

Head to Lapland for a trip that is truly wondrous

This winter is the best in a decade to view the Northern Lights in Finnish Lapland. Gabriel O'Rorke was there to see it unfold.

WE ARE due to land in Kittilä in 20 minutes. There are light winds and it's a little bit chilly on the ground with temperatures of minus 38," the captain says as we descend on Finnish Lapland.

Many people know Lapland as the home of Father Christmas, and some might recognize its snowy scenes from the BBC's *Frozen Planet* series. But the reason Lapland is on most people's radars this year is because of the Aurora Borealis, or the Northern Lights, which peak every eleven years and 2012 happened to be one of those years. I decided to head for the Arctic Circle and try my luck with the lights – and, if no luck should come, try my hand at sub-degree sledding, skiing and skidoing.

As the wheels hit the runway, a world of white came into view. Everything from the runway (yes, a snowy runway – don't tell Heathrow, they'll probably shut down at the mere thought of it) to the trees, and even the air glittered white.

A feeling of excitement, coupled with a touch of fear, spread through the cabin. What does minus 38 degrees feel like? Can we possibly have brought enough clothes? Are we sure humans can survive in these temperatures?

Coughing was the first bodily reaction as I stepped outside and the onslaught of cold air hit the back of my throat. Then, in the small walk from the plane to arrivals, the inside of my nose froze solid, tempting me to pinch it to see if it would crack.

Lapland covers Russia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, and temperatures can drop as low as minus 50, but more commonly they lurk between minus 10 and minus 20. As luck would have it, our trip coincided with the coldest week of the winter, so life soon became about putting on plenty of clothes and eating plenty of food.

Full body thermals, leggings, wooly jumpers, saloppettes and ski jackets no longer cut the mustard. For these sorts of climes, a "onesie" (soon to be known as a "fat suit") is essential, and I wasn't to be seen without mine, night or day.

"Everyone asks what's the best time to see the northern lights," says Lara, a guide for Inghams, as we drive from Kittilä Airport to Äkäshölen Hotel. "But really it's any time

between 8pm and 2am."

Our first night is a little overcast so we opt for an early night before reindeer safaris and skiing the following day.

The next morning, wrapped up like mummies and stocked up on homemade waffles, we head to Samin Porotila (Sami's reindeer farm) in the commune of Kolari in Venejärvi, home to Sami Tiensuu and his very smiley wife, Marjut. "Sami's family have been reindeer herders forever", says Marjut, "they have lived on this plot for six generations."

The indigenous Arctic people are nomadic reindeer herders known as Sami. They number approximately 7,000 in Finnish Lapland, and their ancestral lands spread throughout the expansive territory.

Sadly, the native Sami language is endangered. "It's coming back now though," says Marjut. "There's this funny gap where grandparents speak and so do children, but the generations in between just speak Finnish."

Piling into sleds of two, we tuck ourselves under blankets and set off into the snow. My reindeer certainly lives up to his name, Lightning, and we hurtle through the snowy woods.

Due to the unusually cold weather, we return within fifteen minutes and retreated inside to thaw off our frozen eyelashes and defrost our insides with a mug of hot cloudberry juice.

"It's very impolite to ask a herder how big his herd is," Lara says. "It's like asking someone how big their bank account is. But there is one way of telling: the bigger the women's necklaces, the more reindeer her husband has."

Our next stop is Ylläs ski resort, which has 18 lifts and 34 pistes. The Lappish hills here are rounded rather than jagged so there's a range of slopes, with plenty for beginners as well as advanced skiers.

The afternoon flies past and after stopping to warm up in Finland's highest restaurant (700m), we ski down in the dark.

The full moon lights up the night sky, and we make out a faint green line splashed across the sky. Our first sighting; there were no swirls or movement but these are the Northern Lights.

The next day we move south to Levi stopping en route at Finland's



☞ The full moon lights up the night sky and a faint green line splashed across the sky

biggest ice village, Lainio, which has 25 rooms sculpted out of ice. Deciding not to sleep in minus five degrees, we continue to Levitunturi hotel where our bedrooms have private saunas.

The Finns are big on saunas, and no wonder living in these temperatures. After a day of snowshoeing, husky sledding and skiing we head for supper at Taivaanvalkeat restaurant in Köngäs (15 minutes from Levi). But before eating we try out a traditional smoke sauna.

The beer and heat must have gone to our heads because we opted for the full Finnish experience, running through the snow and plunging through a hole cut in the ice covering the river.

The water (scarily) didn't feel too cold – that is, compared to the minus 30-degree air outside. The most

NEED TO KNOW

Lapland

■ Part of the Arctic Circle, Lapland spans Russia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland

■ Official language in Finnish Lapland is Finnish

■ Currency: Euro

■ Weather: lowest temperature -51C/ highest 30C

Levi

■ 15km from Kittilä airport

■ 45 slopes (three black, 23 red, 18 blue and one green)

■ Highest peak 531m, vertical drop 325m

■ 230km cross-country tracks

■ 886km snowmobile tracks

■ 60km hiking routes

painful part was running back through the snow to the sauna.

We each did it twice, and, feeling very much alive, retreated to the main house for a typical Lappish supper of local salmon followed by reindeer steak with Lappish potatoes, topped off with cloudberry liquor and cheesecake.

Our last night was spent outside Levi in glass (luckily not ice) igloos. The family-run Golden Crown Igloos stand in a line of four overlooking a snow-covered valley; they are cosy and stylish with orthopedic beds so you can enjoy the views in ultimate comfort.

Sadly, the Northern Lights didn't come out to bid us adieu, but looking up at the starry sky framed with snow-laden trees was magical enough. And surely this means I have to come back...



WHAT TO DO IN LAPLAND

- Husky sledding
- Reindeer safaris
- Snowmobile safaris
- Downhill and cross-country skiing
- Snow-shoeing
- Finnish sauna and ice bathing
- Visit or stay at an ice hotel
- Go to the Icium ice sculpture park
- Try to spot the Northern Lights



While the Northern Lights continue to be a big attraction for tourists travelling to Finland, there's a lot of other things to do too. Snowmobile safaris (top right) and reindeer safaris (right) are very popular



Inghams feature the resorts of Levi, Saariselkä and Ylläs in Lapland and offer a selection of three and four star hotels, cabins, chalets and apartments. In Ylläs, stay at the four star Äkä's Alp Apartments for seven nights on a self catering basis from £509 per person, based on four sharing, including return flights from Gatwick to Kittilä and resort transfers. Regional flights are also available from Manchester and Birmingham (for an extra £19).

Reindeer Mini-Safari
Adult: £25, Child: £19
Reindeer Super-Safari
Adult: £35, Child: £25

Ski pack items can be pre-booked:

Six day local area pass
Adult £120, Child £80
Six day adult ski & boot hire £70
Six day adult snowboard & boot hire £100
Six day adult cross country skis & boots £86
Three days ski/snowboard school (1.5 hr/day)
Adult £77, Child £67
Seven day thermal suit hire:
Adult £29, Child £29
Seven day thermal boot hire: Adult £19
Child £19

In Levi, stay at the four star Levitunturi Spa Hotel for seven nights, with prices starting from £729 per person, based on a half board basis and includes flights from Gatwick to Kittilä and resort transfers. Regional flights are also available from Manchester and Birmingham (for an extra £19).

Ski pack items can be pre-booked:

6 day local area pass
Adult £115, Child £77
6 day adult ski & boot hire £79
6 day adult snowboard & boot hire £109
3 days ski school (1.5 hr/ day)
Adult & Child £75
3 days snowboard school (1.5 hr/day)
Adult & Child £75
3 days cross country (1.5 hr/day)
Adult & Child £75

Glass Igloos

Stay for a night in the Glass Igloo from £179 per person based on two sharing. This includes breakfast and transfer from Levi. Book online at ingham.co.uk or contact: 020 8780 4447

A selection of excursions can be pre-booked

Husky Mini Safari
Adult £35, Child £19
Husky Super Safari
Adult £65, Child £35
Snowmobile Safari — Single
Adult £75
Snowmobile Safari — Double
Adult £49, Child £15

For more information on Finland visit www.visitfinland.com

Inghams Ski Reservations:
020 8780 4447 or book online at www.ingham.co.uk

Prices based on 2012/13

Champagne, food and rolling countryside with Lexus Experiences



The GS was designed with all-weather drive making it ideal for long distance travel

IT TURNS out that weekend breaks don't have to involve a 6am flight from Stansted to an airport that's fifty miles from your destination. Nah, eschew the crowded plane for a roomy executive car and 36 hours out of London can involve a decadent journey across two countries that takes in good food, even better alcohol and gorgeous countryside. But to really enjoy the trip, you need the right car – and that's where Lexus comes in.

The carmaker has clocked that while its cars perform brilliantly in the city (the Lexus GS I was driving was great fun, with astonishing acceleration) you can't enjoy their full capabilities while creeping along clogged London streets. Instead they've teamed up with a variety of high-end brands to create experiences that let you test the cars to the limit while also enjoying some much-needed luxury.

In the case of our trip, this means swilling vintage champagne in Reims, the French city at the hub of the drink's production. After heading through the Eurotunnel, we hit the blissfully empty French autoroute that zips all the way to Champagne. Just a few hours' pacy drive from London, you find yourself in a completely different world of vineyards and sleepy villages. Reims itself was ravaged by two world wars but the 14th century cathedral – where generations of French kings were crowned – remains standing, surrounded by a picturesque city centre.

Leaving the car behind, we head off to the imposing 18th-century headquarters of Ruinart – the world's oldest champagne house, founded in 1729, and with whom Lexus has

a longstanding partnership. Every single drop of the company's fizz is still produced on this original site, matured in deep cellars carved out of an ancient chalk mine so secure that hundreds of locals sheltered down here during World War II.

We're guided by cellar master Frédéric Panaïotis, a Champagne native who recalls how his grandparents would knock back the local sparkling wine at the end of a long day in much the same way that a City worker might slip out for a quick post-shift Peroni. But today Frédéric has something special for us – a highly prized 1989 vintage, of which only a few dozen magnums survive. We do our best to make it even more endangered. A glowing amber colour, the champagne's fizz has entirely subsided, while its flavours have mellowed and deepened: with notes of tobacco and burnt sugar, this is closer to a brandy than any champagne I've ever tasted.

Champagne is not, at first glance, the most picturesque area of France. But perseverance pays off and the next morning, we make for the back roads, where we discover a beguiling landscape of rolling hills and quiet villages. The Lexus proves just as adept at manoeuvring narrow lanes and hairpin bends as it is at tearing up the autoroute.

Fitting such an ambitious itinerary into less than two full days would usually be a recipe for disaster. It turns out the trick is to make the journey itself just as much fun as the destination.

For more information or to book your place on a Lexus Experience visit lexus-experiences.co.uk

James Waterson