

Dog Sledding in Finland

Finland is the land of a thousand lakes, Sibelius, Moomintrolls, Kimi Raikkonen I could go on but you get the picture. I visited in midwinter, while this may have been a little chilly let me tell you that every one of those thousand lakes breeds 10 billion midges in summer. The choice therefore, is to freeze or be bitten to death, no choice really.



Finland has only been an independent nation since early in the 20th century. Prior to that it was ruled by Russia and before that Sweden (yes the Swedes once were a major power, nowadays they just resort to domination through popular music and reliable cars¹).

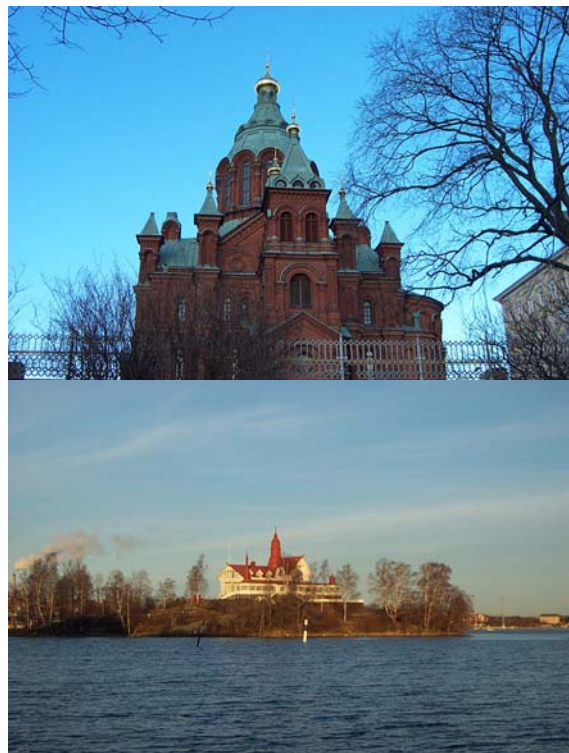
When I arrived in Helsinki on Christmas Day the weather was fine and sunny, it was also -5°C, which took my breath away somewhat.

There are a multitude of churches in Helsinki and the Finns regard them as cultural venues not potential development sites. These buildings are beautiful and well preserved. Most of the churches are Lutheran however some are Russian Orthodox. You can see the Russian influence in the architecture of many of the churches. On my first full day I went to *Temppeliaukion kirkossa* (Temppeliaukio church) this is a modern church built in 1969, the building is hewn out of the rock with a domed roof. It is similar to the Church of the Good Shepherd in New Zealand in that it has a wonderful ethereal quality and is also permanently full of tourists. My visit coincided with bus loads of Russians and Japanese.

Later that afternoon I went to *Kallion kirkossa* (Kallio church) where there was a service with Christmas hymns. The service was simple, a reading then 4-5 hymns, then another reading and hymns. The Finnish language is very musical and the paster was female (wearing a very striking red jacket).

Kallio church was built in 1912 (out of granite); it is a Lutheran church and emplies the sobriety of this religion. The parishioners were also the sombre sober sort (none of this happy clappy bullshit here, no demands for money either (novel experience)). There were two pipe organs, the main one in the French Romantic style, and the other one being Baroque, with an organist and a soprano leading. The hymns were all sung in Finnish, some of the tunes were familiar and I noticed *Oh Come All Ye Faithful* and *Silent Night*.

The experience was enhanced by the gentleman behind me having a fine Bass voice; I complimented him on it after the service. I walked back to my hotel humming Finnish hymns (mostly I just hummed random Finnish words to the tune of *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*).



¹ Plus groundbreaking military aircraft, see Viggen/Gripen.

Dog Sledding in Finland

By this stage I was developing a new framework for the meaning of mild temperatures; mild weather is anything over 0°C. Finland is also suffering from global warming; this was the first Christmas Day since 1921 that was not white.

On Wednesday I went to Suomenlinna Maritime Fortress, this is a fortress built on a small archipelago (4 larger islands plus some smaller ones) in the main harbour. Construction commenced in the middle of the 18th century and continued through the various conflicts and changes of rule since then. A potted history of the fortress is as follows.

1748 Construction of the fortress begins under the command of Augustin Ehrensward (a Swede).

1808 The Finnish war begins. Viapori surrenders to the Russian army with almost no resistance.

1809 Treaty of Hamina. Sweden cedes Finland to Russia.

1855 Crimean War and bombardment of Viapori. Anglo-French fleet bombards the fortress, which is badly damaged.

1917 Russian revolution. Finland declares independence on 6 December 1917.

1918 Fortress is given the name Suomenlinna (Finland's Fortress) and after the civil war is used as a prison camp.

1919 Suomenlinna becomes a Finnish garrison.

1973 Military period of the fortress ends. Suomenlinna is handed over to civilian administration.

1991 UNESCO admits Suomenlinna to the World Heritage List.

1999 Suomenlinna was awarded a medal by Europa Nostra for the quality of its restoration and revitalisation of the fortress.

The fortress reflects construction throughout its entire period, with traditional fortifications juxtaposed with more modern accommodation plus administrative uses. The island is home to a permanent population of 850 people with high proportion of children. There is a regular ferry service (taking around 15 minutes) to the mainland so many residents commute to Helsinki daily.

The island is also used as an artistic community in summer months, there are also musical festivals and other activities. I couldn't help comparing this with Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour which is facing a number of difficulties with adaptive reuse; it appears that having an ongoing population (which look after the place), a range of property types (which can be put to a variety of uses) and its overall larger size are notable factors in finding continuing uses for a property of this type.

I went to a performance of *Jevgeni Onegin* at the Finnish National Opera, it was a pleasant production with many interesting touches including an ice-skating scene with the Opera Ballet, I don't think the Australian Opera Ballet could manage ice-skating. It was a joint production with the Royal Opera House Covent Garden.



Dog Sledding in Finland

I spoke to the young chap sitting next to me (during intermission of course), his comment was that the production lacked the passion of a Russian production; it was somewhat mechanical being more in the Germanic style. I tended to agree with him as while the production wasn't flat it wasn't magical either. I think the conductor may have been stronger on the German productions, although the young man commented that the Finns were better at German productions. I think that only the Russians do Russian, other nationalities can do a variety (we are rather good at the Italian, French and everyone **can** be good at Mozart).



It is quite a small auditorium, even smaller than the Sydney Opera house. One thing of particular note was the catering at intermission, there were a number of laid out tables with numbers and names, these were reserved. At intermission the individual orders had been placed on the tables, coffee/tea, cakes (there were a variety), sandwiches and alcoholic beverages of course, this was most civilised as at intermission groups just went to their table, sat down and were able to eat/drink and talk without all the hassle of fighting at the bar. However you need plenty of room for this layout, something which the Sydney Opera house lacks. The queue at the bar was very civilised, the Finns queue in an orderly manner, none of the Opera House stampede to the bar and elbowing the other patrons aside.

When I commented to the young man that it was a very civilised way to get your drinks at intermission, he was somewhat disparaging and said he considered it rather bourgeois.

The hotel buffet breakfast was adequate, although a trifle plain; I worked out a way to improve my breakfast each morning by quickly walking down to the nearby produce market and buying some fresh salmon caviar. I

and then able to have caviar (on the rye bread provided by the hotel) for my breakfast. The other guests at the hotel by the usual polyglot lot that you find in most hotels (Russians, Americans, Germans, English, etc) however there seemed to be a high proportion of Finnish heavy metal fans (distinguishable by their Helsinki vampires T-shirts – maybe there is a convention on), I have never seen that many Mohawks at breakfast before in my life. However the Goths do have quite decent table manners.

Other delicacies that I managed to munch through during my stay included elk pastrami, wild mushrooms, a bear hamburger, reindeer pate/noisettes/stew, cloudberry conserve, fresh and smoked salmon and smoked reindeer salami.

I went to a Bach organ recital at *Mikael Agricolan kirkko* (Mikael Agricolan church). This is quite a large Anglican church and was designed by the same architect as the Kallio church (Lars Sonck). It has amazing soaring arches like inverted parabolas. I also went to a cello concert at the Temppeleaukio church which has particularly good acoustics. All the musical productions that I attended were pleasant.



Dog Sledding in Finland



New Year at the hotel was interesting; there was a high proportion of French tourists on a package tour, so the evening featured French Karaoke and fireworks over the river. The next morning, New Years Day without any trace of a hangover (there is something about French karaoke that makes you feel like not indulging; moreover the hotel wine list included such items as Jacobs Creek chardonnay which led to me viewing the remaining selection with deepest suspicion) I started my dog sledding tour.

We rugged up in ski suits, boots, hats and mittens and got our dog handling instructions. While the instructions are straight forward (this is the brake, brake going down hill and going into corners, lean into corners) the getting then hang of them takes a little longer. Some of the initial difficulties were compounded by the warm weather resulting in little snow cover so the ground was quite bumpy in places.

The dogs were really excited at going out for some it was the first real tour of the winter season as due to the lack of snow that hadn't any major tours in December. There was an incredible adrenalin rush as we all took off everything was a complete blur for the first 10 - 15 minutes, then you started to settle down and get the hang of what you should be doing (emphasis on the should).

The area we travelled through was a state forest next to a national park – similar to Oz you can't take dogs into a national park. The forest included a number of lakes (frozen over), 4 wheel drive (now skidoo and dog) tracks and walking trails. The dog teams can traverse all these so the going was always interesting. The walking trails were the most hair raising as these twist and turn and as the dogs can take these at a high speed you have to brake hard just to control the sled. Furthermore while you know the dogs are following the trail the actual line they would take through a corner was an unknown until they were at least halfway through.

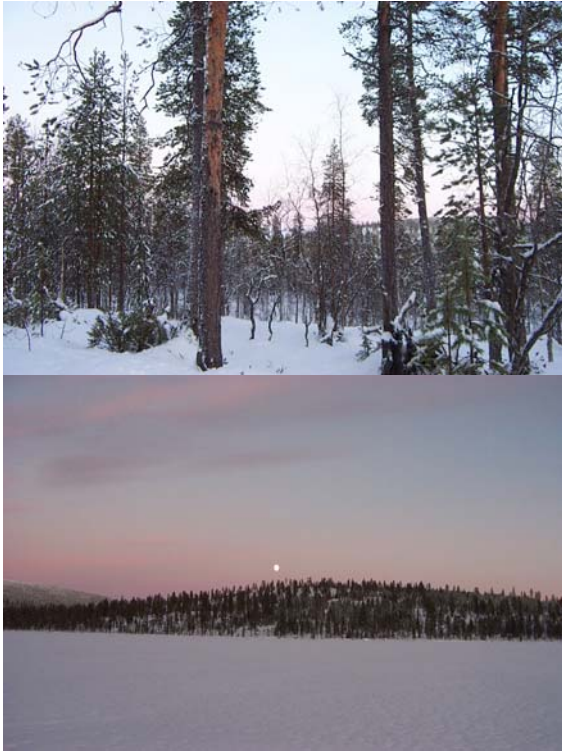
I then travelled north of the Arctic Circle to Ivalo; at this time of year there is no sunlight, only twilight between 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. The Christmas lights in this daytime twilight show why Christmas lights are so festive in these conditions; they do provide a wonderful warm glow that you can see in the distance and even quite simple decorations look incredibly cheerful.

I stayed at the Hotel Kultahippu which means gold nugget; there was a gold rush in the area in the mid 19th century. The gold is alluvial and while it was originally found by panning and sluicing it is now found using heavy machinery (but not as heavy as Kalgoorlie). Lonely Planet describe the town and the hotel as being rather wild, I was expecting something like the Big Fish in Granity (see earlier report) however it is nothing like that, all sit down meals and French tour groups, maybe the Lonely Planet writers should get out more.

The Ivalo River at the rear of the hotel is frozen over, so its main use now appears to be a skidoo track (they are hooning up and down – now that looks like fun) and an ice hockey field.



Dog Sledding in Finland



On the first (and perhaps the most) really rough section there was a large bump on the inside of a tight downhill corner' I was going way too fast and ended up somersaulting into a snowdrift – I was shaken more than anything. I fell off a couple more times on the first day and so did some of the others. There are wonderful hoon moments as you fly along at breakneck speed hanging onto the sled; I was really enjoying being a bit of a speed fiend.

There were five tourists (myself included) and our guide on our tour. The other tourists were two couples comprising 3 South Africans and a Brit who all knew each other. The South Africans (Pete, Aisha and Paris) had all gone to a special boarding school which featured all sorts of camping and survival activities so these guys were all expert at adventure activities. This made all the work type activities like getting water out of the ice covered lake (drill and pump), carting water, getting wood, feeding dogs really easy as these guys were all experts (or learned really quickly) at these things. Kate (the Brit) and I volunteered for the girly type indoor kitchen stuff like making the fire, cooking, getting the first hot drinks to the outdoor workers and dishes. They all were a really willing team and there seemed to be

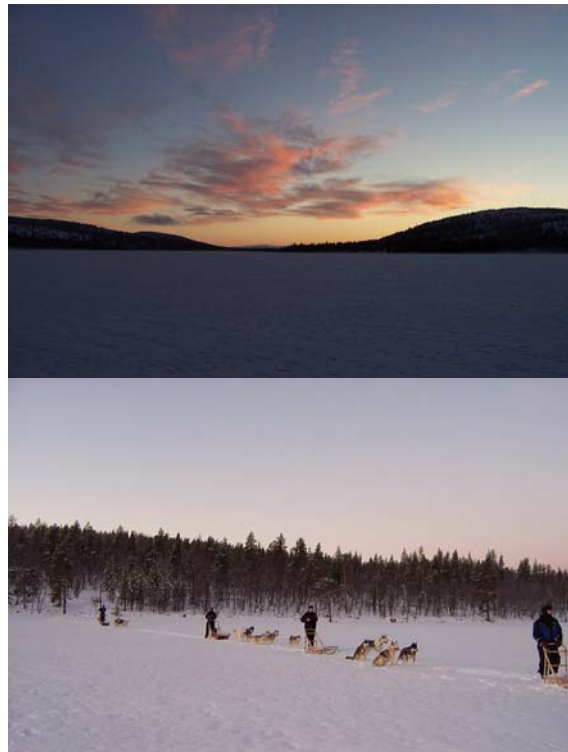
times when everyone was trying to see how much they could do.

The scenery was amazing and in the daytime twilight there is an almost surreal quality to the forest, it is also incredibly quiet, with no other animals around (apart from the reindeer). The forest was alternatively spruce and fir and the snow was amazing even if Erkki (the guide) kept saying how light the cover was.

There was a full moon while we were there and even at night it was quite light – enough to stumble your way to the toilet. The full moon over the ice covered lakes was incredible; it was a real highlight to just be in such an amazing place. After dark (after 3:00) we would put on our headlamps on and ride on the lakes. Even at midday the sun does not come over the horizon and at high noon it is like a sunrise or sunset.

The gear actually kept us very warm, although it was unseasonably warm (global warming), the lowest that it got to was around -6°C . I only started to feel cold a few times, especially on the lakes at night as it was coldest there and you weren't doing a lot of physical activity.

The dogs do everything on the run including any "Barkers Egg" moments (why am I thinking of a Cheech & Chong sketch). Their "bottom burps" are also something else; on the first day as their metabolisms were obviously settling into their new routine some moments could really make your eyes water, enough to take your mind off the pristine wilderness. Standing up behind the sled is preferable to sitting on it where your nose would be at the level of their rear ends.



Dog Sledding in Finland



Lunch was out in the open and similar to Antipodeans Fins light a fire, snow is actually a very good insulator and doesn't really melt around the fire. The upside is that we had hot soup each day.

The dogs are all Siberian Huskies and are trained to follow the trail left by the skidoo so the teams stay in the same order for the tour. In each team there were at least two stronger and older dogs with the biggest and strongest one closest to the sled. The teams are balanced with a stronger dog next to a weaker dog. Dogs have to be around 2 years old before they can start pulling a sled, they just aren't big or strong enough to

work until then and they could suffer permanent damage if they start pulling sleds before then.

The dogs do get tired and you do have to help by pushing up the steeper hills. My team would let me know when they wanted me to get off and push. In the afternoon of the first day the two weaker ones would turn and look at me as if to say, "It's now time for you to do your bit". By the afternoon of the second day my all girl team was experiencing a Finnish socialist workers moment - canine style on the steeper hills. They would all stop and collectively give me that look. As this was the first real run of the season the dogs were not that fit; later in the season (around late February and March) they are really fit and can run fast for days.

The dogs are trained to follow the trail lead by the skidoo. The only things that disrupt them are other skidoos (we only saw one) and other animals. When they catch the scent of reindeer they get really excited and couldn't care less about following trails and carting tourists around. This led to some difficulties as someone had been herding reindeer through the forest and on day 2 we ran straight into a large recent reindeer trail. We tried to hold position while Erkki worked out a way of going around the trail.



Once the dogs got the scent of the reindeer they became really excited barking and tugging at their harness, it took all my strength and weight on the brake just to hold onto them. When one or two tugged the sled would jerk forward about a metre or so; then all four started tugging at once and I just couldn't hold the sled. It started lurching forward and as I again somersaulted face first into a snowdrift I saw my team careering off round the next bend obviously far more interested in chasing reindeer than carting tourists up hill and down dale.

Dog Sledding in Finland



Kate was having the same problem with her dogs so I sat on her sled to help weigh it down until Erkki came back and when he was told that the dogs had done a bunk he raced off to find them before they injured themselves or a reindeer. He managed to find and stop them about 20 metres from a main road.

The upside was that Erkki took me riding pillion on the skidoo to get to my sled, those things really whiz along – they are serious fun. I can just imagine young guys using them to pick up girls; “Want to come for a ride on my skidoo, baby?” There are even organised tours that feature a pillion ride on a skidoo as part of their

activities and I got my ride included in the trip, admittedly I had to pay for it by doing gymnastics in the snow.

We slept in different cabins on each night, both cabins were cosy and we all slept in the same room/general area; I took my earplugs as someone was snoring. With the fire going they can be very warm (I mean underpants only). They are very well provisioned with crockery and cutlery, plus a gas stove (cylinders) for cooking. The water comes from the lake; there is also an outside (long drop) toilet. The toilet was around 50 metres away from both cabins so that night time walk (curse my old woman bladder) was a little chilly, you had to put all your gear on just to go and “spend a penny”. I did however plan for this by bagging the bed nearest the door on both occasions.

Both cabins had a Finnish sauna which was great for washing in at the end of the day. Despite being cold and not really raising a sweat you really appreciated being able to clean yourself properly. For some reason I am not including that photo.

It was snowing lightly on the last day which in itself was amazing (OK I haven't seen snow that often). To ride through the softly falling snow seeing the woods getting whiter and whiter was wonderful and special.

We got back by around 4:00 PM on the final day which left enough time to have a serious puppy moment with the latest litter.



Dog Sledding in Finland



These puppies, from the same litter of seven, were around 8 weeks old. The one thing that we all noticed was just how heavy they were, you could feel that these were going to grow up to be solid working dogs.

The dog sledding was through Kamisak which is based just outside of Ivalo. It is run by Sanna and Mika Nylund and there are dog sledding tours of between 1 to 5 days (I did 3 days 2 nights). Their net site is www.kamisak.com. I would certainly go again, besides I haven't done the arctic car rally driving experience (rally driving on snow and ice) which certainly sounds like fun.

The only other event of note was that in Ivalo going for a walk in the morning before catching my plane some old soak started following me around telling me that I was beautiful. Now all the Finns can speak good English, however I was debating whether to start yelling Anglo Saxon terms at him when I was saved by two women coming out of a shop who immediately told him to bugger off and stop annoying tourists. (This was a serious "Win a dream date with Dump Rat moment", eh Lesley). This in itself was interesting as normally it takes until at least 11:30 in the evening for Sydney men to start considering me attractive leading to two possible conclusions, Sydney men have higher standards or men in Ivalo start drinking earlier, both of which are plausible explanations.



Up until the there had been something niggling me about Ivalo, as the Lonely Planet had mentioned that it was wild I had expected something like the backblocks of New Zealand. It was then that I realised that all the men that I had seen in Ivalo were clean shaven. In New Zealand the men all sprout considerable facial hair, to the point that some can resemble a bird's nest on legs. I suppose it says something about Finland, even the town drunk had had a morning shave.

On my final day full day in Finland and back in Helsinki it was my birthday (47 for those who are counting) and I went to one of the city's better restaurants for a particularly good feed.

January 2007