

[HOMEPAGE](#) » [COUNTRY & TRAVEL](#) » [SHORT BREAKS AND HOLIDAYS](#)

Enjoy outdoor fun in wintry Finland

North of the Arctic Circle, in temperatures down to -30, Adrienne Wyper found it easy to enjoy the great outdoors in Finland

Feb 18, 2015 07:40:00 AM by Adrienne Wyper



2



0



0



Hurling across a frozen lake on a 600cc snowmobile, half-blinded by falling snow flurries, in a temperature of 20 below, wearing three pairs of trousers, was possibly the moment when the relaxation hit its peak.

Our guide, Reiner, had told me off for not going fast enough, and taken control of the accelerator while hanging off the side of the snowmobile, taking it over 30kph. He had hopped off, up to his thighs in soft snow, and told me to zoom back to the other side of the lake, holding my speed - and my nerve - at no less than 30kph. I had to release my sense of control and surge ahead in blind faith that all would be well; I wouldn't hit a submerged rock, tree trunk, hibernating bear...



Get active

Snowmobiling was the last activity in our winter activity week in Finnish Lapland, based in Akaslompolo, 200km inside the **Arctic Circle**. After a little encouragement for me, we rode a 40km circuit, bumping along winding forest paths arched over with pine trees bent double by the weight of snow on their branches, swooping through soft snow on frozen swamps, and crossing a lake or two. At the side of one of these, we stopped for lunch in a wilderness hut, wooden tepee-like structures equipped with firepits, cooking racks, and a supply of chopped wood provided by the government, housed in its own tepee. Reiner heated smoked reindeer and veg over the fire, poured out berry juice and brewed tea, accompanied by chocolate-covered **oaty biscuits**. And a slow 50-metre trudge through knee-deep snow was a loo with a view. It did have a door but there was no need to close it as there was no one else around for a very long way. And with temperatures *well* below zero, I was in and out in a flash!

Slightly quieter was the cross-country skiing tuition. Timo, the ski instructor, kitted us all out, with skis, boots and poles and we set off for the tracks, which run almost to the hotel door. Unlike downhill skiing, with classic skiing - as cross-country is also known - you ski in prepared tracks: parallel furrows created specially by snow grooming machines. Skis are longer and narrower than those for the downhill discipline and are waxed before use, to improve grip. Each pole is moved forward with the opposite leg, in a long, loping stride. The skis make an odd 'oink, oink' noise



was deafening...

long, roping cables and bus tracks are seen along, with views on the tracks, which run across massive lakes, through forests, and up the fells. There are seasonal cafés along the way, like the art- and craft-filled **Naveta Galleria**, each cosy and full of character and serving welcome hot drinks such as hot chocolate with brandy and glögi (mulled wine) as well as treats such as freshly cooked doughnuts.

There are 330km of cross-country tracks in the Ylläs area for all abilities up to and altitude of 540m (including 38km of illuminated trails - useful with limited hours of daylight), with a drop-off service to different start points available for a small charge. All are well signposted; we felt perfectly comfortable setting off on our own for a day long trip.

The quietest activity was snowshoeing, using metal frames shaped like massive foot, with straps to hold the front of your foot in place, and serrated edges to help you climb ice- and snow-covered slopes. Again, you use poles to stride with opposite arm and leg in unison, and as your weight is spread by the shoes, you can walk on top of thick, soft snow of considerable depth. Timo, our guide, led us to the top of Kuer tunturi, a thickly forested fell visible from outside the hotel. We followed paths at times and made our own too.

The light was lilac, blue and gold and the visibility from the top was amazing: we could see into Sweden - but what we couldn't see was any sign of human activity. The silence

Apart from snowmobiling, husky-sledding was the noisiest activity, except when the sled was on the move. And be warned, that sled gets under way very quickly. The huskies *love* to run, and they love to run right away. I was driving initially, and as we careered round a bend in the track, my left foot wasn't on the runner, or the brake, and I flew off into a snowdrift while my partner - seated on the front of the sled and seeing it rapidly gaining on the sled in front - suggested then screamed at me to put the brake on, not knowing I was no longer aboard. We were all reunited quickly, and I swapped places with Bob to sit on the reindeer pelt on the front of the sled. We whooshed along through the forest and across a frozen swamp, with the huskies silent, until we stopped. Then they glared back at us resentfully, as if to say 'Why have we stopped?' They don't even stop to answer the call of nature; they go on the go!

Look to the skies

Northern Finland is one of the world's best places to see Northern Lights. Get the Ylläs Aurora app, and you can send and receive sightings. This results in an amusing slow-motion stampede outside whenever someone gets an alert. Because of the low temperature, you can't just rush out in the middle of dinner; you have to pause to put on your jacket, hat, gloves, scarf and so on. We did see them but not the dazzling, shimmering light curtains image you probably have in your head. Most of those are taken with **long camera** exposures, so it's not what you see with the naked eye. What we saw was more like misty green undulating cloud formations - but still fascinating.

In the hotel

The Ylläshumina hotel is modern in design, with quirky and cosy decoration and furnishings. with lots of wooden cabins arranged around the main building. Our cabin was cool and contemporary (curtains made in Marimekko fabric) and very, very cosy - very relaxing when returning after a day's activity. Each cabin has two bedrooms opening off a shared vestibule, where there's a 'hot cupboard' for each room. This is a brilliant idea, allowing you to quickly dry off your wet outdoor gear, ready to put it on again the next time you go out. The beds were very comfortable, and for children, there's a well-designed mezzanine sleeping area under the eaves. The bathroom was open-plan in style and featured a powerful shower, and plenty of storage space - something that many hotels lack.

Staying on a half-board basis, we tucked into our favourite breakfasts from the buffet: fruit, cereal and yogurt for me; a cooked breakfast involving bacon, sausages and eggs for Bob. And in the evening, there was a wide choice of hot and cold food, with themed buffets four nights a week, including Russian, Lappish and southern Finnish specialities, all labelled in Finnish and English, together with nutritional info. Russian night included borscht, smoked lamb and herring, with Lappish treats including smoked salmon, reindeer, barley flatbread and baked leipäjuusto cheese. We also enjoyed Karelian pies - an egg- and rice-filled pastry I'd read about and was looking forward to.

The bar had two distinct areas: the lower-level armchairs-by-the-fire area, and the upper floor, with its quirky cross-country skiboats on the ceiling and antler lampshades. At the bar we sample the local Lapin Kulta (meaning Lappish gold) lager, plus gin on draft - that's a grapefruit flavour gin drink that's very popular with Finns. The modern, organically shaped fireplace in the corner belted out the heat, and comfy armchairs were dotted around by the fire or by the bookshelves. The only issue here was that the **wifi signal** didn't quite reach, which meant any 'sightings' of the Northern Lights pinged up by the app we all had needed to be relayed down the stairs.

Another relaxing option for the evening is a trip to the sauna. As you'd expect in Finland, where the sauna originates, the large, centrally situated double sauna was very thoughtfully designed, with a vestibule for **removing boots**, then an inner room for disrobing and relaxing after the sauna, and the sauna itself. As I sat with sweat dripping down me, I laughed as I looked at the thermometer, realising that I'd experienced a temperature range of 110 degrees in just one day: from -30 to +80! The heat eases tired muscles, and the nudity makes a welcome change after being in at least three layers for most of the day. There's also an outdoor hot tub that's open a couple of evenings a week.

Get the gear

Being north of the **Arctic Circle** in winter, you'd expect it to be cold. Checking the weather forecast before I went, the average for January seemed to be -15°C. Brrr, I thought. However, during our week, the mercury actually plummeted to -33. But, as the saying goes, and as we discovered, there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. Layering is the key to keeping cosy.

Start with a base layer (what we used to call thermals or long johns). The best fabric for these is 100% merino, which wicks away sweat, holds in warmth, and is naturally antibacterial so you stay smelling fresh even after wearing them every day for a week. The tops can be worn as a **T-shirt layer** in 'normal' weather conditions.

Another of my inner layers was a Magic Layer from JML. Virtually seamless, with ultra-lightweight Tactel fibres to lock in heat, this top is as sheer as a pair of 60-denier tights. And if you ever wear tights under trousers, you'll know the difference a layer like this can make. **Buy a three-pack for £29.99 from JML Direct.**

Fleeces and Scandinavian jumpers can be layered on top, topped off with a thick down jacket or coat. I borrowed an **Infinity Endurance jacket by Rab** from **Cotswold Outdoor**, and was very glad I had it. This miracle jacket is as light as a feather, and comes with its own little stuff sack, into which I didn't believe it was possible to stuff it. I was wrong. I didn't believe a garment so lightweight could keep me warm. I was wrong about that too. When I tried the jacket out in the UK, I got so hot I had to unzip it. Designed primarily for use in Alpine conditions, its Pertex Endurance outer protects against storms and spindrift, and its high-spec goose-down filling gives unbelievable warmth. It has a long-line back to avoid draughts, and three pockets - one a zipped internal security pocket - perfect for stuffing in gloves, camera, lip balm, room key hanging on a piece of reindeer antler and suchlike. And with down jackets having a moment in the fashion spotlight, it looks good back in Britain, too.

Add heavyweight normal trousers and/or ski-type trousers - mine were just £30 from Sports Direct - and you're ready to go outside.

Hands can get very chilly and again, layering is best, with lightweight inner gloves, designed for very cold conditions, followed by thermal mitts.

The Ylläshumina hotel has outdoor clothing and boots that you can borrow - I wore a pair of their trousers, and the boots, for snowmobiling.

Find out more

This **Lapland Activity Week** with Slow Holiday specialist, **Inntravel** (01653 617000) in Ylläs, deep within the **Arctic Circle**, costs from £1,485 per person based on two sharing including return flights with Monarch from Gatwick-Kittilä or with Jet2 Manchester-Kittilä, connecting transfers (50 mins), seven nights' half board at the Ylläshumina Hotel with sauna and Northern Lights prediction service, three guided excursions, 90-minute cross-country skiing lesson, one day's cross-country ski hire and free use of cross-country trails. Available January to April.

I always like to 'know before I go' with destination research and the **'Lonely Planet Finland Guide'** supplies a great overview, with fascinating facts on customs, food, wildlife and more - and I'm sure we stood where the cover photo for this one was taken!

You might also like...

Try a ski-free winter break in Switzerland

Take a bespoke activity break on a budget

Stay cosy: top thermal underwear

