

# **SNOW PATROL**

By Corrina Allen



earers statues at Helsinki Central Station.

espite its long, cold winters. Finland has been ranked by the World Happiness Report, and after vacationing there last winter, Lunderstand why. Finns find happiness there has twitter, Lunderstand why. Finns find happiness in fresh iat "even when it's 20 C below. They've made embracing the cold an art form, intertwining a love of winter with a culture that celebrate severything from monwhose

to saunas.

In Finnish cities, cyclists take to the snowy streets on fat-tire bikes, and bike paths double as cross-country-ski routes. Prams are swapped for plastic sleds, and the politukelikka (bicksled) is used for both sport and grocery shopping. Head north, and as the snow deepens, so does the desire to be out in it.

#### SEAFOOD AND SAUNAS IN THE CITY

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In Helinisk, the city's architecture alone is enough to draw visitors outdoors. Art Nouveau and National Romantic buildings in the the street near the central palway station, where you'll find many strolling with cappuccine in hand Clinns drink once offse than any other nationality on Earth), but a complete of kilometres away is the recently renovated Halaniemi Market Hall—a light-filled, two-storys hopping and dining space ideal for long lunches at one of the half's fish shops, and perfect for a taste of Firnish cuibes. The Marja Nitti senfood counter, a SO-year-old local institution, has its own cafe, tastisa, which serves kalakukka, a raditional specialty of fish, pork and bacon baked in rye-bread dough.



Karhunkierros hiking trail in Oulanka National Park; the restau-rant at Basecamp

The sauna is legendary in Finnish culture — literally. The Ralevala, a compilation of centuries old Finnish oral folidore and medieval mythology, includes peems about paging gold deciding the fast of their peeple while wrapped in a cloud of sauna steam. Statistically, the country has one sauna for a sauna steam. Statistically, the country has one sauna for a seasified sauna and restaurant in the former industrial neighbourhood of Hernessarf, just two kilometres from Helsinki's downtown core. Herne, guests eight by healing properties of a good, hot sweat in a stuming contemporary structure that belends into Helsinki's natural shoreline on the Gulf of Finland. After a relaxing sauna, I slept well in the brand-new fluxurious Hofed Maria, housed in four historic late 19th-century buildings a short stroll from the Presidential Palace.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES IN OULANKA
Trading urban charm for rusic realness and more time
in the sauma). I took an hour-and-a-half flight north from
Heisink to Kussam, the airport closest to Oulanka
National Park. There, I met my tour group from Exodus
Adventure Travels for a week of Finnish oundors activities
at Basecamp Oulanka—including snowshoeing a section
of the country's most popular hiking route, the 82-kilometerlong Karhunklernos Trail.
Basecamp Oulanka is a collection of three log houses
nestled at the park's edge, just south of the Arctic Circle. Its

cory accommodations are free of distractions like televisions and radios (though there is Wi-Fi). The main building has a wood-burning fireplace, all the rooms have heated floors, and, naturally, there's a suam, Valistors are provided with everything they'l need to stay warm – from insulated mittens and hiking boots to fleece beas leyers and waterproof outst shells – and we needed them! Outside, the plowed snow was piled high above our heath, and you could quickly sink into it up to mid-thigh while walling across frozen Jumas Lake. On our first day, we bundled up and donned bright orange snowshoes for a hike. Our guide, Tomas, led us through the forest, pointing out trees draped in Uneas ("Oid man's beard" lichen) and patches of reindeer moss, a favourite anack for the heat shat venture north in the summer. Oulanks is a quite place – apart from the snow crunching underfoot and the Siberian jays chattering in the trees. It's even more serene on cross-country skis (once you've mastered the yoga-like technique they teach you on how to recover from a fail). Elina, our lead guide, explained that Basecamp Oulanks was created to encourage guests to see the wilderness as a kind of church where wildlife is wenerated and its preservation is the ultimate virtue. The message found its mark when our group embasted on an hours-long snowshoe trek to see a frozen waterfall that towered above us like a spectacular nature-made cathedral.



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WINTER 2024 | 25



Kota-Husky dogs pull a sled in Riisitunturi National Park.

#### RIISITUNTURI, RUKA AND REINDEER

For visitors looking to add a faster-paced element to their Finland vacation, nearby Riisitunturi National Park offers options. The Kota-Husky experience allows you to pilot a two-person sled, pulled by a team of very eager dogs, on a 10-kilometre thrill ride through the snow. There is a mechanism that allows you to make minor steering adjustments along the trail, but mostly I relied on my trust in the dogs and an effective foot brake. Afterwards, we were served a generous portion of hearty stew while sitting around the fire in a traditional lávvu (a teepee-like structure used by the region's Indigenous population, the Sámi). We also met some of the farm's retired sled dogs, who prefer lounging on sofas in the main barn and like being scratched behind the ears or under their chins.

A day trip to the ski town of Ruka is also included in the Exodus itinerary. While the town's main attractions are the slopes and après-ski spots, you can also visit a family-run reindeer farm or book a snowmobiling safari. Take the Ruka gondola to the top of the slopes and enjoy marshmallowtopped hot chocolate (or a beer) at the Heineken Polar Bar, an outdoor ice café. Then, ride down on the far side and hike around the mountain on the well-maintained footpaths leading back to the centre of the village.

By March, the region surrounding Oulanka averages 60 to 90 centimetres of snow, and the many pine trees are bent under its weight. Snow in such abundance is perfect for building a lumikammi, a temporary shelter resembling the Canadian quinzhee, which is made by piling snow into a heap and hollowing the centre. Building a lumikammi is a popular activity for Basecamp Oulanka guests, with the option of spending the entire night there or, as I did, just snapping a quick photo before heading back to the sauna and a warm bed. Yes, Finland helped me learn to love winter, but even love has its limits. CAA



Finns have made embracing the cold an art form."

## AN ARCTIC **EXPEDITION TO** ROVANIEMI

Just six kilometres south of the Arctic Circle is Rovaniemi, home base for Father Christmas, or Joulupukki, as locals call him. In winter, many tourists travel more than 700 km from Helsinki by train or plane to meet the Big Man himself at the local Santa Claus Village (although he does keep office hours year-round).

Rovaniemi is the capital of Finland's northern region, and the surrounding area is where Sámi communities live - the Indigenous peoples of northern Scandinavia and Kola peninsulas. Many Sámi call this region Sápmi. Here, you can visit a local Sámi reindeer farm to learn about traditional herding practices and for a chance to feed these gentle animals their favourite mossy snack.

With only about three hours of daylight per day in December, Sápmi is also the perfect place to view the magnificent aurora borealis. Sightings of the northern lights here average 150 per year, which is much more often than in the southern regions of Finland.



They call him Joulupukki at Rovaniemi's Santa Claus Village.



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