



Christmas holidays 10/12/99 In search of Santa

Yo-ho-ho and bah-humbug! Sleigh bells jingle, snowflakes fall, Santa roars with laughter in a winter wonderland. It's that season again and Yule have to be merry. But if you're dreading Auntie Maud and going cold turkey on Boxing Day, how about a sleigh ride through the skies towards cheerier climates?

Finnishing school

Nestling on the Arctic Circle, under the glow of the Northern Lights is Lapland, home to herds of red-nosed reindeer and good old Father Christmas. Rovaniemi is the regional capital and Santa's hometown. Here you can journey back to Christmas past at the Santa Claus Village, or to Christmas future at the newly opened SantaPark.

Santa Claus Village truly is the Dickensian Christmas idyll made real. You can waft along snow-covered streets on shimmering sleighs drawn by mighty reindeer or sleds dragged by teams of huskies. Visit the "real" Mr Claus, hard at work in his post office (or you can email him now) and receive an unexpected gift (hand-made wooden things by local craftsmen, deliciously fattening truffles, thermal underwear, that sort of thing).

Canterbury Travel (01923 822388) offer a one-day Fantasy Trip to Rovaniemi. The flight is three hours each way and highlights include an opportunity for the kids to meet Santa, an Arctic Circle Crossing, and skidoo and sleigh rides. Departures daily from 18-25 December, prices are £399 per adult, £375 per child.

Next stop, SantaPark, the Santa version of Alton Towers, where every day is Christmas. Enter through the subterranean network of caverns and grottoes, illuminated by neon pyrotechnic displays. Wizenen elves and dwarfs in fluorescent clothes and funny hats dart to and fro chuckling. Test your nerves on the Magic Sleigh Ride or Rudolph's Run, scale the dizzying heights of Mountain Crystal, or catch the Carousel or Puppet Land. You can even fly in Santa's Helicopters! And, of course, there are Santas galore. Entrance is FM95 (£10) for an adult, FM65 (£7) for a child, or FM190 (£20) for the family.

Norvista (0171 409 7334) offer a wide variety of package holidays to Rovaniemi, including their Six-Day Christmas Tour, from 23-28 December. This comprises just about everything to do with Santa and costs £1199 per adult, £855 per child. For those that prefer to make their own hotel reservations in Rovaniemi, check out Lapland Holiday Hotels.

Do it your way

If you're a more independent traveller and up for

Recently in this section

- Murder mystery weekends
- Hemingway Adventure - book review
- Belinda Carlisle interview
- Michael Palin's Hemingway Adventure
- Whale watching holidays

Full Archive

For related auctions



something a bit different, your search for Santa may lead you to the icy seaside city of Kemi, home to the world's largest snow castle. Sampo Tours, a locally-based tour operator, organise boat trips in the northern gulf of Bothnia, where you get to disembark the boat and walk on ice.

For the more adventurous traveller, you can hunt out the slalom Santas on the slopes of Levi, one of Lapland's best ski resorts. Spectacular downhill and cross-country skiing and snowboarding are widely available and the well-groomed slopes range from smooth blue to icy black, and equipment is available to hire.

And when you've tired of skiing, try out Santa-spotting safaris in Pyhä (Finland's oldest national park), sure to put any African safari to shame. Tours of the Great Lakes and wilderness range from two hours to three days, and include sleeping in log cabins. Pure Scandinavian fantasy. Get hooked on one of the daily ice fishing excursions, cooking your catch over a campfire or join a sled party and let huskies guide you alongside stampeding reindeer, in search of wild bears.

Presumably Santa's also to be found in Turku Åbo. Although not in Lapland, it was proclaimed this year's Christmas City of Finland. And if you're not into city slicking, you might want to trail your dream of Santa into the Finnish wilderness in Saariselkä. Finman Travel International (0870 9025399) offer an inclusive six-day package to Saariselkä. They're charging £1089 an adult and £611 per child.

Out on the piste

Traditionally, celebrations in Lapland kick off on Christmas Eve and peak on Boxing Day; Christmas Day is supposed to be a day of rest. Log-cabin sauna parties are where it's happening on Christmas Eve - wild! That's followed by a sumptuous festive meal - haunch of reindeer, ham, bilberries and other regional delicacies. Night-time springs to life with torch-lit parades and blazing log bonfires.

Useful information: Lapland Tourist Board
Useful information: Travel guides

Further a fjord

For the alternative sort who finds Santa-mania a bit too gift-wrapped and is left cold by the idea of winter sports, exploring pagan rituals might be on the cards. Nomadic Saami groups were wandering Lapland for thousands of years before the advent of Christianity. This land is deeply encrusted with mythology and folklore, the enchantment national composer Sibelius attempted to capture in music.

Long ago, tribes used shamans as guiding pathfinders. They believed animal spirits and magical powers possessed the shaman. In winter, the shaman feasted on the meat and urine of reindeer to induce hallucinatory trances. In this state, the shaman would visit each of the tribal tepees, climbing through the smoke-hole and down the central pole. The trance-state was not just a shamanistic bluff because the reindeer ate fly-agaric mushrooms, plentiful in Lap forests at this time of year. These, in turn, intoxicated the shaman. Hence, the distinctive red and white of the mushroom became the Santa livery loved by kids the world over.