

IN THE OF THE

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◆ **Andy Jones** heads into the Arctic Circle to immerse himself in the magic and the ethereal silence of remote Solberget in Swedish Lapland, where the rest of the world seems, and is, miles away

THE LAP GODS





ABOVE: Santa's bigger helper – a reindeer pulls a visitor's sleigh through the snowy, Christmas card landscapes of Lapland

At Solberget Wilderness Retreat, near Muddus National Park on the far tip of northern Sweden, you are 20km from the nearest residential house. So remote is Lapland's Solberget – a beautiful night train ride from Stockholm – that you have to ask the train driver to stop there.

The **Northern Lights** can be seen frequently – though, like the trains, they are not guaranteed. Nothing is, except snow, adventure, reindeers and beautiful, otherworldly silence. If you are yoked to a tech addiction, this is the place in which to break it. There is no internet, little phone signal and no TV. That said, so spectacular is the terrain that you'll be glad to have left the worlds of Twitter and TOWIE far behind.

Pine trees bend under the weight of huge snowdrifts as civilization blurs out of the train window into one long, white smear. The days start in electric white light and dip steadily into pastel shades of

The Northern Lights are known as the aurora borealis, derived from the name of the Roman goddess of dawn, Aurora, and boreas, the Greek word for the north wind.

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PUTTING THE SKIDS UNDER IT

Swedish Lapland is an area slightly larger than Portugal, but with a population slightly below that of Basingstoke. That leaves an awful lot of space for playing around in supercars – provided, of course, you're able to master the art of driving in freezing Arctic conditions.

The town of Arjeplog, which lies in the heart of Lapland and is 80km from the Arctic Circle, is used by the motor industry for severe weather testing and is also home to the Lapland Ice Driving experience.

With a fleet of 31 performance cars – including two new Porsche 991 GT3s, a pair of Lamborghini Gallardos and even a classic Lancia Delta Evo 2 – and 500 hectares of crisp white snow and ice, Lapland Ice Driving's base is a playground for petrolheads in search of a new experience behind the wheel.

Under the guidance of instructors, drivers can drift their way around GPS-mapped replicas of famous racing circuits including Silverstone and Paul Ricard, covering around 150 miles per day at speeds approaching 140mph. *Lapland Ice Driving runs two and four-day courses from 15 January to 20 March. Prices start from €3,100 per person, excluding flights and accommodation.*

lapland-ice-driving.com



ABOVE: The spectacular colours of a winter sunset, seen across a snow-covered forest on a cross-country sleigh-and-ski trek

your own thermals and proper gloves and own a ski jacket, you can simply borrow snow boots from Solberget. I kitted myself out for less than £100 – after all, this isn't the fashion snow-walk of Val d'Isère. With the right gear on, I can actually say I've been considerably colder waiting for a London bus than I ever was in the Arctic Circle.

Setting off on a day trek using a combination of reindeer sleigh and skis – I had only skied once before, and experience on skis would have been helpful – we travel for around an hour into the pine forests.

The one-man reindeer sleighs are easy to drive (they're basically just stop-and-start, after all), and are used in the first part of the excursion. They pull at barely 20mph, but you sit close to the floor and, exposed to the

elements, the journey can feel hairier than the speed suggests – especially when you're being dragged through low-hanging branches and hefty snowdrifts. ▲

The Ice Hotel covers 5,500 m sq and is built from 1,000 tonnes of Torne River ice and 30,000 tons of 'snice' – a snow and ice mixture used to give added strength.

pink and purples by 3pm, colours so striking and unpolluted that they take on an almost neon effervescence. It really is breathtaking – quite literally, in a super-fast husky sled – to be pulled through thick forests and across frozen lakes and eerie swamps. Thankfully, the pace of our group is just pedestrian enough for us to take pictures, and the animals are impeccably trained. If you can walk a dog, you can happily manage a husky or reindeer sled.

Solberget's base is a wood cabin with a roaring fire in each room, communal hot meals and fur-skin beds. As the name

'wilderness retreat' suggests, toilets are outside in a separate cabin, and guests are asked to help collect drinking water from a mountain stream. There is nothing in the way of nightlife – this is books-by-the-fire and blankets country, although a day trip to the **Ice Hotel** at Jukkasjarvi is possible.

If, like me, you opt to build your own igloo, you forego those cabin pleasures for one night. Most of us wouldn't appreciate having to build our own holiday home on arrival but, when you're in the remote north of Sweden, a snow home is a show home. The cold is unrelenting, but if you invest in

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IGLOO HOW-TO

CONSTRUCT YOUR OWN IN FIVE EASY STEPS:

- 1 To make a basic Quinzee igloo – i.e. not one built out of ice blocks, Eskimo-style – first pile up a big mound of snow.
- 2 Compress the mound down so it is densely packed. When it is compressed, the pile will be big enough to enable two people to have room to sleep.
- 3 Using shovels, hollow out the centre of the pile. If you're worried about breaking through the top of the igloo, poke some sticks through from above so you can tell when you are reaching the structure's ceiling.
- 4 At the entrance to the igloo, create a tunnel to ward off the elements, making sure it's just wide enough to crawl through.
- 5 Once complete, leave for an hour for any water to reset. Lay skins on the inside. Sleep.

After an hour or so we reach a clearing at the top of a hill and begin digging our **igloos**. This is surprisingly easy [see above], and you needn't be super-fit to do it – it essentially amounts to an hour of shovelling snow and patting it into shape. Unlike this writer, you'll need the presence of mind to flatten out the floor of your dwelling before it freezes hard again, but I eventually sleep well in an Arctic sleeping bag and a giant fur skin. If you're claustrophobic, a night in a tight space

Igloo is derived from the Inuit word Iglu, which can be used for a dwelling or house built of any material, and is not restricted to constructions that are made from snow.



ABOVE: Northern Lights, visitor's delight – the aurora borealis, in all its mysterious glory, creates an out-of-this world atmosphere

GETTING AND STAYING THERE

Igloo-building and reindeer tours at Solberget wilderness retreat cost from £489, with dates specific depending on the weather. See solberget.com or visit igloo expert Cecilia Lundin at igloo-lapland.com

Let the dog walk you for a change on a two-day dog sled tour across the surrounding mountains. Each would-be sledder has to pass a simple husky-care assessment first, as they will be in the care of eight very well-trained dogs. Full excursion details can be found at solberget.com

Ryanair flies from Stansted to Skavsta (Stockholm) from £54 return. The sleeper train from Stockholm to Nattavarra (around 12 hours) costs from £140 return. sj.se

Visit the world's largest ice and snow hotel at Jukkasjärvi, rebuilt every winter from water from the river Torne. Discover The World offers packages, with direct flights, from £1,164pp. icehotel.co.uk

Winter in Solberget isn't as dark as you might imagine for the Arctic. Even in December, there are five hours of daylight and a sky with unbelievable daytime colours.

under the snow in the pitch black could be hellish, but there is little chance that the igloo will collapse – once the crushed snow refreezes, it is possible to walk a reindeer, complete with sled, over the roof.

At nightfall, the sleds and reindeer are taken away, and the following day we ski back down the hill – a euphoric slip-slide to the cabin. The slalom through tight forests and deep snowy grooves takes barely 40 minutes, and even this skiing Bambi managed to master the steady descent.

Back at the retreat, it's a relief to be in something approaching civilisation, even if its owner tells me it's sufficiently remote that, "when the drifts descend, if you go 50 metres from the cabin I wouldn't find you".

Evening entertainment comes in the form of a hardwood Swedish sauna. Soak up the steam, grab a beer and sit in the cleansing heat. For an extra endorphin rush, you can plunge, sans clothes, into the snow outside – though, at this point, perhaps you've seen enough snow for one day... **e**