





In the middle of snow-where: snowmobile riders gather around a fire trying to warm their freezing feet inside the Arctic Circle.

Licensed to **chill**



The talk of the town in Sweden's northernmost city, Kiruna, was the mildest winter in decades – the thermometer outside the airport showed a 'mild' minus 20°C. North of the Arctic Circle, Dieter Losskarn headed into one of Europe's last remaining true wilderness areas in search of an icy hotel.



Sweat was streaming from my pores, running down my body. The naked guy sitting uncomfortably close to me, featuring some kind of full-torso moustache, was pouring more cold water onto the glowing coals. The resulting cloud of steam was literally taking my breath away. Time to leave.

Outside the rustic wooden structure was an Arctic winter night with temperatures of 20°C below freezing point. Diving into metre-deep snow after heating up your body to melting point is the fun part of a traditional Swedish sauna, locally known as snow-swimming.

It's amazing how falsetto the voices of full-grown males can become in situations like this. My fellow snow-

swimmer disappeared in powdery snow and frantically tried to resurface. Covered in the stuff and steaming, we rushed back into the heat of the converted ferryman's house. The journey to Icehotel had only just begun.

Our group had arrived in Lapland earlier that day after a 90-minute flight from Sweden's capital, Stockholm. We were greeted by some friendly, bear-like fellows with Nordic features, blond hair and ice-blue eyes. Getting into long johns and thermal shirts, thick trousers and fur-crested parkas was an exhausting and sweaty affair. Our shorts-and-flip-flop-conditioned group of South Africans looked rather overdressed and moved like hungover brown bears

Big Blue: one of the fairytale-like suites in the Icehotel, where elk skins are essential for a cosy night.





over the crunchy snow towards a traditional Sami tent, made of reindeer hides, with a huge fire inside. Apart from the temperature, it reminded me of a Native American tepee.

Lapland is the home of the Sami people, who came here not long after the Ice Age. The region, also known as Samiland, covers a vast area across four different countries – from the Kola Peninsula in Russia to the northernmost tip of Finland, through northern Norway’s coast and inland to large parts of northern Sweden. Most of the Sami people still practise their traditional way of life. While they’re pretty well adapted to modern society, reindeer husbandry remains central.

After some hot coffee and fine reindeer stew – by then I only briefly thought of Rudolf the Red Nosed – we boarded a couple of Sweden’s famous Volvos and headed north as the day began to fade. The last rays illuminated a fairy-tale winter landscape with snow-covered pine trees that made you imagine Father Christmas and his reindeer sled lurking around the corner. The headlights reflected crystal snowflakes looking like tiny bright stars tumbling from the dark sky.

A warm glow coming from a cosy, red wooden house lured us in. We were tired and cold, but not quite as far as we’d hoped to be. Inside was a much-anticipated fire and a friendly blond woman with a cute Nordic

accent who said we should grab a change of clothes and a toothbrush from our luggage and put them in one of the rucksacks provided. ‘Then grab an open-face helmet and a balaclava. Your adventure starts here,’ she added. ‘You will be staying in zee wilderness tonight’. Adventure, helmets and balaclavas?

After a short introduction in the light cone of our guide’s snowmobile (like a snow jetski), our group climbed aboard our snowmobiles and followed him into the darkness in single file. Our headlights pierced an enchanted

I went one step too far and sank up to my belly in snow. Self-recovery was not elegant.’



gloom, criss-crossed by the tracks of dog and reindeer sleds, the main modes of transport in the north. The only sound was the grinding, concrete-mixer buzz of snowmobile engines.

A short stop to relieve our shaken bladders resulted in some comic mishaps. While snow is solidly packed on the track, it’s soft further out. I went one step too far and sank up to my belly in snow. Self-recovery was not elegant.

After about two hours, we spotted another warm glow in the distance – a wilderness camp with the tongue-

twisting name of Lappeasuando. We all looked a bit like Rudolf by then – thank heavens for the welcome drink, a hot, mulled wine concoction laced with red lingonberry, a local fruit which apparently helps locals to survive Arctic winters scurvy-free.

The sauna was a pre-dinner activity. After three steaming-hot sessions



RIGHT: Traditional Sami outfits are warm and brightly coloured.

BELOW: The fun mode of transport in the north, where snowmobiles are replacing the slightly slower reindeer sleds.



with subsequent snow-swimming, we were ready to eat. Up north, your body burns calories to keep warm, so you have to eat to survive – a great excuse to dig in. The fat-free elk steak was delicious. Having recently tried a steak with chocolate sauce in one of Cape Town's posher eateries, I was tempted to suggest a new local dish: Moose au Chocolat.

The small, heated wooden huts each housed five people. There was no toilet inside, although the heated long-drop was only a couple of metres away. Would this be a deadly distance in the night? Luckily, sleep came fast in the crowded cottage.

The following day, we set off for the Icehotel and saw some wild moose (or is it meese?) battling through the deep, powder snow. The sun peeped through the clouds at a local in traditional-style elk leather trousers herding his reindeer with his snowmobile.

Ice to meet you

Artistic people blessed with imagination clearly wanted to create something out of their special Arctic environment. The result is a place with a licence to chill. The Icehotel in the village of Jukkasjärvi, which means 'meeting place' in the Sami language, is 200 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. The heart of the Icehotel is the River Torne, flowing nearby covered by a metre of ice in winter. It's the source of the hotel's building material. Pure and unpolluted water, together with the steady movement of the river, create the clearest ice imaginable. The hotel is wholly built of it and reconstructed each year.

As soon as winter approaches, a team of snow builders, architects, designers and artists from all over the world gather to create each year's version of the hotel. The building process usually starts in mid-November and takes until the end of January. Snow



Instead of mortar, they use 'snice', a contraction of snow and ice, to bond the ice blocks

Ask for ice in this bar and you'll get a funny look. In the Icehotel's Absolut Icebar, even the shot glasses are made from frozen water.

is sprayed onto huge steel forms and allowed to freeze. After a few days, the forms are removed, leaving a maze of free-standing corridors of snow. These are then linked with the various ice rooms. Instead of mortar, they use 'snice', a contraction of snow and ice, to bond the ice blocks.

Inside the hotel, childhood fairytale castles are a reality. Narrow corridors gleam bluishly and you expect an





The rooms reflect those cool fantasies with sculptures of voluptuous, blue-eyed females



ice princess or snow queen to appear. The rooms reflect those cool fantasies with sculptures of voluptuous, blue-eyed females, created by well-known artists. The beds are naturally made of ice as well, covered with insulating reindeer skins and an expedition sleeping bag on top.

You definitely don't need ice cubes in the Absolut Icebar – the

'glasses' you drink from are made from frozen water. People from all over the world flood in to break the ice and experience the cold rush – okay, I had to say that.

After my Arctic visit, Cape Town felt like another sauna session, only without the snow-swimming part. It took me a while in the walk-in fridge of my local liquor store to recover. ■

footnotes

How to get there

Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.de) has direct flights from Cape Town or Johannesburg (about 10 hours, from R12500) to Frankfurt and on to Stockholm (FRA-Stockholm-FRA from R4500). Scandinavian Airlines (www.sas.se) has two to three daily 90-minute flights (R4000 return) to Kiruna.

Where to stay

\$\$\$\$ Icehotel in Jukkasjärvi has three room categories: Ice Room (R1 750 to R2 648), Design Suite (R2 062 to R3 594) and Art Suite (R2 375 to R4 140). Prices are for the room with two beds and include breakfast and a morning sauna. Tel +46-980-66800, e-mail info@icehotel.com, web www.icehotel.com.

\$\$\$ Lappeasuando Wilderness Park's cabins sleep five and cost from R350 a person a night (min. four people), including breakfast and sauna. Tel +46-970-50170, e-mail info@visitlapland.com, web www.visitlapland.com/english.htm

\$\$\$\$ Camp Ripan in Kiruna offers red wooden cottages close to town. A twin room with breakfast costs from R1 100 a night. Tel +46-980-63000, e-mail ripan@kiruna.se, web www.campripan.se/se/.

What to do

Take a snowmobile safari with **Lapland Wilderness Tours**. They range from 45 kilometres to the overnight trip described here (R1 750 a person with two to a snowmobile, or an extra R780 to ride alone on a snowmobile (much more fun!). Minimum of four people a safari. They also do dog-sled tours. Tel +46-980-29190, e-mail info.lwt@telia.com, www.laplandwildernesstours.com.

Every man of the Nordic Sami tribe wears one of these traditional, beautifully decorated knives.



Northern lights tours, ski and snowshoe trails, reindeer- and dog-sledding trips and ice sculpting courses can be booked via the Icehotel website, www.icehotel.com.

Travel tips

- The currency is the Swedish Krona (SEK). R1 = SEK0,78
- Electricity is 220V AC.
- Submit visa applications to the Embassy of Sweden in Pretoria or to the Swedish consulates in Cape Town or Durban. The embassy does not

accept applications by mail. In addition to a completed application form for a Schengen visa, you need to submit a number of documents with your application. See requirements on www.swedenabroad.com (click South Africa).

- Check out these websites for more information: www.swedishlapland.com, www.lapland.se, www.visitsweden.com.
- See live webcam images of the Icehotel at www.webbkameror.se/webbkameror/Icehotel/index.php. ■

