

HUSKY DOG SLEDDING IN LAPLAND

NEW YEAR 2014

PAUL & FIONA – DEVON



I'd wanted to do this ever since watching the Ititarod Trans-Alaska race as a child. It took me a little while to overcome Fiona's natural aversion to all things snowy, but once the idea had taken hold, that was it... we were off!... Husky dog sledding in Finland over the New Year! 8 days in Finland above the Arctic Circle, 5 days of which on a safari driving my own team of Huskies. Plus, with sunspot activity the highest for 10 years and no moon in the sky for the time we'd be there, there was a more than fair chance of witnessing the Northern Lights. What better way to spend the winter holiday?

We flew from Heathrow on my birthday, and spent the first night in Helsinki between flights. It was dark, and we only saw the briefest glimpse of the city on the way to the hotel. On Sunday, we flew 548 miles north to Kittila in Finnish Lapland; 280 miles above the Arctic Circle. Our flight landed around 9:15am, before the sunrise. About 3 months before the sunrise! At this time of year, and this far north, the sun doesn't get above the horizon. A bus journey took us a further 50 miles north to the town of Muonio on the Finland/Sweden border and we arrived in time for lunch at Harriniva which was to be our jumping off point.

Later that afternoon we collected our insulated snow suits. Temperatures were unusually mild at -5°C, but were forecast to fall to the normal -30°C later in the week. It was hot work getting into the heavily padded salopettes and jacket in the gear room, but we were glad of them later. Snow boots were next and they were heavy and thickly insulated with removable ¾ inch thick insulated booties inside. They must have weighed about 3kg each!

We met our guide at the introduction dinner that night and early on Monday we met the dogs. They would be our transport and responsibility for the next 5 days. There were 7 clients and one guide. Our guide was a girl called Hanski. This turned out to be her surname, but she was known by it to everyone. She had a 10-dog team as her sledge carried all our food and other gear for the week, and the others had 4-dog teams. I had a heavier sledge, so needed a fifth dog to help out. We carried our own personal luggage, as well as spares for the teams, harnesses, sleeping bags, thermal gear, lunch etc.

The instructions on sledge control were brief and a little scary. Once harnessed, the dogs know what's coming and they get really, really, really excited. Yapping, howling, barking, whining, tugging on the gang-line and generally winding each other up. More than one fight broke out before we started, and the alpha male on my team (Tundra) had to be forcibly removed from the throat of his harness mate. The other dog was put back in a pen and more timid one brought out.



Then, a few minutes after the sky had brightened enough to see, Hanski pulled out of the kennels and our teams leapt after her. She works with these dogs all year and knows each one personally. We took 39 of her 60 dogs with us and they kept right behind her all the way. The energy was astonishing. They pull like crazy and if you're not holding on tight you'll get left behind, and these dogs DO NOT STOP for anything. Unlike a horse that you can rein in, dogs only have one speed...flat out. The only way you can stop them is by standing on the foot brake, which drives a pair of steel spikes into the snow beneath the sledge.

Leaving the hotel/kennels we were soon in open countryside and the yapping subsided as the teams settled into their job. The swish of the runners on the snow and the soft slap of webbed pads on snow was all you could hear. I was mesmerised. We swished through woods, along paths between the trees and then burst into the open to cross hard frozen lakes and swamps. We ran for about 2 hours before Hanski called a halt for lunch. I realised that my hands were aching from holding too tightly to the handles, my calves were aching from the constant movement of the runners under my feet, and my jaw and face ached from the maniacal broad grin that had been

there all morning. Lunch was cooked over an open fire in the woods, and the dogs took the chance to rest.





Lumi & Xenia

30 minutes later we restarted and once more the dogs sensed something was happening and began their excited howling. It split the forest. It was like the starting grid of some huge car race, with all the drivers revving their engines. The restart was fast and exhilarating again.

The afternoon journey was a shorter one. We took another hour to cover the remaining 12-15km in order to arrive at our cabin for the night just before the sky darkened at 3pm. Head torches were needed to unharness the dogs and clip them to their chains for the night. They sleep outside, but when the temperature gets below about -20°C they get some straw to insulate them from the snow. They have been bred for so long to tolerate such low temperatures that they work best at about -15°C and cannot run at all above 10°C . Throughout the summer off season they don't even exercise them, but allow them to remain in their kennels or runs and take it easy. They will have run between 3000 and 3500km through the winter so they'll need the rest.

Our cabins were wooden, basic, but very comfortable and warm. No lights, no power and no sink. No running water (hot or cold) and no privacy. Hot water was only provided if you lit the wood fire in the stove or sauna after fetching water from a hole in the ice in a nearby lake or river. This was the first task every night. Heat enough water to make "dog soup", a thin gruel to give the dogs a warm drink. After this we would chop their meat and put it in the sauna to thaw out. More boiling water was added later and then a high energy dog food was mixed in to make a thicker mince-like concoction. They are fed once a day after they've run and by then they are more than ready for it. Over the next few days, my affection for these dogs rose remarkably and it was the same for the others there. Conversations at dinner each night were mostly about the dogs. It turned out I was the only actual dog-owner amongst the whole group but we were united in a love of dogs.

It was only when the dogs were bedded down for the night could we think about ourselves. More wood would be brought for the stove, sauna heater and sauna boiler, food cooked and personal luggage taken inside. We did everything lit by candles or head torches. It was amazing.

Dinner was always absolutely delicious. Traditional Lappish meals cooked simply over the fire, or in a single pan or pot. Wholesome, tasty and just what you needed. By 9pm it had been dark for 6 hours so bedtime came early. We were all knackered anyway and even on New Year's Eve (after 35km on the trail) we were all in bed by 11pm!

Our outbound route took us north for a further 2 days (and about 70km), so we were well within the Arctic Circle. The Northern Lights were reportedly spectacular on Wednesday night, but all the time we were there, there was a thick and continuous cloud cover. The forecast clear skies and plummeting temperatures never appeared and we had snow for the full 5 days and 175km of our safari. We were disappointed not to have experienced the Foxfire (as the Lapps know it), but we had gone for the dogs and here they are...

Everyone was sad on the last evening and most insisted on sitting with their team into the night. I was certainly attached to mine now and missing Sweepy (my own dog) all the more for it.

Our last day was the coldest by far with a driving wind pushing the temperature down to about -17°C. It was fantastic! I'd go again tomorrow if someone told me it was free! On our return to the hotel we glided into the kennel area and simply unhitched the dogs. This was their home and they unceremoniously scampered off to wee on things, scavenge food and find their way back to their own pens and kennels.

We spent a few minutes cuddling some of the cutest puppies you've ever seen, then ditched our gear and headed for the bar!



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