



THE PERFECT TRIP

# Lapland

Dashing through the snow on a sled pulled by huskies is a magical way to explore this province in northernmost Europe. After embracing Lapland's bewitching scenery and culture, retreat to your log cabin or treehouse to scan the skies for the northern lights

WORDS ANTHONY HAM ● PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP LEE HARVEY



A thick blanket of snow cloaks a log cabin in Junosuando, 60 miles north of the Arctic Circle. LEFT Dog-musher Richard Karlsson steers his team of Siberian huskies through the snowy landscape of Luleå

# Your trip mapped out

This 600-mile road trip through Lapland begins in frozen Luleå in Sweden, visiting the villages of Gammelstad and Harads, then heads north to the wild forests of Junosuando and on to the Sami outposts of Inari and Lemmenjoki in Finland

**1 LULEÅ**  
Best for activities

Get your skates on quite literally in this Swedish town whose rivers and sea inlets become frozen over during the winter months.

**2 GAMMELSTAD & HARADS**  
Best for architecture

Gammelstad is a church village virtually unchanged since the 1400s. Fast-forward to the 21st century in Harads, where a designer treehouse hotel brings guests closer to nature.

**3 JUNOSUANDO**  
Best for nature

Step out into the wilds of Junosuando – one of the best places to witness the northern lights – before retreating to the warmth of your log cabin.

**4 INARI**  
Best for Sami culture

The village of Inari is Finland's most significant Sami centre and the seat of its parliament. Reindeer herding is still a way of life for some who live here.

**5 LEMMENJOKI**  
Best for wilderness

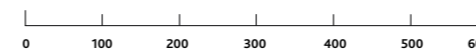
Finland's largest park, the Lemmenjoki National Park, is a remote wilderness populated by reindeer, elk, wolves and lynx.

MAP ILLUSTRATION: ALEXANDRE VERHILLE



## 1 LULEÅ Best for activities

**MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 0**  
TO GET TO LULEÅ, IT'S A 3½-HOUR DRIVE FROM ROVANIEMI IN FINLAND ALONG THE E75 AND THE E8, THEN ON THE E4 ACROSS THE BORDER INTO SWEDEN.



In Luleå, the gateway to the Swedish portion of Lapland, people do anything but wait out the winter indoors. Here, skiing and skating are less leisure pursuits than ways of life adapted to the ice-bound landscape. Until two decades ago, the indigenous Sami followed their migrating reindeer herds on skis from Sweden's far north to Luleå. These days, local children learn to skate almost as soon as they can walk.

From December to April, the rivers and sea inlets that surround Luleå are turned into almost two miles of cleared ice. Sleds replace prams, dog owners ski instead of walk and young people skate across town to visit friends. Joining them couldn't be easier – rental outlets for ice skates and skis abound, and gliding across the frozen sea is an exhilarating first step towards embracing the Lapland winter. But it is dog-sledding that gives the greatest thrill – sitting on reindeer skins draped over long wooden sleds, while expert mushers drive their teams of purebred Siberian huskies along trails is an invigorating experience.

'Hanwi! Donder! Vixen!' Richard Karlsson calls to his dogs as he steers the team on snowy forest tracks around Sörbyn, a quiet village north of Luleå. 'Mush! Yipyip!' He urges them onwards, slowing to describe each dog's personality above the scrape of sled runners on the ice.

'The lead dogs are the real extensions of my will,' he says, pointing at blue-eyed Denahi with unrestrained affection. 'There's a mythology surrounding the huskies with blue eyes. They say that they can see the spirit world and the wind.' The sled slides through snow, crossing lakes, cresting gentle rises and turning sharp bends that the dogs take in their stride.

'This is the only way to travel,' Richard says, easing to a halt. 'You can get close to everything. You can hear the wind and see the wildlife. You become a part of nature.' He pauses, the surrounding forests blurred by the visible breath of the huskies. 'The longer you spend with the dogs,' Richard says quietly, 'the more it becomes a spiritual thing, something that connects you with the animals and the land in a profound way.'

### FURTHER INFORMATION

- Ice skates can be rented through most hotels and from Häggblunds Adventure (£23 per day; [aventyrsubutiken.se](http://aventyrsubutiken.se)).
- Isdimma Husky Adventures arranges husky trips (from £195 for 1½ hours; [isdimma.com](http://isdimma.com)).
- Lapland Sweden can arrange snowmobiling, snowshoeing or ice driving in the Luleå region (snowshoe tour from £100; [lapland-sweden.com](http://lapland-sweden.com)).

### WHERE TO EAT

● Dog-musher Richard Karlsson is also a celebrated gourmet chef at Sörbyn Turism & Konferens. His creative three-course meals are among the best you'll find in Lapland; the perfectly seared reindeer steak served with sauces made from local berries is a speciality (three-course dinner £45; [sorbyn.se](http://sorbyn.se)).

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Skating in Luleå – people here wear long-distance Nordic skates, which have longer, thinner blades than those used by figure skaters; Richard Karlsson shows off two of his Siberian huskies



### WHERE TO STAY Hotell Amber

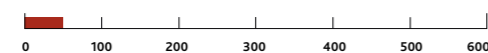
On a quiet street close to downtown Luleå, this family-run hotel has large, welcoming rooms with light colour schemes and extremely comfortable beds. The hotel can provide ice skates for guests and the buffet breakfast is better than most in this price range (from £80; [amber-hotell.se](http://amber-hotell.se)).



## ② GAMMELSTAD & HARADS

### Best for architecture

**MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 54 TO HARADS**  
GAMMELSTAD IS A WELL-SIGNPOSTED SEVEN-MILE DRIVE NORTHWEST OF LULEÅ, AND FROM THERE HARADS IS A ONE-HOUR DRIVE NORTHWEST ALONG ROUTE 97.



The cottages that surround the 15th-century stone church in Gammelstad tell one of Lapland's more curious tales: this is a village where no-one slept for more than a single night in any given week.

At the time it was built, every person – even those who lived in isolated farms and homesteads many miles from the nearest place of worship – was required by law to attend church. The solution in this vast and thinly populated land was to build ‘church villages’ like Gammelstad. Parishioners could travel to these makeshift villages from far and wide, sleep overnight and go to church the next morning before beginning the long journey home. There were once more than 70 such villages across northern Sweden – Gammelstad is the largest and best-preserved of the 16 that remain, and today it's a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Some 408 cottages survive here in their original form: red-timber façades with white-painted window frames, window-box flowers and embroidered tablecloths visible through the glass. No-one lives in the old heart of the town now, but it's as if the inhabitants are expected back at any moment. ‘The cottages have survived centuries,’ says Camilla Vikström, a local historian who was baptised in the church and whose family owns one of the cottages. ‘But the houses were built without nails so that the owners could dismantle them in an hour in case of fire. All of the houses are privately owned, and people still come here to stay at weekends.’

Where Gammelstad served as a magnet for those drawn to civilisation, the Treehotel, an hour's drive (and six centuries on) to the northwest, calls to those who would escape it. In this northern Swedish forest, in treehouses designed by leading Swedish architects, guests go to their rest safe in the knowledge that theirs is a room unlike any other in the world.

‘We wondered what people would most expect to see in a forest?’ says Britta Jonsson Lindvall, who owns the hotel with her husband Kent. ‘A bird's nest. So we built one. This is the one I like when I want to hide from the world. What would people least expect? A UFO. So we built that, too. It makes me think of my grandchildren. And if I'm feeling romantic, I love the Cabin.’

The Cabin's interior, reached via a gently sloping ramp that resembles a ski jump, bears all the hallmarks of clean-lined Scandinavian design, with light-pine furnishings and gently curved surfaces. Lying in bed surrounded by great sweeps of glass, it only takes a slight lift of the head to become one with the forest. And then there's the Mirrorcube. From a distance, it resembles a three-dimensional hole cut into the forest. Once inside, it's like sleeping inside a two-way mirror, albeit with a tree trunk running through the heart of the room. Suspended above the ground, accessible along easily negotiated wood-and-rope bridges, and surrounded by little more than leaves and branches, the Mirrorcube is less about drawing near to nature than inhabiting it.

‘I want guests to come away with a sense of fun and of magic,’ says Britta. ‘I also want the designs to make people think about what it means to return to nature. Fun, philosophy and trees. That's what this is all about.’

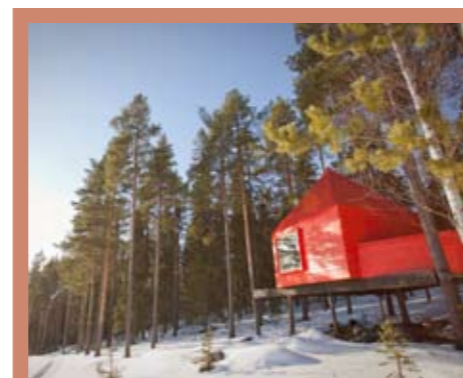
#### FURTHER INFORMATION

● [visitlulea.se](http://visitlulea.se)

#### WHERE TO EAT

● 1950s interior design and traditional Swedish cooking rule at Brittas Pensionat, the Treehotel's sister establishment. Dishes include palt (a doughy ball filled with meat), reindeer and elk (lunch buffet £8, dinner mains from £16; [brittaspensionat.se](http://brittaspensionat.se)).

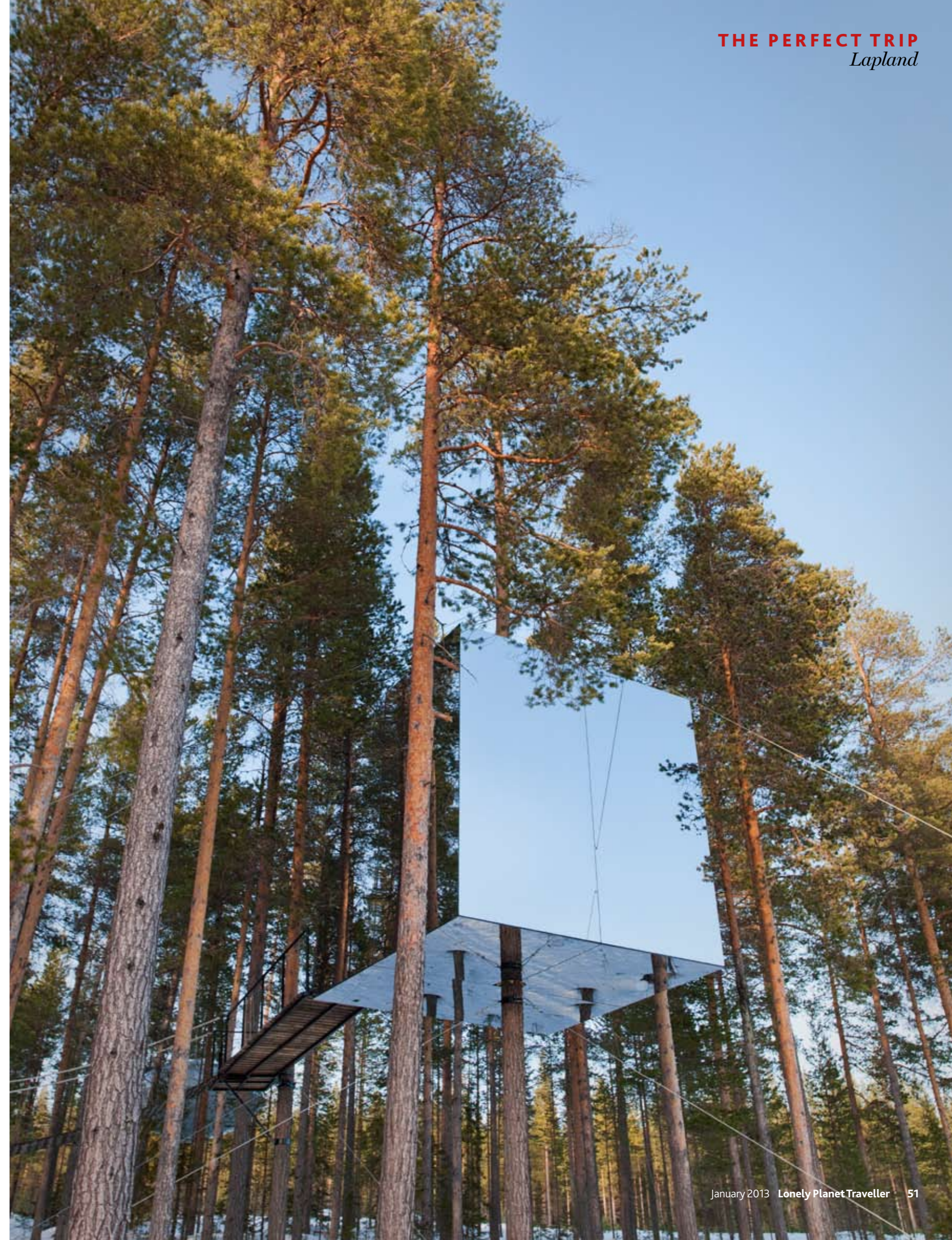
**LEFT, FROM TOP** More than 400 cottages encircle the medieval church in Gammelstad, the world's best-preserved church village; Britta and Kent who own Treehotel; inside the Mirrorcube. **OPPOSITE** The Mirrorcube's camouflaged exterior



#### WHERE TO STAY

#### Treehotel

The Treehotel has five unique rooms: the Cabin, the Mirrorcube, the Bird's Nest, the saucer-shaped UFO and Lego-like Blue Cone (above). There is also a Tree Sauna perfect for steaming away the winter cold from visitors' bones. Check into your room via the Treehotel reception at Brittas Pensionat in Harads (from £400; [treehotel.se](http://treehotel.se)). →



### 3 JUNOSUANDO

## Best for nature

**MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 260**

JUNOSUANDO IS A SIX-HOUR DRIVE, FIRST RETURNING TO LULEÅ, THEN HEADING NORTH VIA ÖVERKALIX.



On the long journey north, the road crosses the Arctic Circle. The distances lengthen between isolated farm buildings. When the small village of Junosuando appears on the horizon, it feels like the end of the road. And then Mikael Kangas suggests that we go a little further.

Mikael, who specialises in taking the uninitiated to the far reaches of northern Lapland, transports us by car, snowmobile and sled to a cluster of log cabins in the forest. We unload, build fires to warm the cabins, then step outside to contemplate our home for the next 24 hours. In a primordial stillness, the snow absorbs all sound save for that of our own breathing.

'Just last week there was an elk family over there,' says Mikael as we explore a frozen lake on wooden skis. 'You might also see foxes and reindeer. This land belongs

to these animals. We just pass through it.'

The sun disappears behind the silhouetted Arctic forest. In this elemental dusk, silence descends with the night. We retreat indoors to seek warmth by the fire, emerging from time to time to search the sky for the northern lights while reclining on reindeer skins in the snow. Close to midnight, vivid greens fringed with violet dance across the sky like genies released from bottles, great curtains of pure light. A sound (the wind in the trees? water rushing beneath the metre-thick ice?) surrounds us.

Cocooned in the cabin's warmth, we pass a night that yields to the magic of morning sun on virgin snow, to the sense of a world made new. 'What I want people to experience out here is the silence, the beauty and simplicity of the natural world,' Mikael says as our breath rises in the Arctic air. He looks out across the treetops, a man sharing his dream with others. 'Deep down, this is life as I would like to live it. Every time I come out here, I feel as if I return to the world a better person for having spent a night in the wilderness.'

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

● Retreats in Junosuando are possible from November to April ([auroraretreat.se](http://auroraretreat.se)).



**WHERE TO STAY AND EAT**

### Aurora Retreat

Mikael oversees four forest cabins. All have a sauna, pit toilets in a separate hut, pine tables, simple beds and sleeping bags. Guides can stay overnight or return for you in the morning. There is no electricity but some cabins have a kitchen with a gas oven, and food is included in the price (from £280 per person, including transport; [auroraretreat.se](http://auroraretreat.se)). →

The northern lights are caused when charged solar particles collide with nitrogen and oxygen atoms in the Earth's outer atmosphere; the excess energy creates this colourful light display



their Sami past. 'I've been herding reindeer since I was fourteen,' he says. 'And I have taught these skills to my sons.'

He eases his snowmobile out onto the trail. In its wake, our simple plywood sled strewn with reindeer skins bounces agreeably through the forest. With his Swarovski binoculars, Heikki scans the horizon for strays.

'What makes us strong is the reindeer,' he says. 'Our clothes, our food, our tradition of being on the land – everything in our culture comes from the reindeer. If there were no reindeer, there would be no Sami. That's why we have survived, because we never stopped herding.'

Deep in the national park, Heikki takes a rest in a brick-built lavvu, a replica of the traditional Sami tent. He absent-mindedly carves out a spatula from a piece of discarded timber, then cooks reindeer stew and sausages over a blazing fire. Outside it's blowing a gale and freezing cold but in here, gathered around the Sami hearth, the temperature is welcoming toasty.

'Things may have changed but I still remember all the lessons I learned,' he says. 'I don't need maps. I know every stone, every tree. I have spent my life following the reindeer. Our connection to the land remains very deep.'

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- Excursions and stays with the Paltto family can be organised through [lemmenjoki.org](http://lemmenjoki.org) (excursions from £30 per person; cabins from £45).
- Sami Museum (admission £7.50; [siida.fi](http://siida.fi)).

**LEFT** Reindeer are an intrinsic part of Sami culture and this bond is reflected in the Sami language: the word for herd is 'eallu'; the word for life is 'eallin'



**WHERE TO STAY AND EAT**  
**Hotel Kultahovi**

Easily Inari's best hotel and restaurant, Hotel Kultahovi is within walking distance of Inari's Sami parliament and museum. Built in the 1930s as a fishing retreat, its modern rooms overlook the river, which freezes in winter. Woven Sami rugs adorn rooms and there's an on-site sauna. The restaurant has a menu which draws on local ingredients such as berries, reindeer and Arctic fish (rooms from £70, mains from £9; [hotelkultahovi.fi](http://hotelkultahovi.fi)). →



Heikki Paltto making kindling. LEFT Heikki wearing traditional Sami costume. FAR LEFT The kettle is always on at the Paltto homestay



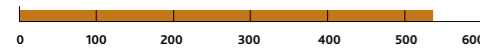
Reindeer hide boots. RIGHT Detail on an old Sami shaman drum. FAR RIGHT Sami artefacts for sale at the Paltto homestay



**4 INARI**  
*Best for Sami culture*

**MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 533**

IT'S A SEVEN-HOUR DRIVE FROM JUNOSUANDO TO INARI VIA PAJALA, THEN ACROSS THE BORDER INTO FINLAND, THROUGH KITTILÄ, SODANKYLÄ AND IVALO.



No-one knows Lapland like its original inhabitants, the Sami people. They have probably lived as far north as you can go in Finland for the last 11,000 years, roaming with their reindeer across the icy plains. The quiet town of Inari serves as the capital for Finland's Sami, home to Sajos, the Sami parliament building – a wood-clad building that was designed to look like a reindeer skin hung out to dry from above – and Siida, the Sami museum. The

story of the Sami is not best reflected in towns, however, but instead on the wild plains of their ancestors, where many still hold on fiercely to their traditions.

Few have retained their link to the past like the Paltto family. Reindeer herders for longer than they can remember, they live in the tiny hamlet of Lemmenjoki, west of Inari. Reindeer surround the family home, ranging through the forest and burrowing into the snow for lichen. They do so under the watchful eye of Nils-Heikki, a 24-year-old master of the yoik, the sung story or oral history that is a pillar of traditional Sami culture. Inside the house, his mother Kaija conjures up handicrafts bearing motifs gleaned from the ceremonial drums once used by Sami shaman to communicate with the spirit world.

But it is his father Heikki, the patriarch of the family and the vice-president of the Sami parliament, who anchors them in



Heikki on his snowmobile. LEFT Reindeer meat forms a big part of the Sami's diet. FAR LEFT The brand new Sami parliament building

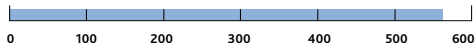


## 5 LEMMENJOKI NATIONAL PARK

*Best for wilderness*

### MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 562

THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO LEMMENJOKI NATIONAL PARK IS A 45-MINUTE DRIVE SOUTHWEST OF INARI ON ROUTE 955, TURNING RIGHT ONTO THE 9551 FOR SIX MILES.



Lemmenjoki National Park (pronounced 'lemmen-yokki') is the traditional homeland for northern Finland's Sami people. And it also happens to be one of Lapland's most beautiful corners. At 1,100 square miles, the park is one of the largest uninhabited territories in Europe: an immense wilderness of forest and fell. In winter, the park is woven with trails that meander along ice-bound rivers and narrow byways carved by summer hiking tracks, through deep snow and between tall pines dwarfed by the hulking, 534-metre Joenkielinen Fell nearby.

From the fell's summit, Lapland's forested vastness undulates to the horizon in low, rolling hills. 'This is one of the last and largest refuges for the old pine forests of Western Europe,' says Pirjo Seurujärvi, the park's director, surveying the scene. 'Most of the pines are around 500 years old, but some have been here for 800 years. And Lemmenjoki is one of very few places

ABOVE Five hundred-year-old pines stand sentry beside the frozen Lemmenjoki river in the vast wilderness of the Lemmenjoki National Park in Finnish Lapland

to have been sculpted almost entirely by nature, not by man. Yes, there are Sami here with their reindeer, but this landscape hasn't changed in centuries.'

Pirjo makes her way down from the high country, winding through forests where various sets of pawprints lead off into the trees – a sign of the many reindeer, elk, wolverines, brown bears, lynx and wolves that inhabit the park. She at last arrives in the river valley that gives the park its name – Lemmenjoki means 'warm river' in Sami, or 'river of love' in Finnish.

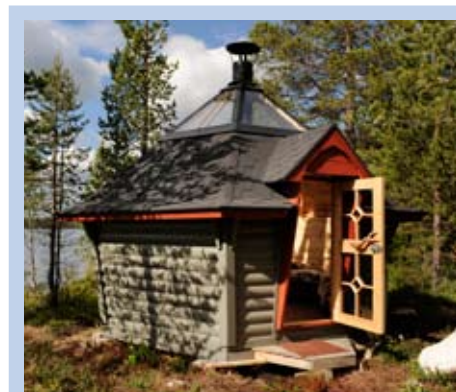
At first broad and fringed with trees, the Lemmenjoki river narrows as it passes beneath steep-sided hills strewn with boulders. Here in a river canyon, deep in the Arctic, Lapland's call is once again that of a frozen wilderness – the sound of perfect silence.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

● [outdoors.fi/lemmenjokin](http://outdoors.fi/lemmenjokin)

### WHERE TO EAT

● Picnics for excursions within the park can be arranged through the Paltto family (see previous entry on Inari). Hotel Korpikartano (right) can also arrange meals for non-guests, but bookings are required at least three days in advance.



### WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

#### Hotel Korpikartano

In the tiny village of Menesjärvi, close to the Lemmenjoki turn-off, Hotel Korpikartano occupies a former Sami school house (Heikki Paltto studied here as a child) and its renovated rooms and apartments make abundant use of Scandinavian pine. The list of activities is endless, while there's the obligatory lakeside sauna for those hoping for something less energetic (rooms with lake view from £85; [menesjarvi.fi](http://menesjarvi.fi)).



ANTHONY HAM is a guidebook author who specialises in the Arctic, and a regular contributor to *Lonely Planet Traveller*.

**NEXT MONTH: THE PERFECT TRIP TO YORKSHIRE**