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# LAPLAND

FROM DARKNESS

*Comes Light*

It was just after 3pm as our plane touched down at the remote airport of Enontekiö in northern Finland. Snow sped past the window, illuminated in the blackness by runway lights. We wouldn't see the sun for another 20 hours. Welcome to winter in Lapland.

WORDS & IMAGES BY: CAROLINE RICHES

The crisp air bit us as we exited the airport, but this was the very best cold – the kind accompanied by thigh-deep snow to play in.

If it wasn't for the white ground, we wouldn't be able to see a thing. In winter up here, 250 kilometres inside the Arctic circle, it's as black as night, almost all day. Constant darkness brings with it a feeling of isolation. It felt like we were in a quiet tent under a thick, black canvas.

I had been fascinated by Lapland since I was a child. It is Finland's largest and northernmost province, an expanse of plains, fells, lakes and fir tree forests with a relatively tiny – and falling – population. I'd always wanted to experience Christmas here with my daughters, to play in the snow and see Santa. As we headed to our hotel by coach, I peered into the dense, dark tangle of trunks, branches and spikes

sprinkled with snow, and the rest of the world felt almost unreachable.

Many locals like it that way. Living up here holds a badge of honour; proof of a hardy character, an understanding of nature and the strength to live among its harshest challenges. I wanted to watch these people – especially the women. I wanted to talk to them, understand a little about their lives.

Anneli greeted us at the reception. Her face was as pale as snow, but her smile was warm and her eyes twinkled. After breakfast the next morning – when it was still pitch black – we got talking. Anneli had lived in Lapland her whole life. She loved it here, but she found it tough, particularly in winter. "We struggle a bit," she said. "For us, when we don't see the sun high in the sky for many months, we suffer

depression a little.”

Three months in near-complete darkness would do that to anyone. The body produces higher levels of melatonin and lower levels of serotonin, which combines to make us feel tired, unmotivated and grumpy. Lapland is known for its high suicide rate and alcoholism, which tend to affect men more than women.

Up at these latitudes, there’s no escape from the night. People want to hibernate; they want to sleep. Actually, the best way to combat the Lapland malaise is to get outdoors and exercise, Anneli told me. “We must find a strategy to cope with the darkness. In the middle of the day when we can see a little daylight, I try to take a walk outside.”

I looked around the hotel. Bridges of electric candles flickered on windowsills. These are a tradition across Finland, Sweden and Norway during the festive season, offering an atmospheric light inside and an inviting one to those outside. To me they suggest the Scandinavian desire to inject life with cosiness and comfort – what the Danes have made famous with *hygge*.

Light in many forms can soothe during ‘kaamos’, the polar night. If the warmth of wicks and crackling fires isn’t enough, some locals resort to light therapy. Others like to go out and gaze at the moon and stars; they dazzle here. “I like to look at the light and try and notice everything – what is changing,” said Anneli. “We also try to laugh a lot. And we drink a lot of coffee.”

For Anneli, the hardest time of year is autumn. “Around October time, it is just so black. Once the snow falls

and settles on the ground, we can see again.”

By late morning we were geared up and ready to explore. It was still dark – and ridiculously cold at around minus 15 degrees Celsius, the mean temperature for this time of year. The cold made my toes sting through four layers of ski socks and snow boots, and evaporated the water from my eyes, sending tears tumbling down pink, frozen cheeks.

It struck me that with these physical reactions to the conditions, and knowing the mental health issues they induce, humans don’t quite belong at these latitudes. This place is better suited to reindeer, their eyes designed for darkness, their double layer of thick fur, their noses heating the air as it enters their bodies, their hooves and claws designed to dig through and find grip in the snow. They outnumber people in Finnish Lapland, by around 200,000 to 180,000 in wintertime.

Nature has the upper hand here. People must abide by the rules defined by the elements.

But humans are strong and we adapt, and nowhere is this strength more palpable than at the polar ends of the globe. I remember learning about the indigenous tribes of Patagonia on the southern tip of South America, who would grease their naked bodies during winter; they were always fishing and it

served them better than wet clothes. The Sami, meanwhile, the indigenous people of northern Scandinavia, live on as one of the world’s oldest populations.

On the main road of Hetta, Enontekiö’s biggest village, a mum pulled her young son along on a sledge – it’s how people get around here. They giggled and chatted in Finnish. They’re comfortable in these conditions, I thought, and I smiled at my Australian family, who were pumping their arms, breathing into face scarves to keep warm. We were using up every ounce of our energy to

do so, and it was hungry work; we were constantly starving.

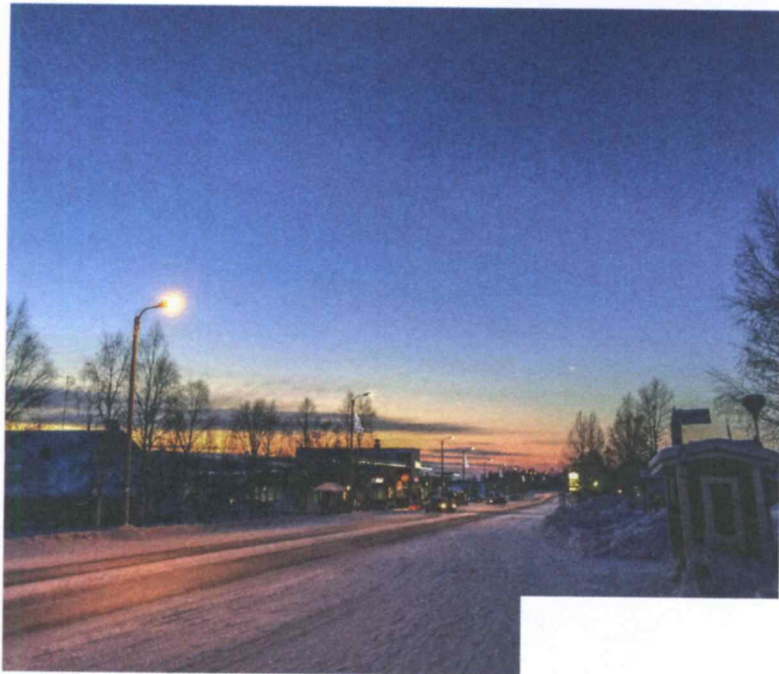
When the sun finally made an appearance before lunch, it seemed to have about as much energy as we did. It hovered lazily above the horizon for about three hours, like a smudge of white light below baking paper, before giving up and sinking again.

But for those blissful short hours, twilight fell on Lapland. I remembered Anneli’s words and tried to drink in the details. The heavy sky turned a welcome, cloudy grey and the snow, no longer glowing orange under streetlights, was awash with pastel blue and violet.

We wandered away from Hetta’s sleepy main street down to a frozen lake. A handful of small wooden houses lined the

## Nature has the upper hand here. People must abide by the rules defined by the elements.





shore; an upturned boat covered in snow acted as a reminder of how this place would be a few months from now. Lapland is famous for its beautiful lakes and I imagined being here in the summer – fishing from boats on the water, enjoying picnics on the grass, hiking through the surrounding forests under the midnight sun.

But for now, snowmobiles doing donuts on the ice were lighting the fast-encroaching darkness and kids sledging down a hill to the lake's edge shrieked in delight. Humans are always excited by extremes. Then again, it's easy to embrace the northern winter when you dip in as a tourist.

But as I learnt a little more about Lapland, I realised nature here offers plenty of lifelines. It gives tree trunks for shelter and fuel, and provides a bounty of food. Finnish Lapland's rivers are packed with oily salmon rich in Vitamin D. The soil gives wild mushrooms (also packed with Vitamin D) and potatoes. Bushes in the bogs and forests drip with bilberries, cloudberries and bright red lingonberries in summertime. Barley, one of the few grains that survives the Arctic cold, thickens up stews and makes flatbread. And the reindeer, herded here for centuries, have shaped the cuisine. Alongside tourism, they provide the region's biggest income source.

Food preservation is key and locals spend the summer months

picking, pickling and bottling. It's all worth it. The potato soups, hearty stewed reindeer, pickled salads and hot berry juices are delicious after a day in the snow – especially when served around a fire in a traditional canvas teepee.

There are so many fun ways to spend the dark winter days. You can cross-country ski, play ice hockey, go ice fishing and there are enough small hills to sledge to your heart's content. We rode snowmobiles through the forests and let excitable huskies pull us in sleighs across the plains, cuddled up under layers of reindeer fur.

We didn't see the Northern Lights but we did find Santa thanks to one group of reindeer and a couple of cheery elves. He was sitting by the fire in a hut aglow in the forest, waiting for us and surrounded by toys. It brought our children – and me – to tears.

But one of my favourite things to do in Lapland was just walk around the village and watch the locals in their daily lives.

Shoppers chatted quietly outside the supermarket on what looked like trolleys fitted with skis. Music emanated from an empty church. The woman flipping reindeer burgers in the grillikioski smiled warmly when she finally had a customer.

Candle bridges glowed in the windows of wooden houses, all of modest size but all you would ever need, and all looking so inviting and cozy. White fairy lights shone from giant pine trees in gardens. This isn't a place of excess, even at Christmas time.

Lapland is a place of simple pleasures. People here relish the nature, the

peace, the challenges of living at the top of the world and the sense of community that forms when you have to work to survive.

But while this place can zap your energy, it can also fill you with wonder. On our last day the clouds finally departed and for the first time the sun's low, weak rays could stretch out. We were treated to a long, drawn-out sunrise followed by a lingering sunset. A three-hour light show of purple, red, orange and yellow.

Fire and ice.

#### Trip Notes

One of the best ways to visit Lapland during the festive season is as part of an organised tour out of the United Kingdom. Snow suits and boots are usually provided, which helps to keep your own luggage light.

**Disclaimer:** The writer travelled at her own expense with Transun. Visit [www.transun.co.uk](http://www.transun.co.uk) for more details.

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### MEET **Caroline Riches**

Caroline Riches is a freelance writer from Sydney who has also been travel editor at national newswire Australian Associated Press since 2016. In her freelance work, she writes mainly on travel, health and relationships, while raising her three girls. She travels with and without her kids as much as she can, and has a particular fondness for places at high latitudes.

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