

## Finnish Lapland: Sweating in the Arctic

By Margie Goldsmith

I am sitting sweating droplets the size of plums in a wood-burning Finnish sauna in Lapland. It's well over 110 degrees Fahrenheit inside this little hut, though outside, it's around 10 degrees.

This is not surprising, considering I am 186 miles north of the Arctic Circle. I'd swear at Leena, my Finnish friend who has dragged me into this hot-hole, but Finns consider the sauna a sacred place, and you're not supposed to use foul language.



The author at a reindeer farm in Lapland  
- photos by Margie Goldsmith

Saunas are so important to them that they have a yearly sauna bathing contest in which the competitor has to leave the sauna without outside help.

Considering some of the other competitions the Finns have – a mobile-phone throwing contest in Nokia, a wife-carrying contest in eastern Finland, and a mosquito swatting contest in Lapland -- the idea of competing to heat the meat isn't so unusual.

### Broiled Alive

But I'm not being warmed, I'm being broiled alive because Leena keeps throwing water on the hot stones. It's so steamy I can't see my toes. Any second now, I'll melt like the Wicked Witch.

It's customary to jump into water or roll in the snow as part of the sauna experience. Leena has already jumped into the lake once and plans to do it again, but I have no intention of doing that.

Wearing only your bathing suit, a small towel, and a pair of woolen socks, you're supposed to run down a path through the snow to a washing-machine-sized hole cut into the frozen ice, drop the towel, climb down a ladder, submerge yourself to your neck, then scramble back up and race to the sauna to get warm again.

It doesn't sound like fun, but the Finns must know something I don't because there are more than two million saunas in Finland, at least one per household. Even the Parliament building has a sauna because, says Leena, they need it to relax.

So far, in two of the hotels where I've stayed, there was a private sauna in my room. I don't have one here at the Kakslauttanen Igloo Village because my room is a heated glass igloo.

It doesn't matter, though, because the resort's smoke sauna is one of the largest in Lapland; and besides, being with other overcooked people is much more fun, even though right now I feel like a wilted hotdog and am about the same color.



**Glass igloos at Kakslauttanen Igloo Village**



**Riding in a reindeer sledge**

### **Riding a Kick Sledge**

Speaking of fun, here in the Igloo Village, you take your own suitcase up a big hill to your igloo by kick sledge, a sled with runners, only bigger.

This morning, after I dropped off my suitcase, I took the sledge and flew down the hill like a kid, screaming at the top of my lungs. I couldn't steer but it didn't matter because I only crashed into soft snow piles.

Then I tested the kick sledge on the trails, kicking with one foot just like a scooter. When I got to the top of a hill, I put both feet on the runners and coasted. This is how the Finns get around, and I'll take it over walking any day.

Leena jumps up and announces, "I'm going back the lake. Care to join me?"

"No way," I answer. She opens the door and runs down the path, surrounded by snow.

### **Eels in My Hovercraft**

It's already late March, but winter in Lapland runs from October through April, even early May, and the lakes are still frozen solid. Today it snowed while I ate lunch at the top of Kaunispaa fell, a small mountain, and I watched the skiers get off the lift and make fresh tracks in the new powder.

I have come to Lapland because how can you not want to visit a place whose first sentence in the Lapp/English phrase book is *Ilmatyynyalukseni on tayana ankeriata* or "My hovercraft is full of eels." So far, I've seen neither a hovercraft nor eels.



**A Sami reindeer farmer**

Lapland, a cultural area that includes the northernmost part of Norway, Russia, and Finland, is home to the Lapps or Sámi, the only indigenous people in the European Union. No one knows where they came from, but they've been here since the Ice Age, traditionally making their living by hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding.

Now, there are only 700 reindeer herders left in the area, but Lapland is still about reindeer, and not because Santa's Village is close by at the Arctic Circle.

In Lapland, reindeer are imbedded into the culture. The main food, for instance, is reindeer, which tastes like a combination of tenderloin and Spring lamb: fried, stewed, broiled, baked, in soups, salads, and sausage.



Not Rudolph

## Two Kinds of Reindeer

There are two kinds of reindeer; one kind you see at the tourist reindeer farms. They are tame and have names. Yesterday, I was at one of those farms sitting in a passenger sledge being pulled through the snow by a reindeer with huge antlers. I couldn't remember if his name was Sukki, Sula, or Sochi, so I just called him Rudolph. It was fun going around a loop in the forest in the reindeer train, but a little hoaky.

The second kind of reindeer have no names. They live in the forest as part of a herd and eat mushrooms and lichen. The reindeer herders sell their meat as well as every other part of their body: the skin is used for clothing and blankets, the heads for dog food, hooves for boots, and antlers for handicrafts.

Some reindeer herders even grind the antlers into powder because the Japanese buy it as Viagra, even though there's no proof it has those powers.

The Sámi or Lapp man who owns the reindeer farm where I took a my ride, was dressed in full Sámi costume: a many-pointed hat with streamers (the streamer's direction indicates marital status), a royal blue tunic with red and green embroidered designs, reindeer boots which curled up at the toes in order to attach skis, and a leather belt decorated with gold and silver on which was a leather sheath holding a knife.

Both men and women carry a knife not as a weapon, but as a tool. His Sámi wife wore a colorful skirt and embroidered blouse. At her neck was a *riska*, a brooch whose purpose is to flaunt financial status: the more jewels and bigger the *riska*, the wealthier she is.

## The Ski Boot Dance

After the reindeer ride, Leena took me to the ski boot dance, a funky bar where all the skiers go after the slopes close, still wearing their ski clothes and ski boots. A local band played mainly polkas, but every now and they launched into a rendition of Springsteen on steroids.



A tall man with reddish hair approached and asked me to dance. As he led me to the dance floor he said proudly, "I skied almost 100 kilometers today." Leena had warned me they love to brag about their daily mileage.

"Are you Sámi?" I asked hopefully.

"No, I'm Robert."

He wasn't even Finnish – he was Dutch.

### **Yee Haw!**



Sami woman

The sauna door pulls open and Leena rushes back in and sits down on the bench. "Ah, that was so excellent," she says. "You are missing a wonderful experience."

Okay, I guess I have to do this after all. I don wool socks, pull my towel around my waist, and step out into the inky blue night. I'm so overheated that I don't even feel the cold as I run towards the hole in the frozen lake.

I throw down the towel down, grab the rungs of the ladder, submerge until only my head is above water, and scream YEEEE-HAWWWWWW at the top of my lungs. Then, I climb back up, grab my towel and, holding it behind me like Superman's cape, I run back to the heat of the sauna.

After dinner, still proud of myself, I stand outside in the blackness staring up in awe. There, directly above me, are the Northern Lights, like a colossal green genie dancing across the expanse of the entire sky.

### **To Get There:**

**Finnair** flies from the USA to Helsinki daily and 10 flights per week in the summer. From there, it's a short flight to Ivalo in the north. [finnair.com](http://finnair.com) 1-800-950-5000

## For information on Finland:

[visitfinland.com](http://visitfinland.com) 1-212-885-9700 or  
email: [contact.usa@visitfinland.com](mailto:contact.usa@visitfinland.com)

## Where to Stay in Lapland:

**Saariselkä Tunturi Hotel:** In a picturesque mountain village right next to 120 miles of cross country ski tracks including 21 miles of night-lit trails [tunturihotelli.fi](http://tunturihotelli.fi)



The Northern Lights - photo by Pier Orler Images

## Kakslauttanen Igloo Village:

choose from hotel rooms, ice hotel rooms and heated glass igloos; has one of the largest smoke saunas in Finland [kakslauttanen.fi](http://kakslauttanen.fi)

**Hotel Inarin Kultahovi:** an ideal place to watch the Northern Lights either from your terrace or close by at the river. [hotelkultahovi.fi/english/](http://hotelkultahovi.fi/english/)

To Visit a **Reindeer Farm**, take a reindeer safari into the wilderness, and all other outdoor activities including husky safaris, ice fishing:  
[saariselka.fi/inarievnt](http://saariselka.fi/inarievnt)



[Margie Goldsmith](#) has hiked, biked, run, paddled, climbed and luxuriated in 113 countries and has written about them all. She has just won the ASJA (American Society of Journalists and Authors) 2009 Outstanding Article Award, which she also won in 2008.