



Jayde Kincaid is no stranger to Scandinavian winters; her husband Tietse is Norwegian himself. The two Nordic travel specialists send countless families abroad through their Melbourne-based company, **50 Degrees North**, each year.

But their two children had never travelled to Finland in the winter before, so none of them – mum, dad or the kids – knew what to expect when they holidayed there last December. Would their offspring cope with the sub-zero temperatures? How would they manage round-the-clock darkness? And what about the snow? The kids had only ever seen it once before, in slushy conditions at Victoria's Mt Buller – would they even like it?

Then there was the issue of Father Christmas. At seven and nine, their two boys were at that awkward age where they were questioning the magic of Christmas. Would a winter holiday timed around Christmas be a waste of time and had they left it too late?

The family flew north from Helsinki and then on to Kittilä just days before Christmas. From there, they transferred to the village of

Santa's secret hideaway

Editors'
Pick

A Finland visit for one family proves you're never too old to believe in Father Christmas, writes **MARK DAFHEY**.



Äkäslompola, 150 kilometres inside the Arctic Circle and on the edge of the Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park, close to Finland’s border with Sweden, where they checked into the family-friendly log cabins – complete with open fires and saunas. There, the wait began for Christmas in Santa’s very own homeland.

A world of magic

On Christmas Eve the family drove through wintry pine and spruce forests that looked like they’d been wrapped in cotton wool until they reached a cabin in the woods where they were greeted by a Sami shaman.

The children watched wide-eyed as he danced and sang folk songs in his native tongue, retelling the story of the Arctic Circle Crossing. Slurping salmon soup and hot chocolates around a roaring fire, they made gingerbread cookies and Yuletide crafts.

In the winter wonderland outside they tobogganed down gently sloped hills, made snowmen and rolled up snowballs, pelting each other and anyone else within range. Best of all, they tried snowmobiling, weaving between trees and along deserted trails.

But it was Santa they’d come here to see and, like kids the world over, they hoped and prayed that presents awaited. As snowflakes billowed upon the breeze and a rhythmic clattering of ringing bells cut through the silence, a reindeer appeared through the swelling mist, an empty sled hauled behind. It had come to deliver them to Saint Nicholas.

The man in red

The reindeer galloped to a shack in the woods of Elämänluukku, towing two youthful passengers who could barely wait. After depositing them outside a door crusted with snow, they tentatively inched forward.

When the door creaked open, a portly man in a red suit was sitting by a crackling fire. His



eyes twinkled behind glasses above a face full of whiskers. His kindly smile beckoned them closer, to where presents were laid out on the floor at his feet.

Weeks before Christmas, the boys’ parents had asked them to write him a letter listing all the good things they’d done and the gifts they hoped to receive. Their wishes were noted, and Santa duly handed out soccer boots, cricket bats and the like, just as they’d requested. He had added a surprise of his own: soft, fluffy and barking, the boys looked at him quizzically. “They’re huskies,” he said. “To jolt memories of Finland.”

The two boys couldn’t believe their eyes... but believe in Santa, they did. They left with a cuddle, then returned with their parents to the cabin they called home.

“I can’t believe he really wore red,” said one. “Or that his beard wasn’t fake,” mused the other in disbelief.

“So, do you believe in him now?” their mother asked.

“Of course!” they chorused. For another year, at least. ●

01 Santa and his sleigh 02 The man in red. Images 01 & 02 © Juho Kuva 03 Waiting for Christmas © Jani Kärppää & Flatlight Films. All images courtesy Visit Finland.

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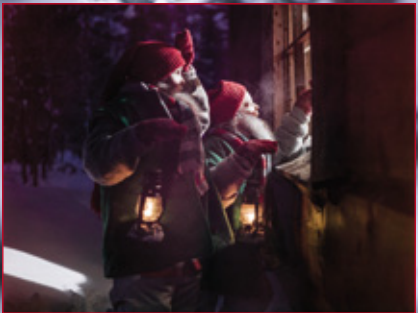
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