



Seeing is believing
It all took place just north of
Rovaniemi, writes **Godfrey Hall**.
Ari, a friend from Tampere,
had asked if I would like to go
on an overnight trip to Lapland.
That evening after a long but
impressive journey on deserted
roads and past spectacular
lakes we both stood in the
frozen forest drinking hot berry
juice witnessing one of nature's
most spectacular sights, the
northern lights.
Faint at first, it started as an
arc of coloured light and
developed into an amazing
display of dancing greens and
blues cascading across the
night sky. We were told later by
locals that if the weather was
really calm you might on rare
occasions hear a strange
whizzing sound as the lights
passed overhead.
It was an awe-inspiring
moment — nature at its best.
■ Pictured: The northern lights
as seen from Finnish Lapland.

The northern lights are an astonishing — and elusive — spectacle of nature.
Join JACQUI PATERSON in Finland as she goes in search of them.

Out of this world

It's cold — so cold there are actually icicles clinging to my eyelashes. But despite the fact that it's -30°C I'm boiling inside my extreme weather jumpsuit. Snowshoeing, it turns out, is very hot work.

I'm following my guide up a steep hillside behind the tiny Finnish Lapland village of Luosto. The night is still and the stars stand out like white-hot embers. The only sound is the crunch of the powdery snow as it compacts under our canoe-shaped shoes. When we reach the summit my guide passes me a mug and I can smell the sharp tang of hot lingonberry juice. "Lie back," he instructs.

It's so cold that the snow is actually dry to the touch. I sink back into the two-feet deep powdery drift and scan the sky hopefully. This is what I've been waiting for. A chance to see the famous northern lights — or aurora borealis — the natural light phenomenon caused when electrons from outer space hit the Earth's atmosphere and their energy is converted into light. The sky is clear and I've been told there is a very good chance they'll appear tonight. "That could be the start of one," says my guide, pointing upwards at a pale streak.

Apparently that's how they start — as a faint smear that slowly builds up in colour and intensity. They glow in luminescent colours of green and red, like fires burning in the sky. The native Laplanders, the Sami, call it the revontulet, or foxfires. They believed the lights were caused by an Arctic fox flicking his tail through the snowdrifts, and creating a trail of sparks into the sky. Sadly this time it's just a line of high cloud.

Apparently, if you stay for a few nights in the Arctic Circle during the winter months, you're almost guaranteed to see the lights. They are most prevalent around February, but easier to see in December, when the Arctic Circle is cloaked in 24-hour darkness.

The northern lights are a huge attraction of Finnish Lapland, but there is so much else to see and do in this unique part of the world.

The Sami people have survived the extreme conditions for centuries, and you can still see their strong influence today. A visit to a local reindeer farm is almost like stepping back in time.

I'm escorted to a lavvu, a traditional Sami tent with a log fire crackling in the centre. Lunch is a plate of steaming reindeer mince and mashed potato, and I tuck in hungrily.

When I tour the farm the reindeer stare warily. They're not friendly creatures but are vital to the Lappish people. Their skins are used for bedding and clothing, their meat for

food, and their antlers for decoration and souvenirs. You can even go northern light spotting through the forests on a reindeer-pulled sleigh, but sadly I don't have time for that. Instead I crane my neck as the deep blue twilight descends, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive light show.

With no luck, I sign up for a snowmobile safari with a local company called Snow Games. I climb into my huge padded snowsuit, and tug on my balaclava and hat — vanity gave way to warmth the moment I arrived in the Arctic Circle.

One by one our small group takes off, and the air is filled with the whine of snowmobile engines. We snake along a trail to a clearing with a breathtaking view. The snow has formed a heavy crust on the pine trees, buckling them into strange shapes like bizarre ice sculptures. The moon reflects off the snow, bathing the forest in a soft blue glow. One by one our engines cut off and there is absolute quiet.

I look up into the clear night sky. It's another great night for spotting the northern lights, but again the sky remains clear. After a hot cup of berry juice and a sweet biscuit we head off again, steering over snow-covered plains. I keep gazing skyward, fervently hoping to catch a glimpse of the lights. Apparently some build up slowly in colour and intensity, while others streak across the sky, and disappear again in moments.

Our snowmobile headlights illuminate the snow crystals, making everything look like it's been dusted in glitter. It really is a magical view, with or without aurora borealis.

The next day I leave Finnish Lapland. I haven't managed to see the natural spectacle but I'm not disappointed. I had an amazing time and it's a great excuse to go back. ■

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