

# The Magic of Lapland

MELINDA MURPHY and family go searching for the Northern Lights – and Santa! – in an epic adventure in Finland.

“Various displays of lights can be seen in the sky roughly 200 nights a year.”



“M ommy, do you think this is it? Will we find Santa now?”

My nine-year-old daughter’s voice was intense, full of hope. She’d been crying only minutes before, disappointed she hadn’t yet glimpsed the man in the big red suit, the reason we’d travelled all the way to Lapland. We were in a sledge (a sleigh of sorts on skis), being pulled by a snowmobile through untouched snow. It was 5pm, pitch black outside.

“Maybe, honey. Let’s hope. But if we don’t find him, we will still have had an amazing trip to Finland, yes?”

And we truly had experienced a few astounding days. The trip to *Inari*, the far northern part of Lapland which borders Norway and Russia, had been a trip of bucket-list items for the whole family.

Meeting reindeer? Check. Dog sledding? Check. Eating in an igloo? Check. Seeing the Northern Lights. Double check.

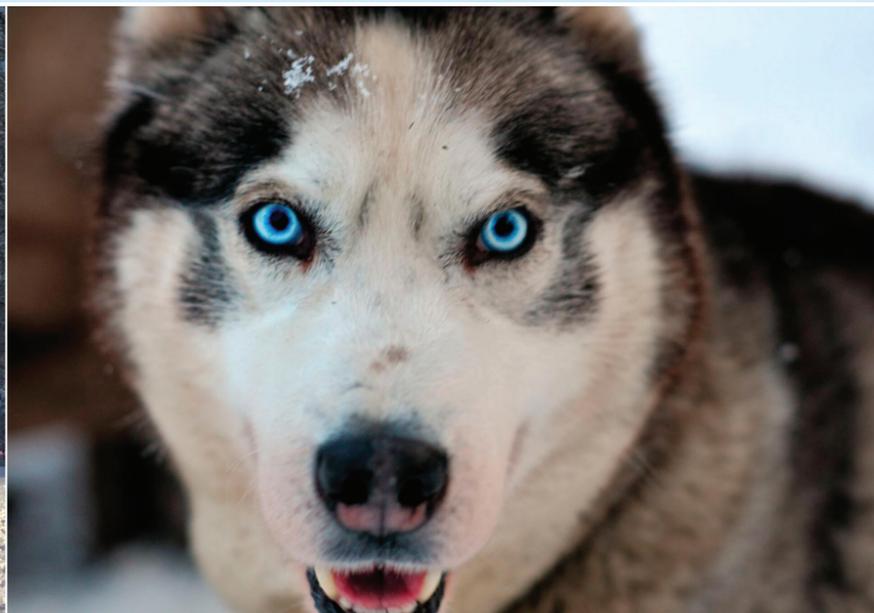
### A remote retreat

Our trip started at the aptly named **Wilderness Hotel Nellim**, one of four hotels in a boutique chain. The hotel is 300km north of the Arctic Circle and just 10km from the Russian border, a 1.5-hour drive from Ivalo Airport, the northernmost airport in Europe. There’s something special about truly being in the middle of nowhere. Ours was a cosy cabin, complete with fireplace and sauna, but the hotel also has bubble rooms and glass *kotas* (Finnish-style teepees), perfect for spotting the Northern Lights (aurora borealis).

After a bountiful Christmas feast of potato casserole, turkey, ham, salted fish and salmon (which we devoured at every meal), we were fitted with thermal coveralls, helmets and boots, something we did with each tour company before every activity on our trip. Those suits were lifesavers and kept us surprisingly toasty. We then piled onto the back of a sledge and skimmed along the edge of frozen **Lake Inari**, the frosty wind whipping our faces numb. It was cold – and exhilarating.

At the aurora camp, our guide built two fires, one inside the small wooden *kota* and one outside in the snow. There were too many clouds to see the lights, but the kids had the time of their lives in the snow, warmed by hot chocolate and warm loganberry juice, a Finnish tradition. My son also learned the importance of keeping your gloves on, and how to warm frozen fingers over a fire. Admittedly disappointed yet happy, we headed back to the hotel after two frigid, exotic hours.

Waking at 4.30am the next morning (the only time I’ve ever been thankful for jet lag), we were



treated to the Northern Lights magically swirling above our cabin. They weren’t the colourful ones I’d seen in the media, but rather white wisps dancing among more stars than I can ever remember seeing, filling the entire sky. Pure enchantment.

The next day, we got our first up-close-and-personal experience with reindeer, feeding the gentle giants who tickled us even through our thick gloves. The local reindeer farmer taught us lots, including how to lasso them. The hotel offers many such adventures including ice fishing, dog sledding and more, one reason so many families come back year after year to celebrate Christmas.

We then headed off to our next adventure, further south in Saariselkä. We drove during the brightest part of the day, the sky glowing an incredible pastel pink, a colour I’ve never seen in nature. This colour changed constantly, too: sometimes a gentle yellow, other times, white with silver strands, and always kissing the sparkling, snow-covered trees.

### Chasing the aurora

We checked into the brand spanning new **Star Arctic Hotel**, a family-run resort built at the highest spot above Saariselkä. I loved our room complete with a fantastic bed in the loft, heated floors and an expansive window overlooking the village. The mountaintop resort also has rooms with glass ceilings built for Northern Light viewing. The upscale Star Arctic has a modern feel, yet retains that cosy, ski lodge aura with a great restaurant, lovely sauna and a desk that can arrange tours. Its luxury was the perfect respite from the cold and the buffets were a great way to refuel. Walking in the door frozen to the bone, I always felt like I was home.

Down in the village, we made traditional Finnish cookies before our kids tried driving real snow mobiles. My seven-year-old son proclaimed it the best day of his life. We retreated into the truly beautiful **Ice Bar & Restaurant**, a giant igloo with a long bar, tables, chairs and more, made out of incredibly thick ice with lights built into the structure. We sat on reindeer hides, ate our warm cookies and sipped more hot lingonberry juice in the surreal room. I imagined I was Anna from Disney’s *Frozen*, feasting in my very own ice palace.

Next, **Northern Lights Village** took us on a bus safari to hunt for the aurora. While searching in a sledge was more adventuresome, there’s something to be said for being warm until you get there. We drove 45 minutes to a small frozen body of water known as **Money Lake** so we could have a clear view, without any light pollution from the town. It was an incredibly cold, clear night, the perfect conditions for light-viewing. As we climbed off the bus, we caught our first colourful threads. *Wow!* A green streak lit up the horizon. It didn’t last long, but long enough for everybody to go wild with excitement. Our guide showed me how to set my camera and I tried my best to capture the magical sky.

We stayed for two hours, treated to various displays of lights that can be seen roughly 200 nights a year. Some were green

to the naked eye, others white, but none were the mythical sky I'd imagined. Turns out, the massive light displays happen only about five times a year and are so bright that you can read a book under them. Still, getting to see what we did was worth every shiver in my happy but frozen body.

The next morning, we tried tobogganing, a winter sport Finns take to a whole new level – and distance. My kids zoomed ahead, riding with the instructors down the 1.5km slope while my husband and I each guided our own sled, faces filling with icy snow whenever we tried to slow down. I haven't had as much fun in years! Later, we tried our hand at cross-country skiing while our kids attempted downhill. **Ski Saariselkä**, the northernmost ski resort in Europe, is the perfect place to learn to ski. It was high season, yet the slope wasn't a bit crowded. I felt like a highfalutin millionaire with enough money to rent the slope all to myself.



We also did a little shopping in town, picking up Christmas-related items and some yummy licorice, a popular Finnish treat. My favourite purchase? Some gnomes, little felt creatures that can be spotted all over the country. We also went to the **Holiday Club**, to check out the Angry Birds Activity Park (which my kids loved), play in the club's pool, and hang out in the sauna, another important part of the local culture. After being so cold all day, the heat relaxes your over-shivered muscles and puts a little life back into your body.

One evening, we had dinner with the Sami (local indigenous people numbering less than 10,000 in Finland) through **Joiku-Kotsamo Safaris**. Inari is the centre of Finnish Sami culture so I was honoured to get a glimpse of their world. In a giant *kota*, they served a yummy traditional flame-fried salmon, the fish nailed to a board and roasted over an open flame. As many Sami are traditionally reindeer herders, the meal also included a reindeer sleigh ride through some eerily quiet woods. The reindeer pulling the sleigh was overly friendly, rubbing his face against mine for most of the ride – I think he was in love. I know I was – my friend said it was love at first sniff!

### Where's Santa?

Of course, the real reason we went to Lapland was to find Father Christmas. Rumour has it, that St Nick has several hideouts where you might spot him in the weeks before Christmas, most in the more touristy Rovaniemi to the south. We chose **Santa's Lapland** outside of Saariselkä, the largest of the British tour providers, which books all-inclusive trips from various parts of the UK. It's the perfect spot for young Santa hunters.

As luck had it, the day we went looking for Santa was



the coldest: minus 26 degrees Celsius with wind chill. Holy iceberg! There are no words for that kind of cold, which was unusual even for Finland – average December temperatures are minus 6. Oddly, I felt lucky to experience weather like that and my kids didn't even seem to notice. Bundled in their warm suits, they were too busy having fun sledding, driving a mini Ski-Doo, skiing and playing snow hockey. The elves put on a cute show in a giant igloo and, in a small cabin, some other elves told us interesting facts about reindeer. (Did you know reindeers' noses warm the air before it reaches their lungs?). Thoroughly chilled and sporting mere human noses, we warmed up with our included pasta dinner, hot drinks and cookies.

Our family's favourite part of the day – well, almost favourite – was dog sledding. After a quick lesson, my husband stood on the back of the sled and drove the huskies while the rest of us hunkered down, watching our amazing team of animals running through the pitch-black day.

It had been dark for a couple of hours and it was about time to go. My daughter was in tears over missing Santa just as a sledge driver pulled up.



"I heard a noise in the woods. I'm scared to go by myself. Will you come with me?"

After a few minutes in the backwoods, we saw a sleigh on its side, presents strewn everywhere. My son screamed, "Daddy, look! That must belong to Santa!" We soon began to hear some funny sounds. Around a bend, we pulled up alongside some elves, who were speaking with the silliest voices ever.

"Oh Mommy! Do you think Santa is here?"

Sparkles and Crumbles led the way to a small, quaint wooden cabin. We knocked and an elf slowly opened the door to a warm room, piled high with wrapped packages.

There, in the corner, was Santa Claus.

"Hello, Maisie, Hello, Hudson. How was your trip from Singapore?"

As my children will tell you, only the real Santa would know their names without asking, right? He knew all about Zirkle, our Elf on the Shelf, and even had their Christmas wish lists tucked into his hat. Wide-eyed and excited, the kids talked to him non-stop. He gave them each a stuffed reindeer and told them to be good and he'd visit on Christmas morning.

While so much of our four days in Lapland was truly magical, nothing compares to seeing their faces when they met the real Santa, a memory our family will forever treasure.

The kids loved it, but the truth? – I may have loved it more. Those few minutes of pure holiday joy for my children were my own personal best Christmas gift – ever! *e*

### FACT FILE

FinnAir flies direct to Helsinki (12 hours), and it's a further 1.5 hours to Ivalo Airport; or you can book an all-inclusive Santa package from various cities in the UK. Hotels and activities at Christmastime sell out one to two years in advance, so book soon.

**Wilderness Hotel Nellim:** nellim.fi/destinations/nellim-wilderness-hotel

**Star Arctic Hotel:** stararctichotel.com

**Northern Lights Village:** northernlightsvillage.com

**Ski Saariselkä:** skisaariselka.com

**Holiday Club Resorts:** holidayclubresorts.com/fi

**Joiku-Kotsamo Safaris:** joikukotsamo.fi/eng

**Santa's Lapland:** santaslapland.com