

Our Lapland Christmas Adventure - Bentours Package Christmas 2014

To say we were excited about our Christmas adventure is an understatement. Only I had never seen snow yet alone be able to be waist deep in it so although completely under prepared for the really temperature change off we set to enjoy a White Christmas in Lapland.

Leaving Adelaide we decided that a few nights in Amsterdam before heading to Lapland might help with the temperature change and also allow us to buy the clothing we would really need to cope with the snowy weather we were about to experience.

Amsterdam was beautiful as always, cold yet not unbearable once kitted out as necessary. We stayed at the Hotel Grand Krasnapolsky. This hotel was located in the centre square of Amsterdam which made for really easy walking to every destination (except the Airport - but the train is close by so we took that to the airport). It still surprises me the confusion at check in when you have 2 hotel rooms booked under different names. Our daughter Brittany is 15 hence an adult and therefore 2 rooms is quite often necessary. The Hotel Grand Krasnapolsky was having it reception and main entrance renovated so through a little side door we go. Breakfast in the Winter Garden Room was definitely the best for the month we were away. It catered for absolutely everyone and the room was beautiful. Definitely recommend this hotel if staying in Amsterdam - close to bars, restaurants, shopping, cafes & train station.

Now we are about to set off on our Bentour to Lapland using Finnair for our flights. When we checked in at Amsterdam we had the option to have our bags sent direct to Ivalo even though we had a night stopover in Helsinki. It made it so easy. Just put overnight things in one carry on for what was a 10 hour stopover. We bought the most magnificent winter boots in Helsinki, so warm.... with a 4am start we were on our way to Ivalo the next morning.

Ivalo was cold to say the least as it is located quite a way up from the Arctic Circle. Snow everywhere which the girls were so excited to see it took us ages to get inside the terminal as they need to play in it. Ivalo terminal is like all rural terminals - tiny. Luckily finding your transfers in easy. It is 9am and still dark which was quite amusing. The sun was due to rise at 11am and set again at 12.30pm. All it does is get a little brighter, quite a different feeling being in the dark most of the day. Our coach transfer was to Kakslauttanen Hotel which was only about an hour away but you need to watch for the odd reindeer crossing the road rather than our kangaroos....

We arrived at the East Village of the Kakslauttanen Hotel not realising there were 2 villages. We were meant to be staying at the West Village which was only about 1-2 km away. As you can imagine we are now surrounded by waist deep soft fluffy snow that the kids just couldn't keep out of. Snow fights, snow sledding were on the cards but now the outside temperature was -20°C which is really, really cold so we kept our outside time limited and came back into the lodge to warm up and for Sophie to change her clothes but had a good look around. The igloos were hard to find in this village with people getting lost trying to find them.

We arrived about 10am and needed to wait until 12.30pm for our transfers to the west village. This time crept out to 1pm and then 2.30pm. I think we managed to get a transfer over about 3pm or so and on our arrival we asked where we had been as they were expecting us at 9am and our igloos were ready. Very frustrating considering there was absolutely nothing to do at the east village yet lots to do at the west. Our package had breakfast and dinner included but not lunch as



you are out on activities most days that included lunch, but as we were just waiting and lunch rolled around we had the broth and bread on offer and they charged us for it... very cheeky.

Once we finally got over to the West Village it was wonderful. The igloos were amazing with room for 4 (if your child is not of 'adult' age). They were warm and cosy with zebra bedspreads and remotes so you could sit up in bed if you wanted. They had really warm showers which apparently the ones in the East Village did not. Luckily the girls were in the igloo next to us and so we could see them through the glass roof. Going between the 2 igloos meant getting all your warm layers on and making a dash for it. We had to transfer our own luggage to the igloos which was done on wooden sleds, very funny as hard covered suitcases tend to slip off when placed on icy sleds and going around corners and down valleys. It was about 4pm now and getting really dark and there is no signage so "Your igloos are 34 & 35 down the road, past 3 streets to your left and then just look for the number" was very interesting. Off we pushed, getting a 'ride' on the sled when you can.

The West Village was fantastic and definitely the newer one if you are booking any of these packages you should request the West Village for both the igloos and log cabins. The dining hall was a nice walk away in the snow and situated right next to Santa's Workshop. Strange situation as it seemed that you needed to book a tour of Santa's Workshop to be able to enjoy the full facilities. We were able to feed the reindeer they had there and enter into the little cabins but



were shooed out pretty quickly. We had dinner at 6pm and there was no way into the huge dining room until that time which was strange. The menu was set but they did cater for the kids quite well. Drinks were extra. They are adding to this village with extra dining room and activities room being built at the moment.

As it is so dark we all decided to head back to the igloos and endeavour to stay up late enough to see the beautiful northern lights. We tried so hard to stay awake but sleep took over. We all seemed to wake at about 4am and the lights were all aglow. Beautiful is an understatement. It is absolutely amazing. The lights we saw were mostly green due to our position on the earth and the time of the year, but they can be all sorts of colours at different times. We looked over to the girls igloo and noticed they were sitting up in bed looking at them too. So glad they woke up as the thought of getting all your gear on to go and wake them was not good.

We only had the one night in the igloos but staying for 2 or 3 nights would have been better. We checked out the next morning. Once again pushing our luggage back up the hill on the sleds that were now very icy to reception. Today we were booked to go a 4 hour Husky Safari. The temperature was about -24°C so again a little chilly. After meeting in reception we were kitted out in "outer gear" which you put over all your other clothing and you needed it!!

The Husky tour left from our West Village so we just walked up to the Husky enclosure and the dogs were going crazy. We could choose one person to 'drive' and one person to 'ride' the sleds. I had Sophie and at 7yo I was doing all the driving. The riders got to sit on reindeer pelts that had been lying out in the snow, so cold and frozen they were but better than nothing.

This was amazing for the driver not so for the rider. With the wind chill factor now kicking in it would have been about -30°C and the riders had nothing to cover them and we were whipping along. 6 husky dogs love to run and don't like to stop. They also love to eat the reindeer pelts if they are anywhere nearby. Poor Sophie & Brittany and all the other riders were all but frozen solid. Britt's hair did actually freeze. 3 layers of clothing on all parts of your body wasn't enough for the girls and 4 hours was longer than you realise. As the driver I had the best time. They are amazing animals with so much energy. I had trouble stopping mine when they needed to be and apparently I was meant to help them by running up hills pushing the sleds but we got to the top before they let me off. Well worth the time to do but dress really warm if you are a rider.

At the end of the tour we arrived back at the husky enclosure and we ushered into a teepee to warm up and have some hot soup and bread for lunch. The kids were so cold they really didn't warm up at all but the broth was Sophie's favourite so we stayed and had this and then went back to reception to wait for our transfer back to the East Village for our Log Cabin stay.



Mid-afternoon we are back at the east village and again required to sled our luggage to our cabin which was "Down to the left and keep walking until you find cabin 22". In the dark and with all signs covered with snow we sled past our cabin and had to turn around and go back. We were initially booked into 2 cabins but we were able to change before leaving Oz into 1 which was just perfect. You had the ability to have an open fire going but you just needed to fetch your wood first. Lots of people we talked to did this as they were staying in the cabins for a few days. We were

only staying one night so opted not to but we didn't really need to as they were so warm anyway. Full kitchen facilities, 2 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms, a sauna in the master bathroom and great living, dining area. I would definitely stay in these for longer if you had the time. Really great family time together. Dinner that night was back in the reception Lodge. It was salted Reindeer which was really nice. The girls had chicken schnitzels instead.

That night we were booked to go Aurora Hunting on Snowmobiles. The girls were still a little frozen from their Husky Adventure so just Dave & I went without them. As the girls didn't come we had our own snowmobiles. Everyone else had to share and once again the passengers all said they got really cold. Great fun, but heavy little suckers they are. Over the moguls and across the main highway we go into the forest to see if the Lights wanted to show up or not. NOT it was. Not a sighting anywhere that night. We did learn that they only tend to come out every other night in this area and it is just pot luck. A great night on the snowmobiles though, with all our outerwear including balaclava needed. This was a great tour and had the light shown up like they did the night before it would have been even better.

As it had been a really cold day for us we tried out the sauna when we got back to the cabin at about 11pm. It was such a great temperature change from the -30°C we had just been in that I could stay in there for very long.

23 December we checked out of our cabin at an early 7am so that we could catch our transfer to Rovaniemi. This transfer was located on the main highway. The coach/bus was not coming into the village to pick us up it was just one of the local buses that travels from Ivalo to Rovaniemi on a daily basis. We had to wheel our suitcases over the road to a bus stop in the pitch black with cars and trucks travelling at 100km whooshing past. We were advised that our transfer would be there somewhere between 8.45am and 9.15am. So waiting in the -30°C weather on the side of a highway is not for everyone. When the bus finally arrived it was all but full, which meant that even if you had bought a ticket you were not guaranteed a seat. There were at least 8 people from our pickup that were sitting in the aisle of the bus. Not very good!!

A 3 hour bus ride got us to Rovaniemi where we were booked into the Santa Claus Hotel for Christmas. We were met at the bus station by our Lapland Safari guides that took us to their office to fit us all out with outerwear that we would then keep for our whole stay. They were fantastic. Took the kids over and sorted them out with clothing and boots that fitted well. We all had our own bags with our gear in it and we were now set to go.

Our Christmas in Lapland package included accommodation, meals & drinks, a trip to Santa's Hideaway, visit from Santa at the Hotel on Christmas Eve and gift for the children, Christmas Day at the Snow Fun Park, Boxing Day touring the local Museum and Santa's Village. There are options to do the Husky tours and Aurora Borealis tours at an extra cost while you are there but as we had just done them we decided not to.

Christmas Eve was spent at Santa's Hideaway. Although -24°C it was sunny so you are tricked into thinking it is not that cold until you step outside and your nose hairs freeze once again. It was a great day though. Playing with elves, making snow angels, reindeer sled rides (where we got our reindeer license that is valid for 4 years), visiting Santa's workshop and the kids getting a letter from Santa as he was too busy to be there at that time. Lunch in big teepees again or soup and paella which the kids loved again. We were there for about 4 hours playing in the snow and decorating Christmas Trees. Best day ever according to Sophie.



When we returned to the hotel and got changed we were invited to decorate gingerbread biscuits and more Christmas Trees before Santa's visit to the kids. In case you were wondering Santa is REAL... He has a really long beard that touches his knees. The kids were so excited but this was the extent of our Christmas. There were little Christmas decorations around the hotel or in the dining rooms. No carols being sung... you definitely need to bring your own Christmas Spirit with you. As we were staying at Santa's Hotel we had hoped that there would have been much more.



Christmas Day was 'Fun in the Snow'. There was ice fishing, quad bikes, little snowmobiles for the kids, snowmobile rides, skis, mini golf and lots of other snow related activities to keep you busy. It got to around -40°C with the wind chill factor this day so everyone got cold pretty quickly. You had to keep busy to try and stay warm. Some of the kids got the start of frostbite but were able to catch it before it took hold. Loads of laughter and squeals could be heard for most of the day. But we were glad to get back on the coach to go back to the hotel. Lunch was soup and sausages which really didn't interest the kids so we went to the local Italian restaurant when we got back and enjoyed a late lunch/early dinner for Christmas night.

We didn't head down for dinner that night but were advised that it was the same as the night before. Buffet style that ran out of food fast and drinks hard to come by. The kids buffet was really good with all the usual, so

at least you knew they were eating well. For the money you pay to stay here it was pretty disappointing. I heard this from many others as there were heaps of Aussie staying with us. They also said they had done the Husky and Moonlight Safari as extra tours and were really disappointed. They were not allowed to drive the Huskies or snowmobiles. On Christmas night due to the extreme cold they cancelled the Husky tour if you had children booked as well which disappointed quite a few.

Boxing Day we heading to the Arktikum (Museum) for a couple of hours which is great if you like Museums and learning about other cultures but lots of Aussie's don't and so the whinging started early this day. We loved it and learnt so much about the history of Lapland and how the Aurora Borealis are formed. Next stop of Santa Claus' Village. There was lunch provided in a big house full of about 5 coaches of people. Hard to get around and if you had dietary requirements they could not be catered for very easily. It was at least a decent meal.

After lunch there was a short walk to the Village. This place is fantastic but you need a whole day there not just a couple of hours. There are rides, shops, Santa's Post Office and of course the Big Man himself. Lots to see and do but not enough time. We were scheduled to see Santa at 3pm so we lined up and had our photo taken with him but it was then time to catch the coach back to the hotel as we had some making up their Husky tours from the day before. Nowhere near enough time spent here. There is also Santa's Park next door to the Village which had all sorts of rides for the family to enjoy. We didn't have the option to go here but it sure would be worth staying longer in Rovaniemi to spend time at the Village and the Park.



For dinner this night we went to an igloo restaurant which was amazing. You needed all your outerwear on to experience this. The chairs were not made of ice and had warm reindeer pelts on them so nice and warm but the tables and the building itself were all made of ice. We had vodka shots in ice glasses too which you need to drink fast so your lips didn't freeze to them. A great way to end what was a wonderful snow adventure.



To be honest I don't think you get your value for money in this package for the time of year we travelled. The hotel seems to be short on staff at dinner time. The bar was often closed or down to just one staff member. The buffet dinners were busy and cramped and there was just no real Christmas atmosphere to offer. If they offered the same package at a different time of the year other than missing seeing Santa himself the rest of it would be wonderful. There were lots of Australian families there with us. Not only staying at our hotel but at the other 4 that were nearby so it definitely on peoples bucket lists of things to do. And not just families. There were plenty of couples and older people there too.

We had a little mix up with our return flights on the 27th Dec but all got sorted thanks to the internet and a credit card. All in all we had a fantastic time, met wonderful people and families that live here in Australia and loved the snow. The northern lights are something you will want to see if you can at some point but they are wonderful in Norway too. I have added some photos of our fun in the snow.

To warm up we heading down to Milan and then out on an MSC Cruise to the East side of the Mediterranean going to Rome, Messina, Athens, Istanbul, Olympia and Malta. The weather was still cold but at least it only got to -1°C. We stayed at the Crowne Plaza in Milan both before and after our cruise. It was a great location. On top of the Metro Subway line to centre of Milan and 2 blocks away from the Central Station where we needed to catch the train to Genoa for our cruise. So easy and wonderful staff. They kept an eye out for our missing suitcase and even chased it up while we were cruising but it must be under snow in Helsinki we think!!



We only lost 1 suitcase between our Christmas adventure and Milan which has still not shown up. Poor Brittany had to go shopping in Milan for new clothes. This wasn't as easy as it should have been but got some clothes to wear on our cruise and a new suitcase out of it.

After our cruise we now have 4 more places to visit and spend more time in. What an amazing place Europe is. So much history!! Just love it.

Happy Travels
Cathy Hewett
Tewantin Travel



