



THE LAND OF SANTA



A journey to Finnish Lapland reveals a world of reindeer, husky dogs and snow mobiles intertwined with cell phones, internet businesses and rye bread Big Macs. But most importantly, Lapland is where

Santa Claus lives. BY THOMAS WILMER

The snow is falling lightly as I arrive in the Santa's Village outer parking lot. It is the first formal day of the Christmas season, and Santa is scheduled to appear shortly on the upper balcony of his log-framed headquarters building. Before long I hear a loud commotion. I catch the tail end of a low slung, late model Lincoln Continental, complete with Santa pennants and Santa logos emblazoned on the sides and rear windows. The Lincoln's horn toots repeatedly as more than 1,000 children gleefully cheer and clap in approval.

But wait. I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's back up.

In early October I was invited by the Finnish government to attend the grand opening of the new Santa Park attraction located within an underground cave in Lapland. I readily accepted (how could I resist). A few weeks later I was airborne and within hours was peering through the porthole of a Finnair 757 as it approached the Finnish Seaport of Oulu.

A mid-journey stop off between Helsinki and our final destination, Oulu is a full fledged city of 50,000. Amazingly enough, it is probably more wired and internetized than any comparably sized American city, and it boasts numerous

high-tech businesses. In fact, Finland, the home of Nokia, is the most "connected" country in the world and has the highest per capita use of cell phones. Oulu is no exception.

As the airship makes its final downwind approach, I receive my first low-level peek into the northern realm of Finland and the southern fringe of the land of the Lapps. We skim over the Gulf of Bothnia, with the Swedish coastline a short hop across the sea to the west. Except where an ice breaker has carved a pathway of jumbled, jagged blocks of crust, the semi-translucent, ice cube-like surface of the water is sealed up for the winter. The texture and hues of the undisturbed aqueous freeze are reminiscent of an alligator-skin wallet or mottled, hammered metal.

INTERLUDE IN OULU

The Oulu people deplane and soon we are airborne



PHOTO: THOMAS WILMER

again. As we gain altitude over the city, a second look over the community reveals details missed before. I notice a downtown core of perfectly gridded business blocks, with a towering, elegant Lutheran cathedral smack in the heart of the town. Clusters of stark, modern, multi-storied apartment houses are set near the snow-covered shoreline of the Oulujoki river. The structures look so rugged and functional that they serve as visual metaphors for the people who reside within – Northland denizens dependent upon an ample dose of survival genes to thrive in this land of long, cold and dark winters.

HARMONIC CONVERGENCE WITH THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

The Finnair flight turns inland and heads northward to the Arctic Circle town of Rovaniemi (regional population 57,000). After touching down, the aircraft comes to a halt on the tarmac, and I am once again pleasantly impressed – the terminal is a sophisticated, cutting-edge modern edifice.

As the airport taxis studded snow tires buzz against the ice covered macadam, I inhale the scene outside. The world of Southern Lapland is graced with endless forests of conifers and elegant white birch coated with a blast of snow from the latest storm. It is cold, but not uncomfortably so. Armed with long underwear, thermal insulated boots and an Arctic parka, I remain warm for the entire trip.

I had presumed that the realm of the Arctic Circle would be a land of endless, bleak and desolate tundra with the largest town a mere collection of huts and crude structures – no way. Once in town I discover that the city hall, the library and the Lappia-House were designed by the internationally renowned Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. The residential homes are so enticing that they beckon one to knock on the door and ask if it might be possible to go in and just relax by the fireplace for a spell.

As the cab wends its way through town, I continue to take in the view as BMWs, Volvos and SUVs zoom by.

THE MOMENT OF THE MISTY BLUE

Many people assume that the sun never rises in the midst of winter here. It does . . . sort of. It is pitch black at 8 a.m. and is still pitch black at 9, but around 10 or

10:30 a.m. the sun peeks up and remains hesitantly close to the horizon, like a prolonged sunset, until just after 2 in the afternoon.

This is the time of day that Laplanders refer to as "The Moment of the Misty Blue" – a most apt descriptor, as daytime is so clipped and minimal that it often seems like one dreamy, prolonged moment.

LIFE GOES ON

Over the years, numerous Finns have confessed that when winter comes, it gets so cold and dark that they hibernate in their homes and curl up on the couch with a book. The mid-winter world I find in Lapland is quite the opposite. Locals truly make the best of their winter wonderland. The streets are busy long into the evening with shoppers and strollers. Rovaniemi is home to a large multi-story indoor mall, numerous upscale shops, and the world's northern-most McDonald's that serves excellent rye bread Big Macs.

From downtown, the nearby lights of the Ounasvaara Lapland Sports Centre on the far side of the river Kemijoki can be seen. There are Olympic-sized ski jumps, extensive downhill and cross country ski trails (all lit for night time adventuring) and a monstrous, indoor soccer and general sports pavilion. Snowmobiles are as common as motorcycles at a Hell's Angels convention, and avid Laplanders do not hesitate to invest in top-of-the-line machines that cost as much or more than a new car.

Local golf course buried in snow? No problem. Around the beginning of December the Rovaniemi Ice-Golf Course opens for the season on the frozen Kemijoki river.

Swimming? Again, no problem. More than 200 active members of the winter swim club religiously chunk out a hole in the ice and jump on in. As I said, Finns are endowed with an ample dose of survival genes and even have a name for their legendary tenaciousness: *sisu*. Of course, one of the first things they do at the beginning of the season is to tow a handy, heated changing/warming room onto the ice.

Tourism, during both winter and summer, has evolved into one of the region's primary engines of employment. Visitors come from all over the globe, more so in the summer, but an astonishing number arrive specifically to savor the wintertime activities offered by adventure companies such as Lapland Safaris.



Finland boasts the highest per capita use of cell phones in the world.

