

The aurora borealis in full display just outside Tromsø – the largest city in northern Norway

# EUROPE'S 30 ULTIMATE WINTER EXPERIENCES... *continued*

Track down wolves in snowy forests, camp out under the aurora borealis in a Sámi tent or snuggle up by the fireside in a medieval village – however you like to enjoy the cold, we've got winter covered

## 2 CHASE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS IN NORWAY

Like general elections, cup finals and British bank-holiday weather, the northern lights are a famously unpredictable species. However hard you try to seek them out, no sighting is ever guaranteed. You can, however, maximise your chances of spotting the fickle aurora borealis by heading to northerly latitudes this winter: because of an intense period of solar activity, now may be your best chance to see the phenomenon in a decade. Better still, enlist the help of professional aurora chaser Kjetil Skogli – a guide who specialises in dashing about

the fjords and windswept mountainsides looking for clear skies near the Norwegian town of Tromsø. Donning thermal suits and sporting snowshoes, Kjetil's apprentices sip coffee as they study the night's sky, with the option of bedding down in the cosy confines of a traditional Sámi lavvu tent following (fingers and toes crossed) a successful sighting. Shorter, evening-only tours can also be booked, with the emphasis on photographing the lights framed by the spectacular landscapes around Tromsø.

- Six-hour evening tours from £170, Sámi lavvu camping from £540; minimum two people to start a tour; kjetilskogli.no

## WHAT ARE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS?

Inhabitants of the Arctic Circle have variously believed the aurora borealis to be a giant fox swishing its tail, dead maidens weaving or Inuit ancestors throwing around a walrus skull. The scientific explanation is no less colourful: particles from the sun are deflected to the polar regions by the Earth's magnetic field, and release energy in the form of light as they collide with the atmosphere. A single aurora storm can release as much as a trillion watts of electricity – the most intense ones produce not only green colours, but crimsons, pinks and yellows. Northern lights have been seen as far south as

Northumberland, England, in recent years, but the most reliable places to witness them are around the latitude of 67° north – which includes all of Iceland, and northern parts of Finland, Norway and Sweden (although Svalbard is actually too far north for the strongest displays). The following tour companies are among those specialising in aurora holidays:

- [discover-the-world.co.uk](http://discover-the-world.co.uk)
- [taberhols.co.uk](http://taberhols.co.uk)
- [theaurorazone.com](http://theaurorazone.com)

Northern lights stand out better the darker the sky is. Aurora intensity is not in itself affected by air temperature, but displays can be seen more clearly when there is no cloud cover, which often means a colder night. →

PHOTOGRAPH (CONTENTS & OPPOSITE): BJØRN JØRGENSEN



### 3 LOOK FOR ELK IN SWEDISH WOODS

The elk is not exactly Lapland's most graceful creature – an animal with one set of legs longer than the other, a face with a look of eternal befuddlement, and a propensity to scamper in

a blind panic whenever humans approach. One smart way of getting closer to these skittish animals is to approach them on horseback. Ofelaš offers five-hour horseback safaris through the elk heartland of Swedish Lapland, near the town of Kiruna, with

beady-eyed elk-spotters trotting through forests and meadows atop sturdy Icelandic horses. Having worked up an appetite inspecting these strange beasts, riders conclude their trip with an elk-meat lunch (it tastes a bit like beef). ● From £175; ofelas.se



Elk can be spotted in open spaces by day, but by night they usually shelter from the wind among the trees



Eight metres up in the air, Tree Top Huts' Gran treehouse sleeps up to seven people

### 4. HIBERNATE IN A TREEHOUSE

As secret dens go, the Tree Top Huts in Norway's Ringsaker Woods would make the Famous Five delirious with joy. Hidden up in the canopy (and with a precise location only revealed to staying guests), four timber cabins are nailed fast to snowy, Christmas-tree-like pines and spruces, with balconies looking over an icy pond to which elk, reindeer and even bears sometimes pay a visit. Simple rooms have wrought-iron lanterns, mounted antlers, reindeer rugs and wood-burning stoves, with solar power providing the electricity. Don't be alarmed if your hut sways in the wind: like any self-respecting tree, it's designed to do that. ● From £70; treetopphytter.no

### 5 PARAGLIDE OVER SLOVENIA

Seen from the summits, Slovenia's Julian Alps qualify as one of the most magnificent corners of the range – with turquoise rivers slaloming through rocky landscapes. Seen from the skies above, it's more impressive still – Slovenia has some of the smoothest air currents in Europe, so take off on a paragliding trip as part a winter tour with Activus Outdoors. Launching from mountains on the Italian border,

participants soar beside eagles and buzzards (and also beside the qualified pilot who's strapped in next to you). Once you've landed there's barely pause for breath: caving inside mountains and sledging the slopes by night (using head torches) are part of the itinerary. ● Seven nights from £695 excl flights; activusoutdoors.co.uk ● Flugschule Aufwind offers short tandem flights in the Austrian Alps (from £75; aufwind.at)

● Tracks and Trails run shorter snowshoe trips in the Alps; they can arrange evening walks from Chamonix in France (from £130; tracks-and-trails.com)

### 6 BOBSLEIGH IN LATVIA

Most people's only passable qualification for driving a bobsleigh is having watched *Cool Runnings* at some point in 1993. Luckily for such novices, the Latvian Winter

Olympic team allows lay visitors to take a gentle spin around its training track. Built during Soviet times, the Sigulda track will see your bobsleigh reaching speeds of up to 77mph, hurtling around 16 curves outside a town 30 miles east of the Latvian capital, Riga. Luckily you won't have to worry about steering – an experienced bobsleigh driver will be chauffeuring from the front. ● £50; grandbaltics.com

### TAKE A HOT-AIR BALLOON RIDE IN LAPLAND

Soaring silently over the frosty wastes of Lapland is a rare privilege – one generally reserved for migratory birds, and Father Christmas on his Yuletide rounds. Now there's another way to do it – the magnificently named Aerohot offers hot-air balloon flights departing from the Finnish ski resort of Levi, deep inside the Arctic Circle. Beginning the flight with a swig of champagne to calm any nerves, passengers soar up to 400 metres in the air, enjoying views of frozen lakes and forests extending as far as the eye can see, before coming to a snowy stop on terra firma an hour later. ● From £200; aerohot.fi →

Balloons fly over the forests near Levi, Finland's biggest ski resort



Huskies are among the oldest extant dog breeds, and are closely related to wolves



Tara cottage in the Czech Republic is made almost entirely out of wood, including the roof tiles

### 8 STAY IN THE CZECH MOUNTAINS

When winter descends, many Brits instinctively make a beeline for the Alps. Far fewer, however, head for the Carpathians – a range that’s bigger, a good deal wilder and also easily accessible from the UK. Perched right at the top of the range in the Czech Republic, Tara is a renovated wooden farmhouse, set on a sloping meadow overlooking nearby Slovak and Polish peaks. Inside, cosy interiors provide a welcome retreat after days spent skiing or building Moravian snowmen, with knotty timber furniture, sturdy

beamed ceilings and – best of all – a traditional bread oven, atop which guests can take a nap upon sheepskin rugs.

- Seven nights from £765 for up to 10 guests; grove-cottages.co.uk

### 9 EXPERIENCE TRADITIONAL SÁMI LIFE

When it comes to solitude, Geunja in Sweden takes some beating. It’s a cluster of turf-roofed timber cabins set deep in the Lapland wilderness – the far side of a lake from electricity, mobile phone reception and the nearest village. A bold experiment in recreating 19th-century Sámi living, it’s also open to day visitors and

staying guests hoping to learn the culture of these Arctic nomads. Residents learn the crafts of catching grouse and grilling fish from the local lake, while long Lapland nights are whiled away listening to traditional Sámi stories by the light of paraffin lamps.

- Day trips from £280; naturesbestsweden.com

### 10 GO KILLER-WHALE WATCHING

Iceland’s Snæfellsnes peninsula has long been a place of pilgrimage: new-age mystics flock to this eerie, volcano-dotted promontory believing it to be one of the planet’s main energy centres. In recent winters it’s been popular with another kind of visitor: killer whales, who come to the surrounding seas to scoff on herring shoals. Join a three-night killer-whale tour with Discover the World – staying in a waterfront hotel on the peninsular’s northern coast, by day guest scour the horizon from sea and land for spraying whales, and by night wait for the aurora borealis to light up the Icelandic sky.

- Three days from £350 excl flights; discover-the-world.co.uk
- For a shorter whale-watching tour, head to Reykjavik in Iceland. Life of Whales runs three-hour trips (from £40; hvalalif.is)



The Sámi are spread across Sweden, Norway and Finland, with a small population in Russia

### 11 SAIL AMONG GREENLAND'S ICEBERGS

Once upon a time, every sailor on the North Atlantic waves would have done their utmost to avoid Greenlandic icebergs – it was, after all, an iceberg from Greenland that sunk the *Titanic* in 1912. Today it’s an altogether different story – sailing among these icy behemoths is a far safer prospect, so get close up to them on Discover the World’s 13-night cruise along the island’s eastern coast. Departing from Spitsbergen, the ship plots a course south for the craggy mouth of the world’s largest fjord, Scoresby Sund – the birthplace of many icebergs. Passengers can then board RIBs (rigid-inflatable boats) to make landfall and meet Greenlandic locals: namely populations of walrus, polar bear and musk oxen.

- From £4,100 excl flights; discover-the-world.co.uk
- For a shorter winter cruise, hop on and off Hurtigruten’s boats, which travel between Bergen and Kirkenes along the Norwegian coast (from £20; hurtigruten.co.uk)

### 12 SKATE ON NATURAL ICE IN SWEDEN

If you enjoy ice skating but have outgrown the endless circling of the local rink, head to Sweden post haste. Nature Travels offers a four-day guided skating holiday on natural ice. Participants head to Stockholm to skate on the myriad lakes close to the Swedish capital, covering as many as 16 miles per day. To join in, you need only be a competent rink-skater. You’ll stay in simple hostel accommodation, and the spur to all the footwork on the ice is the promise of an evening sauna in which to recover sensation in frozen toes. If the conditions are promising, skaters can also look forward to gliding along the lakes by moonlight.

- Three nights from £800 excl flights; naturetravels.co.uk
- Many UK cities set up winter ice rinks; the one at London’s Natural History Museum has a particularly lovely setting (from £11.50; nhm.ac.uk)

PHOTOGRAPHS: PETER ROSÉN/LAPLANDMEDIA & PHOTOADVENTURES, LOTTIE DAVIES



### 13 MUSA TEAM OF HUSKY DOGS

Russian husky dogs are among the world’s most formidable hounds: for centuries they hauled fur traders across the wildernesses of the Russian Far East, and it was with Siberian dogs that Roald Amundsen became the first to reach the South Pole (although he later ate them). Just Go Russia offers a chance to test-drive your own huskies with a winter tour of Karelia province – an overnight train ride north of St Petersburg – staying in rustic guesthouses. After a sledging tutorial, mushing newbies set out on easy journeys in landscapes straight from *Doctor Zhivago* – snowy forests of birch and alder, and villages with rickety wooden churches. Unlike Amundsen, you’re not allowed to eat the dogs at the end.

- Six days from £1,095 incl flights; justgorussia.co.uk
- Shorter husky-sled rides are available across northern Europe (one-hour safari £30; Enontekiö, Finland; hettahuskies.com) →



Saddell Castle was purchased by the Landmark Trust in 1975 – the land was granted to the Bishop of Argyll by James IV, King of Scotland, in 1508

## 14 SIT BY THE FIRESIDE IN A CASTLE

Looking as if it might have been purpose-built for an adaptation of *Macbeth*, Saddell Castle is a dark, brooding 16th-century fortress standing beside a pebbly beach on the Kintyre Peninsula. Given that the castle was burned and sacked by raiding English forces five centuries ago, its original builders would be heartened to see it restored by the Landmark Trust in recent decades. It's open to staying guests throughout the winter, so stoke up the flames in its grand fireplaces to guard against the chilly Scottish draft – or head to the rooftop battlements to watch for invading Sassenachs, or (rather more likely) to see the sublime sunset over the cold waters of Kilbrannan Sound.

● Four nights from £500 for eight people; landmarktrust.org.uk

## 15 STAY IN A ROMANIAN ICE HOTEL

Each winter, ice hotels are whittled and carved into existence across the world, from Finland to Canada. The most remote of them all is in Romania – set 2,000 metres up in the Făgăraş Mountains and accessible only by cable car. Outside, the temperature can scrape as low as -20°C; inside it's a fresh -2°C degrees, meaning guests can sleep easy on their ice beds, safe in the

knowledge that the ceiling won't melt into a puddle (nor, for that matter, will the hotel's ice furniture, ice plates and glasses, or even its ice chapel). If you're inspired by the designs inside the hotel, ice-sculpting classes can be arranged.

● Rooms from £100, sculpting classes from £23; icehotelromania.com

## 16 GO ICE FISHING IN FINLAND

When Finns want respite from the modern world and also the opportunity to stare contemplatively at a fixed

point a yard away, they go ice fishing. Take part in this time-honoured winter tradition by joining an ice-fishing trip near the town of Hämeenkyrö with Hiking Travel. Prospective fishermen and fisherwomen push out on to a frozen lake on a traditional Nordic kicksled, boring a hole into the thick ice before waiting for a jackpot bite from Finland's national fish, the perch (while trying not to be unsettled by the creaking noises from below). Before the consumption of said fish, the trail leads to a local sauna,

where you may be inspired to indulge in another, less immediately appealing Finnish winter tradition: throwing yourself into an ice hole nearby for a freezing cold swim.

● £605 per group (for up to 20 people); hikingtravelhit.fi

## 17 TAKE A WINTER'S STROLL IN SWITZERLAND

To those of us challenged by ambling up and down Britain's more modest fells, the prospect of hiking the Swiss Alps in winter might seem an intimidating one. Fortunately tour operator Inntravel offers an easy introduction to rambling this harsh but beautiful landscape with a week-long walking holiday, based out of the resort town of Kandersteg. Staying in a grand, century-old hotel, participants join guided walks and supervised snowshoeing excursions along powdery trails nearby – as well as a torch-lit alpine stroll under cover of darkness. Free days are left for guests to explore the region further – the medieval streets of Switzerland's diminutive capital, Bern, are about an hour's train ride away.

● From £1,015 incl flights; inntravel.co.uk



Each room in Romania's Ice Hotel is individually designed, and insulated in part by packed snow

PHOTOGRAPHS: STUART LEVAY, PAUL ALBU

## 19 BOARD A HORSE-DRAWN SLEIGH IN AUSTRIA

Bringing a touch of Narnia to Austria's Carinthian-Styrian Alps, the Hotel Trattlerhof offers half-hour horse-drawn sleigh rides through the snowy backroads of the Bad Kleinkirchheim valley. Huddled beneath blankets, guests jingle their way through woodlands and beneath white peaks – stopping off for a sip of mulled wine in a nearby hut. It's also possible to combine the experience with a fondue at the hotel's wood-panelled restaurant.

● Sleigh rides from £16, with fondue meal from £40; trattlerhof.at

PHOTOGRAPH: SYNNOVE HAGA

## 20 SKI ACROSS SWEDISH LAPLAND

Out of all of Scandinavia's long-distance trails, the Kungsleden (King's Trail) reigns supreme: an epic 270-mile route extending deep into the Arctic Circle and passing in the shadow of Sweden's highest mountains. In winter it opens up to cross-country skiers – Nature Travels offers an eight-day guided trip along its northern reaches, gliding along windswept plateaus by day, and staying in mountain cabins heated with wood-burning stoves by night (some also have saunas in which to thaw numb feet). It's also possible

to extend a stay in Abisko at the top of the trail – with especially clear skies, it's one of the best places in Sweden to witness the northern lights.

● Eight days from £700 excl flights; naturetravels.co.uk

● For a lighter taste of the King's Trail, tackle a few miles of the route from Abisko (from £55 for three hours with guide incl ski hire; svenskatouristforeningen.se)

## 21 TAKE A REINDEER RIDE IN FINLAND

We hate to be the bearers of bad news, but despite what we're told as children, reindeer can't actually fly. Putting that aside, their talents are endless: they can be used as transportation,

to produce milk, their skins can keep you warm and (whisper it very quietly) they can be turned into stews, sausages and meatballs. It is precisely for these reasons that they've been herded in northern Finland for millennia. To understand more about these animals, head to the town of Rovaniemi for a nighttime dash through Lapland forests aboard a reindeer-pulled sleigh driven by an experienced herder. The sleigh stops for passengers to sip coffee by the campfire, hoping to see green streaks of the auroras flaring up in the skies above. Just don't expect to fly among them.

● From £95; safartica.com →



With no roads connecting settlements, snowmobiles are one of the principal ways of getting around Spitsbergen in winter



Meaning 'hot springs lake' in Icelandic, Laugarvatn is dotted with a number of warm patches in its otherwise cold waters

## 22 LET OFF STEAM IN A SPA

In winter, Iceland gets colder than the freezers in the eponymous supermarket chain (and gets blasted by Atlantic gales to boot). Its saving grace during this time, however, is natural hot springs. Laugarvatn Fontana is one place to experience Iceland's geothermal activity first hand: with guests sweating in steam rooms parked over natural steam vents and (if they're brave) paddling in the adjacent lake. There's also a geothermal bread-baking demonstration – the bread is cooked in the earth and served with smoked trout.

● Spa admission £14, bakery demonstration £8, fontana.is



## 23 SNOWSHOE THROUGH BALKAN MOUNTAINS

The mountains around Sarajevo have a troubled history – the location for the 1984 Winter Olympics, they were later used as vantage points in the siege of the Bosnian capital. Nearly 20 years into the region's recovery, Exodus offers guided snowshoe tours of these little-explored mountains, pitched at more experienced winter walkers. Staying in simple mountain cabins, participants pick their way through pine forests and alongside steep gorges, ascending quiet mountains where crowds once cheered on Olympic hopefuls, and dining on hearty Bosnian highland food in remote shepherds' hamlets. The tour concludes with a walk up Trebevic – a mountain facing down to the minarets, tower blocks and tramways of Sarajevo.

● Eight days from £999 excl flights; exodus.co.uk

## 24 SNIFF OUT WOLVES IN SWEDEN

Wolves are elusive creatures – prone to scampering back into the cover of the great northern forests when their snouts detect the faintest whiff of intruding humans. Winter, however, affords the best chance of spotting them before they sense your presence – especially in places like central Sweden, where their tracks are visible in deep snow, and young wolves are sometimes sighted bounding over the open ground of frozen lakes. Wild Sweden offers a three-day wolf-tracking trip in forests just two hours west of Stockholm – beginning with a lecture and slide-show about the animals, and ending with guests eating dinner in the open air, hoping to hear the howls of distant wolves carrying through the night. One-day wolf-tracking itineraries can also be booked.

● Three-days from £495 excl flights; wildsweden.com

## 25 SKI STRAIGHT FROM THE DOORSTEP OF YOUR CHALET

In common parlance, a 'well-located' ski lodge might be within a short saunter from the chair lifts, or else a fairly easy potter away from the run. In Switzerland's Hameau les Clèves, however, it's a case of stepping out of the doorstep and slipping downhill with barely the chance to slam the door behind you. Set high above the Rhône valley with superlative views of the surrounding peaks, this alpine chalet opens right out on to the piste, and stands in the midst of nearly 250 miles of ski runs. Snowshoeing and walking trips can also be arranged by day, while massages, a Jacuzzi and nightly three-course Scandinavian-themed dinners promise to keep guests entertained by night.

● From £595 for a week incl dinners and breakfasts; hameaulesclèves.ch

## 26 PRETEND TO BE A POLAR EXPLORER

For anyone who has ever fancied themselves as a prospective Shackleton or Nansen (but didn't fancy the frostbite or the substantial chance of an icy demise), Spitsbergen Travel offers a crash course in being a polar explorer – a four-day expedition crossing Norway's northernmost inhabited island. Beginning in May and departing from the town of Longyearbyen, the supervised trip takes explorers from the west coast eastwards to the Barents Sea – skiing down glaciers, hauling sleds and sheltering in mountain tents. Be warned: polar bears may or may not make a cameo appearance at some point in the expedition.

● From £1,155 exc flights; spitsbergentravel.com  
● For a slightly easier expedition, take a five-hour glacier-walking tour (from £60; svalbardvillmarksenter.no) →

PHOTOGRAPH: GISLELIL HRAFNSSON



Skijoring featured once as an event in the Winter Olympics – in St Moritz, Switzerland, in 1928

## 27 GO SKIJORING

Generally, skiers depend on gravity or their own ski poles to provide propulsion. With skijoring, however, the responsibility instead rests entirely on a horse. Or perhaps a dog. And very occasionally a motorbike. Get to grips with the equestrian variant of this eccentric Nordic sport with a tutorial in Les Gets – a village set deep in the French Alps. A bit like waterskiing but on snow, skijoring sees participants holding on to a harness as they swish through snowy meadows hauled by noble steeds – starting with a brisk trot for first timers and advancing to a canter for seasoned skijorers. ● One-hour ride from £40; skijoring-lesgets.com

## 28 GO ICE CLIMBING IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

Come summer, the more popular trails in the Scottish Highlands closely resemble the queues at Alton Towers. During winter, however, there's no such problem – with glorious snow-swathed munros and icy moors almost

wholly devoid of people. To learn the skills needed to conquer this landscape during the colder months, head to the Ice Factor mountaineering centre in the village of Kinlochleven. Here, courses cover a variety of skills – from safe winter rambling to full-on action-hero-style ice-climbing – all in the company of a seasoned instructor. Guests put new skills into practice in the frosty landscapes nearby, from the crags of Glen Coe to the slopes of Ben Nevis itself. ● Courses available from £80; ice-factor.co.uk

## 29 DRIVE A SNOWCAT IN AUSTRIA

Pootling around the slopes of the Austrian Alps at a steady speed of 10 miles per hour is, by the standards of skiers, a modest achievement. What makes this especially exciting, however, is being surrounded by 10 tonnes of metal, spinning caterpillar tracks and billowing snow, sitting in the warm cabin of a snowcat. Used to tidy up pistes across the world (and looking not unlike a vehicle from *Thunderbirds*), the snowcat at Maiskogel mountain in Zell am See is

available for members of the general public to take an evening spin in, with up to two and a half hours' puttering up and down the hillsides. ● From £40; maiskogel.at

## 30 HUDDLE UP IN A MEDIEVAL MOUNTAIN VILLAGE

Looking like the sort of place where Dante might have penned the *Inferno*, Sextantio Albergo Diffuso offers rooms in medieval buildings in the Italian village of Santo Stefano

di Sessanio, set among remote mountains east of Rome. When the village is dusted with powdery snow, the hotel leases snowshoes to guests hoping to explore the uplands of the surrounding Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park. When the light fails, dine on traditional Abruzzo charcuterie in the hotel restaurant, before stacking logs on your room's blackened fireplace, and watching the light of the flames dancing on ancient stone walls. ● Three nights from £160, incl dinner for two; sextantio.it



Sextantio Albergo Diffuso was created as part of a restored medieval hill town in Abruzzo, Italy