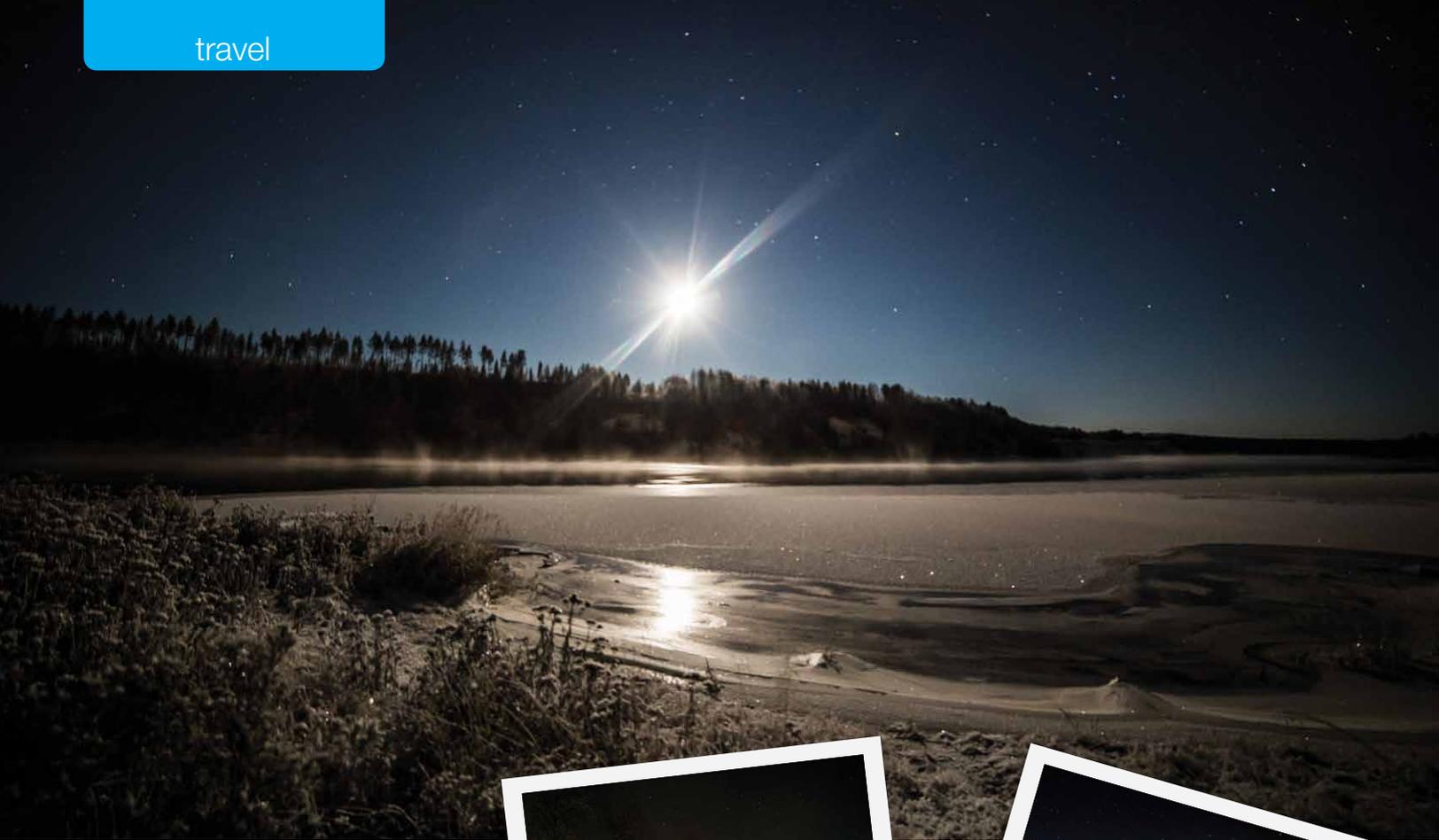


A Lapland winter wonderland

Callum Wiggins makes a trip to Finland in search of the Northern Lights and Santa Claus.





In an old Finnish folk tale the Northern Lights are conjured by the arctic fox. It is said as the fox runs through the snow its tail sweeps snow into the sky creating the Northern Lights. The lights, as many can attest who have searched for them of an evening, can be as elusive as the arctic fox itself. Thankfully Lapland remains one of the best locations in the world to see the lights.

With specialist light hunting companies employing the latest in live aurora tracking technologies, chances grow even stronger.

Arriving in Rovaniemi, the capital of Finnish Lapland and a one hour flight from Helsinki, we met our tour guides for our first evening of Northern Lights hunting. Beyond Arctic (www.beyondarctic.com) runs small photography tours to hunt down the unpredictable phenomenon. Friends Juho and Juho use aurora forecasting feeds and local weather reports to stand the best possible chance.

Wrapped up in layer upon layer of warm clothing to brave the minus 20 degree celsius conditions, our hunt begins with a drive some kilometres away from Rovaniemi to escape any unwanted light pollution. Setting up camp by the edges of a frozen lake, our hunt for the lights takes a surprisingly short amount of time. A greenish hue becomes visible in the sky above just mere minutes after arriving. The hue gradually becomes more visible and a clear streak of green light comes from a northerly direction. Just as quickly as the lights arrived,



Warming up at the camp fire



The unforgettable Northern Lights

they soon begin to fade away. Our spirits are raised and expectations high as we continue our journey deeper into Lapland's wilderness.

A tour with Beyond Arctic comes readily equipped with sophisticated cameras and tripods; this allows amateur lights hunters like us to enjoy the evening without worrying about getting the perfect photo.

Setting up camp again about 20 minutes further from Rovaniemi, Juho and Juho are confident that this will be the ideal location and a roaring fire is soon keeping us warm at the campsite. Sausages are roasted on the open fire, the lake cracks and howls as the water freezes over and a fresh pot of coffee is brewed. We wait patiently.

It's not too long before the arctic foxes come out to play once again. From small whispers of greenish light, stronger vibrant streams of light suddenly appear with an intensity that is reflected by the frozen lake. The camera shutters click as we gaze with wonder into the sky. Minutes pass as we watch the show in silence before the lights begin to fade. We're lucky to have been treated to such a long display of the notoriously unpredictable aurora.

Our evening with Beyond Arctic is rounded off with freshly cooked pancakes on the dying campfire and we take our tired but contented souls back to the warmth of the hotel.

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To set up your own page, please visit www.charitablechoice.org.hk or email fundraise@charitablechoice.org.hk.





Next stop – Santa

As the exact location of Santa's home is a secret known only by a chosen few, Rovaniemi has been designated his official home where he welcomes visitors to the Santa village every day of the year. We decide that a visit to Lapland wouldn't be complete without personally handing Santa our Christmas wishlists.

"Lei ho!" booms Santa Claus as we enter his grotto. We are suitably impressed with Santa's Cantonese and are guided to seats beside him by his elves. "Have you been good boys this year?" asks Santa, whose deep and jolly voice does not disappoint. "I think so", I reply gingerly.

Every visitor to his grotto is treated to a personal meeting with Santa, while tech-savvy elves are on hand to help take pictures and record the special moment on video.

Each year the attraction draws more than 300,000 visitors from around the world. Recent years have seen the number of families from Asia increase considerably.

Next door to Santa's grotto lies Santa Claus' Main Post Office. Letters from around the world addressed to Santa are processed by a small army of elves who reply to each and every letter (provided there is a return address!). Last year, the post office received more than 500,000 letters with nearly every country in the world sending at least one letter.

Aside from a few small countries in Africa, the post office tells us that they're only awaiting a letter from North Korea to complete its world map. We speculate the wait may continue for some years yet. We are glad to see that children in Hong Kong have not lost the Christmas spirit as a large pile of letters from the SAR has already accumulated in the letter box.

Wilderness tours in Luosto

Leaving Rovaniemi we take a short 90-minute bus trip to the small town of Luosto. For those looking to stay somewhere a little out of the ordinary, Santa's Hotel Aurora is comprised of 10 glass-roofed igloos, offering a unique way to experience the Northern Lights and Lapland's star-filled skies. In order to give guests the best possible chance of seeing the Aurora, each room is even equipped with a mobile phone to signal guests when the aurora is in the vicinity.

On our first day in Luosto we meet Mr Eero Fisk, the founder of Kairankutsu - Call of the Wilderness tours which aims to give small tour groups a true outdoor adventure in the Lappish wilderness.

Pyha-Luosto National Park, famous in Finland for its deep gorges and ancient hillside trees, has a number of hiking routes open to the public. Our guide Eero belies his years and energetically hikes through the park with frequent pauses to share his vast knowledge of the



Lots of letters from Hong Kong for Santa

natural landscape and tips for hiking in the wintry conditions.

Our exploration of the park sees us track animal footprints, scavenge for wild berries under a blanket of snow and even adopt a tree. "When a tree calls out to you we will stop and you will connect with your tree". Eero explains. "You will always remember your tree and it will always remember you". Noticing a rather robust looking birch in a small clearing, I tell Eero that a tree has caught my eye. Taking a few moments to fully take in the impressive specimen, I'm instructed to hug the tree and feel a connection to the forest. Thankfully we have chosen a quiet

day to hike the park. When our paths do cross with other hikers, Eero is quick to enquire about their route and whether they are familiar with the conditions. In the harsh winters of Lapland with its vast landscapes, becoming lost or getting into difficulty can quickly become treacherous and the terrain must be given respect.

Santa's little helpers

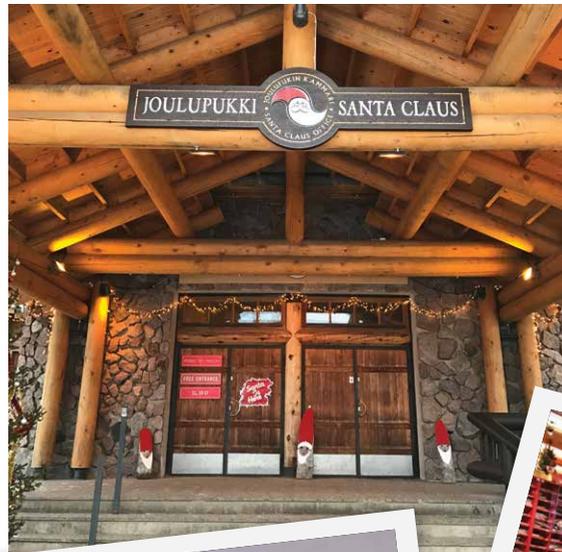
Not just Santa's trusty sleigh pullers, reindeer are vital to the local economy in Lapland with each and every animal owned by a reindeer herder. Each of Lapland's roughly 200,000 reindeer are all rounded up twice a year for counting and ear marking. Each herder makes his or her own distinct marking in the reindeer's ear for identification as these designs are often passed down through the family.

The Kopara Reindeer Park welcomes the public to learn more about the reindeer by getting up close to see the animals. Feeding time is a frenzy but the reindeer are generally tame and well-trained especially in the case of the selected sleigh pullers.

Sleigh rides through the forest are an excellent way to venture into the local surroundings and riders are kept warm under thick reindeer hides. Make sure to book in advance to secure a reindeer or husky sleigh ride during the busy winter season.

Lapland really is a destination with something for everyone. There are plenty of outdoor hikes and excursions not to mention extreme sports for thrill seekers. Culture vultures will be happy with a number of quality museums and exhibitions of the people and history of Lappish culture.

Children (and adults too) will be enchanted with Santa's village and the chance to see the man himself. A trip to Lapland need not just remain on your wishlist for Christmas. **M**



A husky sleigh ride on a frozen lake!



Santa's elves



Fancy a dip?



Plan your trip

When to visit: December to February are the peak months for tourists and winter activities.

Why visit: Finland celebrates 100 years of independence during 2017 so expect a number of national celebrations and centenary events.

Flights: Fly directly from Hong Kong to Helsinki with Finnair and take advantage of Finnair's up to five night stopover. Visit www.finnair.com for more details.

We stayed at:

Arctic Light Hotel, Rovaniemi, www.arcticlighthotel.fi.

Santa's Hotel Aurora, Luosto, www.santashotels.fi

More information: www.visitfinland.com