

VUOLLERIM

A magical visit to Swedish Lapland

(The Sunday Telegraph)

As you head north along Sweden's Highway 97 towards the Arctic Circle, you notice black plastic sacks tied to posts at regular intervals, fluttering against the snow. You might take them for a reminder to hardy picnickers to take their litter with them – but you would be wrong. These improvised flags are a warning from the indigenous Sámi herdsman that their reindeer are grazing in the vicinity: look carefully and you may spot their antlered heads moving slowly through the trees.

The road has long carried visitors from the north-eastern port of Luleå (pronounced 'Loulyou') to Jokkmokk, a small town where Sámi from across Scandinavia and Russia gather every February for a 400-year-old market. Lately, however, an even smaller settlement has set about persuading tourists to make a detour. Vuollerim – population 800 – invites you to meet its inhabitants in their own homes and experience authentic village life in Swedish Lapland.

Vuollerim does not boast a traffic light. Its principal amenities are a school, a village hall and two hotels with 34 rooms between them. But this is not to say that its inhabitants are provincial: the ones we met were well-travelled and, like most Swedes, spoke excellent English. Nor are they lacking in enterprise: when the Gästgiveriet Hotel closed down, 140 of them banded together to buy it and refurbish it, with a different family decorating each room.

The village is blessed with a supremely picturesque setting at the meeting point of two rivers (both, confusingly, called the Luleå) with a backdrop of tree-lined hills. In winter the rivers freeze over and the beauty of the snowbound forest makes Christmas cards seem superfluous; in summer the landscape is lush and green. So varied are the seasons that the locals speak of eight of them rather than four (winter, winter spring, spring, spring summer and so on); but each is held to have its particular charm. In June comes the midnight sun, and

six months later the ‘blue light’ when day never dawns. The Northern Lights can be seen – if you strike lucky – from early December.

It all sounds hard to resist; but there are other places in Swedish Lapland which offer similar wonders, which is why Vuollerim has had to come up with some extra attractions to put itself on the map. One of these is the Ice Lantern Festival, started ten years ago by two villagers to coincide with the influx of tourists for the Jokkmokk Market.

The art of making an ice lantern is quickly learnt. You get a bucket, fill it with water, and leave it out in the cold until a couple of inches of ice have formed all the way round. Then you turn it upside down, knock a hole in the top, and pour off the remaining water, leaving a cavity which comfortably accommodates a large candle. It doesn’t demand great skill, but it’s heavy work, so to fill the village with enough lanterns to make a decent display involves dragooning as much of the population as possible. This year the stakes were particularly high: Vuollerim was trying for a place in the Guinness Book of Records. Its target was 2,000 lanterns, all lit at the same time, to be counted at nightfall by two incorruptible external assessors.

When we arrived on the day of the challenge, we were not in a mood to be easily impressed. We’d spent the night 25 miles away in the most extraordinary hotel I have ever set eyes on: the Tree Hotel at Harads. The main building, once an old people’s home, has been kept as a time capsule of the early 1960s, with period posters on the wall and 50-year-old equipment in the kitchen; but the bedrooms – tucked half a mile away in the woods, each perched in a tree – are altogether 21st-century. Ours, the Cabin (reached by a ramp) was a black shoebox-shaped structure twenty feet above the ground with dizzying forest views. The others include the Bird’s Nest, sitting on a mass of interwoven logs, and the futuristic silver UFO.

On top of that, we’d been snowmobiling from the hotel and spotted something not even our guide had seen before: wolf tracks. (Moose, lynx,

wolverines and even bears are also found in the region.) Vuollerim had a hard act to follow.

It didn't take long to get our bearings. On the main street we found the Gästgiveriet Hotel, supermarket and tourist office; we passed charming houses with old-fashioned wooden porches, painted in the typical colours of the Swedish countryside – rust red and mustard yellow. Then we were crossing the dam whose construction meant a brief boom for the village in the 1960s, before looping back past the fire station and church. It all looked wonderfully picturesque in the snow; but you couldn't help wondering what lay beneath the surface. Was this Sweden's answer to Ambridge, or Twin Peaks?

As day faded to twilight, the main street filled with figures hurrying to and fro, lighting the ice lanterns. Most had been put in position the previous day, but – in an unexpected setback for the would-be record-breakers – had disappeared in overnight snow and had to be dug out again. With the results of the count due at 6pm, an eager crowd gathered around the ice stage in the village square – and now the scene was reminiscent of *Groundhog Day*, lacking only Bill Murray's grumpy weatherman. One after another, key individuals were called to the microphone to reflect on their lantern-making experiences; a group of schoolgirls sang a song. It was small-town with a capital S.

But as we watched – with the local doctor acting as our interpreter – it was impossible not to be infected by the enthusiasm and bonhomie. We applauded the speakers with our snow-gloved hands; we cheered the singers. And as the Guinness assessors mounted the stage, we held our breath with all of those around us. At last the figure was announced: 2,651.

The mood at the Gästgiveriet Hotel that evening was jubilant. The dining-room was booked out, but chairs were moved and tables reconfigured to make room for us. I found myself opposite a cheerful accountant for the state forestry company. Did his job involve counting the trees? No, he said, fortunately not.

The next morning we made the half-hour journey to Jokkmokk, crossing the Arctic Circle a few miles south of it. Beyond the trees which bordered the road, small islands stood frozen in the river.

The town centre was closed to traffic as stalls and yurt cafés were set up for the market. The reindeer had not yet arrived, but on the outskirts a ‘historical’ market could be found offering a glimpse of the ancient Sámi way of life.

Figures clad in wolf skins tended fires ingeniously sandwiched between split tree trunks, guaranteed to keep you warm – and alive – during the Arctic night; traders were offering furs, felt rugs and hunting knives in profusion.

What makes the Sámi particularly fascinating is the way in which they have kept their culture alive in an unaccommodating world. Jokkmokk’s impressive Ájtte Museum, with its black-and-white film footage of nomadic life and its displays of exquisite traditional dress and silverware, is a monument to their ingenuity and adaptability. Today they use snowmobiles and helicopters, but reindeer remain central to their existence.

Jokkmokk is also a centre for outdoor activities, which in Swedish Lapland range from skiing (downhill, cross-country, or even *tolka* – pulled by a horse) to fishing for trout and Arctic char (through the ice in winter, with a fly in summer). My top choice would be dog-sledding, though we in fact tried it further south, at the Svedjekojan Husky Farm, half an hour from Lulea. The dogs proved so well-trained that the effort involved was minimal – just a little shifting of weight from side to side and an occasional foot on the brake as we sped through a frosted forest and across a frozen lake in a spray of snow. The pleasure lay not only in the sled’s smooth running and the beauty of our surroundings, but in the dogs’ teamwork and enthusiasm. (Despite their surprisingly small size, they can cover up to 50 miles a day.)

It was another form of transport, ‘spark-sledding’, that we used for the last event of our stay in Vuollerim: a ‘house-jumping’ dinner. A ‘spark sled’ is a wooden chair on steel runners which you propel from the back like a scooter;

‘house-jumping’ involves moving from one home in the village to another for each course.

Our first stop was a modern house belonging to the local tourist officer, who greeted us with a hug and served us a tasty roulade of reindeer meat and freshly baked bread. Half a dozen other villagers made up the rest of the party; the food, we were told, was prepared by a team behind the scenes, leaving the hosts free to entertain the guests.

And entertain us they did, even performing a specially composed house-jumping song, *Ett hopp för Vuollerim* (‘Let’s jump for Vuollerim’). The mood was exuberant after the previous night’s ice-lantern triumph, which – along with music and politics – formed the main topic of conversation. Outside the lanterns were still burning, giving an extra air of welcome as we spark-sledded along the icy road to the next venue – a more traditional house, once the vicarage, belonging to the head of the fire brigade and her husband. Here we feasted on excellent slow-cooked moose with morel sauce, and were told of the most ambitious house-jumping dinner to date: an assembly of 45 visitors and fifteen locals.

At our final stop, where we sampled exquisite cloudberry tart and homemade gingerbread, we were the guests of a successful businesswoman. At the height of her career, she told us, she had realised that no amount of success would bring her the contentment she had known as a child in Vuollerim; so she had come home, renovated a small house which had belonged to her favourite cousins, and embarked on a new career as a life coach, Skyping clients across Europe and the USA. Her story seemed to sum up a very small village with very broad horizons. I left feeling keen to return next winter; or winter spring; or spring summer...