as I twist the key into the ignition. As I leave the city, I reach habitually for the map I keep in the passenger's seat, before remembering it lies abandoned in the kitchen.

Rule 1: "Memorize your route. Your map can and will lie."

I turn onto the side road and head due north - as per the Heks' vague instructions.

Rule 2: "Take the safest roads." There is no safe way to travel for the most part. My fate is in the hands of the gods.

On the side-road, a bridge barely wide enough for my small car appears in my path.

Rule 27: "Bridges are sacred places. Do not disrespect them."

A car-sized stone lies to the side of the entrance. I stop the car before the foot of the bridge and close my eyes. Mountain trolls act as guardians to bridges and cairns that litter Europe from Denmark to Svalbard and Iceland to Russia.

A shifting noise to my right breaks my focus and the harsh snap of a tree limb near the large boulder on the road spooks me. I open my eyes again. A hunchbacked mountain troll stares at me with piercing blue eyes. The troll looks towards the bridge and then to me. The blue eyes, staring right into my very being blink - permission to pass is granted. I cross the bridge slowly so as not to draw any attention from the mountains and speed back up once I'm on quieter ground. The next few minutes are eerily silent.

Three children with unnaturally long fingers appear and begin to walk in stride with my car. I am sailing along at 100 km/h. My eyes focus ahead of me, and I do my best to ignore them. No real children live here, I know, but the creatures don't make themselves easy to miss. One knocks on the driver's side window, asking with a sheepish smile for a ride in archaic sounding Norwegian. "*En tur?*" I do not even entertain the thought of letting them in. The children are lies, *falskebarn*, not real. Rule 29: "There are no children out here, only false ones."

My foot slams the gas pedal. The *falske barn* run off to find a different meal. They laugh as they get farther away like it is funny that they will stay hungry.

The road winds ahead. I breathe deeply through my nose to steady my heart. Rule 20: "Stay calm."

I steal a look back to the bridge, which is no longer there. In its place is a stretch of road like every other. A tall pine tree has long since fallen across the road and began to rot. Rule 6: "Borders shift."

I consider myself lucky that the borders shifted now instead of earlier. However, the road ahead does not resemble the road that was there before, either. Perhaps Rule 6 does not apply, but rather Rule 3: "Mountain passes shift between our world and another - do not leave your car when you are crossing a mountain pass." I am not too close to the foot of the mountains, but I would be approaching them soon enough. I push on along the gravel road.

Even from this distance, I can hear a loud moan fill the air from the other side of the mountain. Giants are walking through the sinkholes and bulges of the terrain on the other side of the range.

Eventually, a paved road twists ahead. I take the turn a bit too quickly, and my bag slides along the back seat. Finally, I am on a safer, paved road. I sigh and take in the protective barriers around the highway. A building comes into view. Even though I am on a highway, some rules still apply.

The building, a rest stop, is a quaint Tudor house with a gaping doorway. It has a picket fence outlining a pristine lawn and garden. Light spills out from the building into the cloudy air and illuminates the ground. Rule 9: "You may eat at rest stops but leave as soon as possible. If there are no other guests there, leave immediately." I am tempted to go, but I must not keep the Heks waiting.

I take a deep breath and continue on the road. The wind howls along the side of the car. Rule 18: "The wind will bite you. Cover up." Winter winds in Scandinavia have the bite of *Fenrir* himself.

I blast the heat and adjust my thick beanie around my head.

To the side of the barrier, there is a cluster of houses. One house seems to creep onto the road. Uncommon, but there is a rule that matches: Rule 21: "Never approach old houses." This house wasn't too old, but rules are not to be taken lightly.

I press the brakes and go around the house on the gravel. The other side of the house does not match the rest of the highway. I see my eyebrow scrunched in the rearview mirror. This setting resembles nothing I have seen on my journeys in all of Europe. There is no more road— only an endless orchard.

An orchard is not a highway, evidently. I step out of my car and turn around, looking for what lies behind me. The house is present, but not the highway that I came from.

Rule 30: "If you suddenly get lost, stay very still."

I freeze; fear comes back with the force of a typhoon.

And there she is.

My fate is in the hands of the gods.

*The End*

## Rules For The Road When Travelling In Northern Europe

Memorize your route. Your map can and will lie.

Take the safest route.

Mountain passes shift between our world and another - do not leave your car when you are crossing a mountain pass.

If you see something you believe to be a bear, do not photograph it.

The snow does strange things to our eyes.

Borders shift.

Do not speak to anyone you meet further than 1 kilometre from the nearest building.

Not everything that appears to be human is.

You may eat at rest stops but leave as soon as possible. If there are no other guests there, leave immediately.

Don't listen to birdsongs for too long - they will start to tell you things you'd rather not hear.

There are no shortcuts.

Something is always watching you, but it is indifferent to your existence.

The things beneath the soil would rather stay undisturbed. Don't dig.

Bring a mirror and a clear head.

Leave all religious items at home. They will make a scent trail.

There is a reason we fear wolves, but it isn't the one you think.

Do not touch scissors on the ground. Ever.

The wind will bite you. Cover up.

The longer you spend in the woods, the stranger the air gets.

Stay calm.

Never approach old houses.

If there is mist on the ground, do not be afraid.

Windmills are further away than they seem.

Don't look into lakes.

Some farms don't always exist. Don't worry if you can't find it on your return trip.

Don't drink slow-running river water. If you do, there will invariably be a dead animal upstream.

Bridges are sacred places. Do not disrespect them.

Avoid wetlands.

There are no children out here, only false ones.

If you suddenly get lost, stay very still.