

Travel Etc



IT'S SNOWTIME!



Helen Lederer wanted snowflakes, plural. She wanted real snow, crunchy snow, she wanted White Christmas. She went to Lapland

It's that time of year again. And even though I'm still capable of going tingly at the descendant bit in *Hark the Herald...*, I also feel there has to be more to Christmas than eating mince pies when you don't even like them and worrying about who's going to whom on the big day. This year, I decided it was time to Harness My Dream. I was

Christmas, but this was in the century before the clip-on, racy snowsuits and land of the slick snowmobile. How I remember those mornings of being laced into my boots, laden down with 10-ton skis and a shouty cross teacher who spoke only German and told us off a lot. If it hadn't been for the bribe of a slice of Sachertorte at the end of each

of being pre-cider to, well, post-cider, really. If you live in a cold place there have to be perks, and having covered the drink, food and sex clause, the sowner is definitely the other Finnish pleasure. Every Finnish house has one and it is perfectly normal, apparently, to sit in a group, in your birthday suit, and meditate while cleansing your body at

going to trade suburbia (and the prospect of at least one itty-bitty family huff - well, it wouldn't be a proper Christmas, otherwise, would it?) for Lapland.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

Last year I think I spotted one tiny apology of a snowflake making a pathetic attempt to nuzzle the garage roof before giving up the ghost just like on all Christmases past. This year I want real, I want crunch, I want carpets of the stuff. A white Narnia (like in *The Lion, The Witch and the Ikea flatpack*) where cars and other polluting agents would be banned from staining nature's purest and most virgin offering. Reindeer urine, very possibly, but cars? Definitely a no-no. With the help of a Finnair ticket to Kittilä in Lapland via Helsinki, we were off to the sexy ski resort of Levi, pronounced Chevy and not much to do with jeans.

Nothing prepared us for the whack of cold air that hit us as we descended the steps at Kittilä airport. My fault. I thought the emails from our wonderful hosts at Travel Experience warning us to bring thermal underwear were probably a cheerful joke to get us in the mood for Christmas. Not so. It was like arriving in Malaga in August, only in reverse. And we were amazed at how cold and dark everything was.

But having only two or three hours a day of sunlight actually does make you look on the bright side. Literally. Every available tree and bush is adorned with twinkly lights and every hotel and restaurant boasts a roaring fire with hundreds of tiny candles balanced in every crevice. There are about four hotels in Levi and lots of surrounding holiday cottages which also smile back at you in a snug and sparkly way which makes it a very warm and shiny experience all round. So much so that I wasn't surprised to learn that with all this abundance of darkness and ensuing cosiness, your typical Finn is best known for being able to "drink, eat and have sex a lot". Most agreeable, if one isn't watching one's waistline. Anyway, it's dark most of time, which must be a plus in such circumstances.

Just like the ones I used to know

As a child I used to go skiing with my family at

Levi. I swear I'd have broken my own leg to get myself winched away from it all.

We spent the first night in Levi admiring the European women's championships finals on a beautifully floodlit mountainside and started getting somewhat anxious about our own skiing abilities. Luckily, a Finn woman won the thing, which made everyone cheer, sing and get very drunk at the post-ski celebrity party. We heard about it afterwards from our lovely guide Jussi (pronounced pussy, but let's just leave it there) who is the head tourist chap in Levi and in on everything exciting. Apparently, Linda Bravo (violinist-cum-model in a flimsy tank-top), a few members of Bomfunk MCs (that well-known Finnish hip hop band), as well as the Finnish version of Desmond Lynam were there. If it wasn't for the fact that we were tucking into a feast of reindeer sausages, glow-fired salmon and Arctic cloudberries with pancakes washed down with cloudberry liqueur at the time, I might have felt quite jealous. As it was, I just felt stuffed.

We needn't have worried about the skiing. We got up with the lark - not the sun, obviously - and met Pekka, the kind and caring variety of ski instructor who taught us both cross-country and the going-down type of skiing. Levi has 19 ski lifts, one gondolier and 45 ski slopes, which makes for a very credible ski resort - not your Ab-Fabby Chamonix, but full of mountains, reindeer and scrummy food. Which has to be better than a poke in the eye with your ski stick on that dry slope off the A3.

I decided I much preferred the going-down type of skiing, as opposed to huffing, puffing and skidding my way across the land without even getting very far for my troubles. However, the reward for such exertion came in the form of our very own sauna (pronounced sownner) to sit in. I have to say, being able to spend a few hours sequestered away in our own special wooden cabin after an exhausting day of doing active things for a change came as a gorgeous surprise. It was here that my daughter discovered the joys of cider (a full crate being thoughtfully laid outside). I hope she remembers that moment one day: that this was the turning point

the same time. What that says about society I wouldn't dare surmise, except that the Finns can't be as fat, wobbly or hairy as us Brits or else they'd use towels, wouldn't they?

And then came the rub. It was suggested by our kind hosts Steve and Merja that, having got ourselves all cosy and warm, we should then hurl ourselves outside and roll around in the cold carpet of freshly fallen snow for some unknown reason, before descending downwards into an icy tub of specially placed water embedded into a frozen lake.

"Nah, you're joking," I said.

"No," they said. (They weren't.)

"Oh," I said.

Once the others had retired to a safe distance, I shyly hoisted my now very warm body out of its wooden cocoon and placed it on to the freezing snow outside. I did this only once, and rather speedily, I have to confess. My daughter did it three times and the spouse did it - well, let's just say it was a demi-attempt. Toes only.

Where the treetops glisten

And not just the treetops. If you race along the forests in a snowmobile, your ears, nose and throat will be glistening so much you might combust. Had I known we were traversing a lake at the time I might have glistened even more, but as everyone else was being whisked along with the thrill, who was I to worry? The lake was frozen after all - as, indeed, were we.

Our snowmobile teacher was called Sakke, and he very kindly allowed me to have a go at driving myself. However, because I managed to slow down our procession to a rather stately speed of 6km per hour, as opposed to the previous exhilarating 60, it was soon suggested I take a back seat again and leave the driving to those who liked to go fast. Everyone else, in other words.

Sakke didn't seem to mind my child waving her arms about in a slightly annoying way while she sat behind him. In fact, he actually let her have a go at driving herself which proved very popular. "WOW" was all we could hear from her as we sped along behind, trying to keep up as we glistened gamely.

And children listen

Can I just say, the "accidentally-on-purpose" discovery of "Channel 65" in the hotel room,



showing trailers of a pornographic nature and ... well, best not, really.

To hear sleigh bells in the snow

Not only did we hear sleigh bells, we also heard the puffing of reindeer breath and, with our noses pressed against the window, just like in one of those old Hayley Mills films, we saw Santa arrive on his sledge in the snow with his helper bearing personal gifts for us. We had to pinch ourselves, but not too hard because we were having supper at The Skylight private house and it would have appeared rude. Paivikki Palosaaki, a sort of Finnish Shirley Conran figure, owns this and our aptly named Crazy Reindeer Hotel as well as most other places in Levi.

Paivikki's vision of promoting natural Finnish hospitality has made her a top Lappish dignitary and deservedly so. We were served a platter of all manner of fine fishy things and dips followed by those Arctic cloudberrries again, this time whipped up into a frenzy of cream so yummy I had four helpings served by a gorgeous Japanese man and a Finnish cook in national costume. We were taught how to make ginger biscuits while the men decorated the tree, complete with the traditional ceremony of having to de-tangle the fairy lights.

And if the shock of having a chat with Santa by a roaring fire wasn't enough, we were also joined by Niiles Joarni, a Sami reindeer farmer who wanted to share some Sami folk songs and stories with us. I could see it was to be a very reindeer-orientated evening. For a start, Niiles's trousers were a gorgeous tan leather - obviously rendered from a reindeer friend in the



I stood up to get a better view and peered into the smoke, and sure enough, a man coughed an unmistakably male cough. We shrank back in horror and quickly backed ourselves out, derriere first.

Mind you, the man was starkers as well. Not that I looked, mind.

May your days be merry and bright

The best bit of merriness for me occurred when I found myself in a husky park, inside a wooden tepee with a roaring fire watching the smoke go up through the roof. (By the way, the reason Finnish people are short, I was told, is so they can duck under the smoke comfortably and not get smoked out, which was interesting, but didn't explain why all the Finnish people I met were quite tall.)

We were listening to Reijo Jaaskelainen tell us about being a husky-driver champion and how he had bought a husky who was half-wolf half-husky called Oscar, and how Oscar had worked on several films already, as well as providing him with offspring of a quarter wolf and three-quarter husky... We were then placed inside a sledge and wrapped in reindeer fur and taken on a hurtling tour of the countryside pulled by a dozen yapping yet thankfully obedient huskies. Every so often, their master, who was perched behind, said "Oikä!", which seemed to do the trick and stop us getting tan-

past - and hidden in his hold was some magic (reindeer) ingredient which had to be painted on us all in turn in the shape of horns. This was to empower us, and I certainly wasn't going to argue with that. Apparently, reindeer bone marrow is used in all sorts of clinics for ... you know ... and we certainly had a full-on and empowered night after he left. Yes, I am convinced of the power of reindeer, no doubt about it.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

On the second morning in Levi, I woke up laughing. I realised I'd actually had a dream about telling jokes which made a nice change from the more routine angst-ridden ones. So it seems that snow, reindeer charms and a couple of ski lessons were proving even more powerful than I could have, well, dreamed of.

With every Christmas card I write

I had to write to the folks back home to tell them about the time my daughter and I went in into the steam room in the Levi spa and leisure centre in the women's section. The door displayed a very visual instruction of a female swimming costume that was crossed out. Swimwear is totally verboten, we thought. So as we sat in the steam room steaming away, my daughter suddenly whispered: "Mum, there's a man in here."

gled up in hedgerow or very deep snow - which made me especially merry.

In April Reijo takes groups to camp out in the countryside and because there is still snow on the ground, the huskies ferry you about from place to place. The peace of the lake and the fact you don't have walk too far means, well, I'm looking into it already.

And may all your Christmases be white

Yup. It's Lapland every time. Mind you, don't miss your connection at Helsinki. We had to run to catch our plane, which meant we couldn't stock up on cloudberry liqueur, which is why I've got to go back again now, damn ...

All I want for Christmas ... :

Helen gets her kit on, opposite page, for some cold-weather action with Hannah, right
TONY STONE, RRP

