

WINTER NIGHTS AND MAGICAL LIGHTS

STEPHANIE DRAX PACKS EXTRA LAYERS FOR AN ILLUMINATING ARCTIC ADVENTURE IN EUROPE'S LAST WILDERNESS

Before I had ever set foot in Swedish Lapland, the name conjured up ideas of snow, stars and the spectral wonder of the *aurora borealis*. During the 90-minute flight north from Stockholm to the region's capital, Lulea, I am faced with another defining characteristic: space. Located within the Arctic Circle, Swedish Lapland is Europe's largest remaining wilderness, a natural wonderland of mountains, dense forests, river valleys and the Lulea archipelago of 1,300 coastal islands, all of which supports, on average, just two people per square kilometre. It's as if I have carved a window into another world - a Philip Pullman fantasy tale ripe with adventure - where now, in February, winter has set in.

I am met at Lulea airport by Fredrik Broman, a photographer who set up camp - the Aurora Safari Camp - here in 2013. He takes me to meet our story's first character: Lars Eriksson, a local Sami elder who lives in Flakaberg village. The Sami are the only indigenous people in the European Union, and their cultural region, Sapmi, spreads across the borders of Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia. Lars is wearing traditional *gakti* - a black woollen jacket that flares into a skirt with a crimson and yellow trim, and a pair of leather trousers. His pointy boots are made from reindeer hide. He greets us jovially, chuckling from behind a long, white beard.

Behind his pine log cabin on the edge of a forest, Lars introduces me to his reindeer herd. The small, soft creatures respond immediately to his call and nibble lichen from his hand. Reindeer are the main Sami source of income, reared for their meat and fur. We sit in a cosy hut for a *fika* - teatime - of cloudberry cake and warm cinnamon rolls. Lars drinks tea from a wooden cup he keeps on his belt and recounts stories of a life shepherding herds from mountains to forests, sweeping across the snow on his skis of silver birch. The Sami philosophy is to live with nature and leave no trace. Driving through a snowy landscape that is peppered with evergreens and with elegant red clapboard houses, a visitor can only concur. The enchanting



ABOVE The *aurora borealis*, also known as the northern lights, are named after a Roman goddess. They're most prolific at night during winter, in the Lapland areas of Sweden, Finland and Norway

surroundings command such respect. Fredrik tells me about the region's photogenic seasons, from the gentle illumination of a midnight summer sun to the riot of colour in the blaze of autumn. It's the inky winter nights, though, that provide the perfect canvas for the northern lights.

The final approach to Aurora Safari Camp is by snug snowmobile sleigh, a ride that skims us across the frozen Rane River. Tucked into the trees on the edge of a lake are five *lavvu* tents (the Sami version of tipis) and an open fire with seating covered in reindeer hides. As the sun surrenders to the Milky Way, we sit amid tall tree trunks, drink hot lingonberry juice and cold Champagne, and snack on cured meat and cheese. After a dinner of seared salmon and homemade ice cream in the lounge tent, we put on an extra layer of clothing and steal down to the ice, hopeful for an aurora display.

As if on cue, a sprinkling of pale dust appears to curl above the horizon. Fredrik takes a photograph that instantly reveals a lurid green streak across the sky. 'Good timing,' he says. 'It's starting now.' Charged particles from

the sun, borne on the back of solar winds, are colliding with gaseous particles in the earth's atmosphere and here, close to magnetic north, the performances are often powerful. Languidly, the dust takes on discernible shapes - curtains,



ribbons and a musical clef. Hours later, in my toasty warm tent, I sleep soundly, having ticked off one of the world's greatest phenomena.

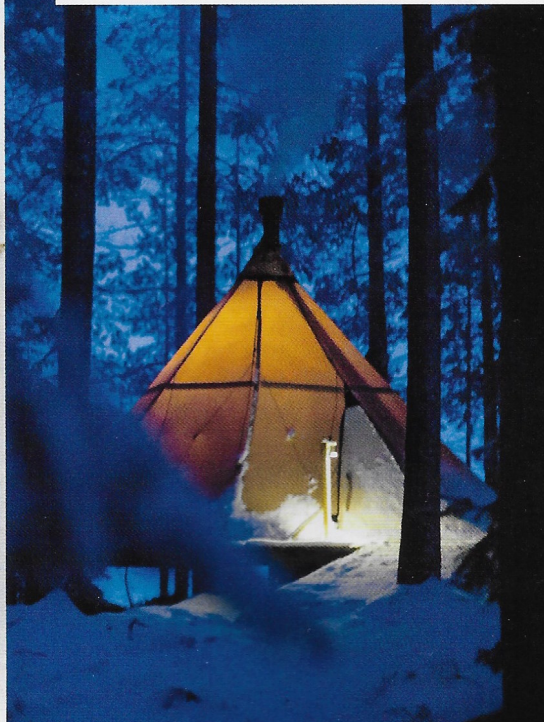
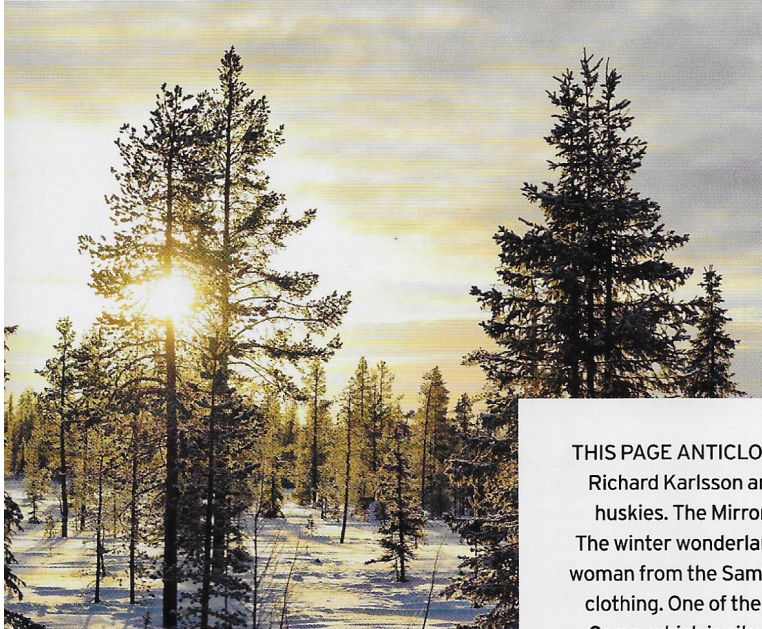
The next day is crisp and bright. After we have breakfasted on Swedish bacon and scrambled eggs, our wintry escapades include ice sculpting, snowmobile driving and riding on bikes with fat wheels specially designed for snow. As the sun begins to dip, I'm scooted by snowmobile sleigh for the next chapter of my adventure.

In a forest clearing stands Richard Karlsson, a bushy-bearded dog sledder. His team of 10 stunning Siberian huskies are harnessed in pairs ahead of a sled. Richard stands at the back, a spiked metal brake between his feet to keep the dogs, who are raring to go, in place. Brake released, Richard calls 'Yip!' and the dogs tear ahead with tremendous energy - these blue-eyed creatures can apparently run for up to 14 hours without tiring. It's an exhilarating rush as we speed through birch forests glowing golden in the sunset. Richard calls out to me that we're 'Arctic sailing'.

The final chapter of this Lapland tale takes me to the Treehotel. I check into the UFO room and gawp as the retractable staircase slowly descends to allow me into my silver spaceship suspended in the trees. Every room here - be it the Bird's Nest or the Mirrorcube - inspires wonder and delight. The charming owner, Kent Lindvall, accepts the Treehotel's enduring popularity with some bemusement.

Before I depart, Kent takes me by snowmobile to the top of a mountain for a delectable lunch of Arctic char, a cold-water fish, cooked on an open fire. The epic view is the side order I've come to expect from Swedish Lapland: food for the soul from the ultimate storybook for all ages □

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Richard Karlsson and his team of 10 Siberian huskies. The Mirrorcube room at Treehotel. The winter wonderland landscape of Lapland. A woman from the Sami people wearing traditional clothing. One of the tents in the Aurora Safari Camp, which is situated on the edge of a lake



ways and means

Stephanie travelled as a guest of Original Travel (020-7978 7333; originaltravel.co.uk). A four-night trip to Swedish Lapland costs from £2,150 per person, including two nights at the Aurora Safari Camp, full-board, and two nights in a Treehotel tree house, half-board, including flights, transfers and activities (dog sledding, snowshoeing and snowmobiling).