

FINLAND NORTHERN LIGHTS TRAVEL GUIDE



I sat down last year with a goal of creating my ultimate European bucket list. We will only be able to live in London for so long and the low-cost direct flights to all of Europe are something that we will miss the most when we move back to the states. Seeing the Northern Lights was top of my list of things I wanted to see.

So I started by googling the **best places to see the Northern Lights**.

Booking A Trip – My Step by Step Template

Not surprisingly, the further north you go the better chance you have of seeing them. Furthermore, things like lunar phases, light pollution, and time of year – things you can control – and cloud coverage – something you can't control – will define your chances. Countries include Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Greenland, Scotland, and even Alaska. I think after reading more about Finland, it just caught my interest! Flights were plentiful and direct from London due to its tourist destination status, and all the activities you can do looked so fun!

So we picked Lapland in Finland for our northern lights trip. From there, you have to pick what region you go to, which is no easy task! There are slightly different regional activities in each place. We ended up picking Ivalo as the airport we flew into mainly because of the direct flights from London but also because it's the northernmost airport you can fly into giving us the biggest chance of seeing the lights.

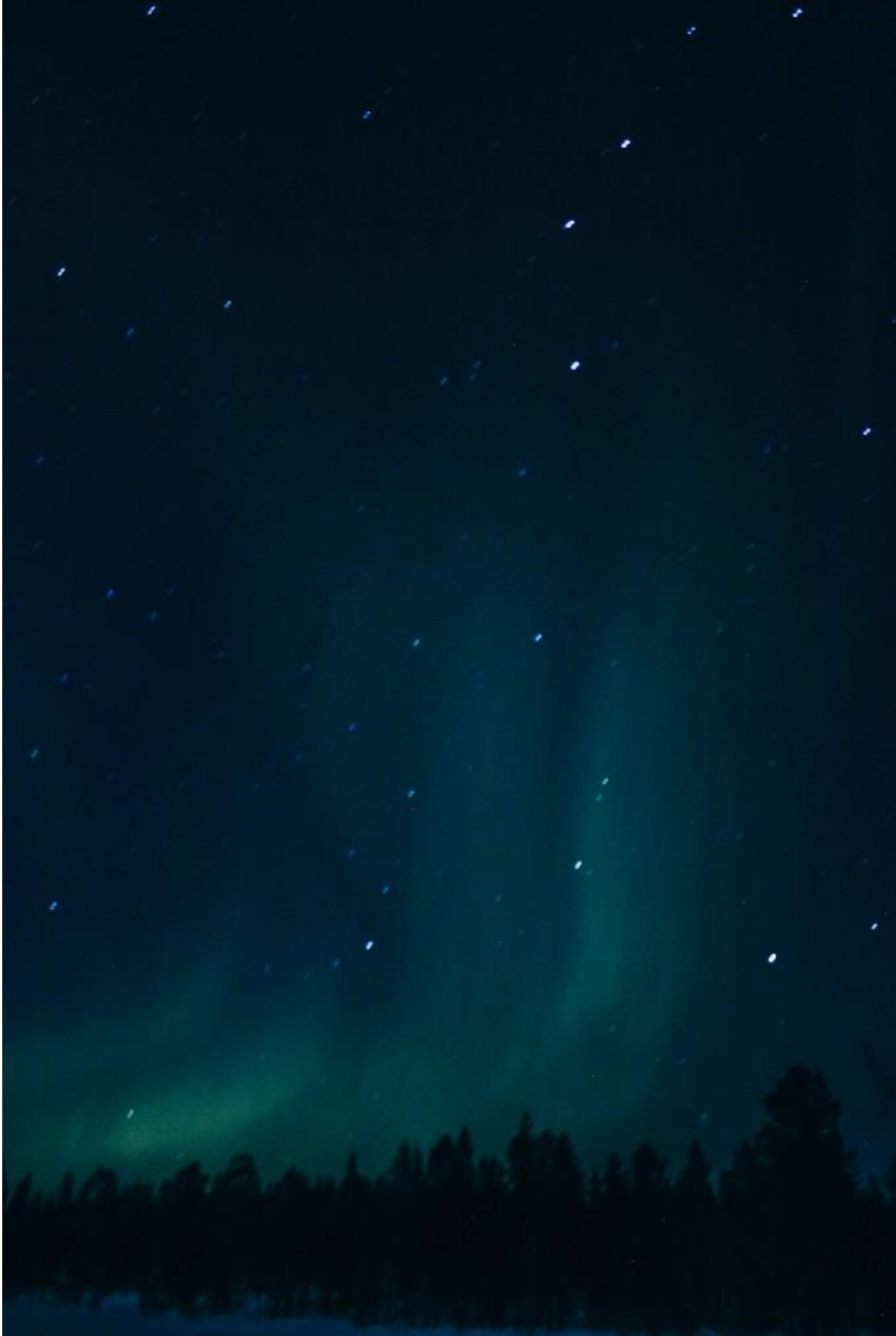
In this guide I'll cover everything I learned when planning the trip and while in Lapland. This was really one of the most amazing trips I've ever been on, even without any beaches :).

SHOULD I VISIT LAPLAND?

If you have any interest in seeing the Northern Lights, then yes. But it's also great if you want to see Santa's workshop (perfect for kiddos), ride a sleigh with huskies, go sledding, go ice fishing, stay in a glass room, ride an ice breaker ship and float in the ice water, go skiing, and so much more!

A lot of people have asked me what the cold was like. It's true that the temperature during the day is between 0 and 20 F or -10 and -30 C. And when you are outside for extended periods, it is cold! You definitely need a good winter coat, warm pants (we wore ski pants with thermals under), and good snow boots are pretty important as well. All of the tour guides offer huge snow jumpsuits, big snow boots, and gloves. So when you are on any of the excursions you will have the option to be even warmer for free (take them up on the offer!!). I am really not a fan of the cold, but I found it totally bearable. Granted, we had sunny skies the whole time we were there and I kept saying I couldn't imagine how cold we would be if it was snowing or even overcast....

If you only get to budget one big trip a year and prefer the sun, then maybe this isn't your first option. I probably would have never visited if I didn't live in London since I love beaches so much. If you are on the fence, read some of my other country posts to see which one inspires the most wanderlust in you – **Greece**, **Italy**, or maybe **Thailand**.



WHAT TIME OF YEAR SHOULD I VISIT LAPLAND TO SEE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS?

Lapland in Finland is known for two things: Northern Lights and visiting Santa's workshop. Did you know that all of the letters in the world addressed to Santa go to Lapland? So cool! If you're coming to see Santa, his workshops are open year round – but November through December are going to be super busy and magical. When it comes to Northern Lights, I think it's really important to note here that you are not guaranteed to see the Northern Lights during your trip. Finland is said to have northern lights 200 nights a year, but there are so many factors that determine whether you see them. You can help your chances in a few ways.

First, visit during the winter. September through March give the greatest chances. We went end of February and saw them every night. One guide told us a lady came for 6 weeks in November and December and only saw them twice, but he said that was just random this year – some Novembers and Decembers are completely clear.

When thinking about what month in the year to visit, also consider that the further north you go the fewer hours of sunlight you have during the day in winter. The average hours of daylight in December is just 1.5. September is 10.5. October is 6.5. November is 4.5. January is 4.5. February is 6.5. March is 10.5. We went end of February and had 10.5 hours.

Second, visit during a new moon. Too much light from the moon will negatively affect the ability to see the Northern Lights. Use a [lunar phase calendar](#) and try to go the closest to a new moon as possible. We went during the "waxing crescent" phase.

Third, there are actually years that are better than others according to the Solar Cycle. The Northern Lights are caused by the sun's interaction with our atmosphere. So you would want to visit in a high activity year. The last high activity year was 2014 and the cycle is every 11 years, so the next best time would be 2025?? We visited in 2020 which I guess would be one of the lowest years and still saw them! But maybe they were weaker than some. They were good enough for me! [Here's an article](#) that explains this more if you are interested.



HOW DO I GET TO LAPLAND?

If you're coming from the US, you are probably connecting in Helsinki. It could be nice to spend a few days there!

As far as **what airport to fly into**, because there are 6 in total I'll talk a little about each one and the benefits.

IVALO

This is where we flew to from London. There were nonstop flights three times a week – so we were able to fly in Thursday and out Sunday. I also picked Ivalo because it's the furthest north airport you can fly into. It has all of the standard things you can do in Lapland. They even have a Santa resort in Saariselkä. Saariselkä also has a small ski hill if you want to ski. This is where we tobogganed!

ROVANIEMI

Rovaniemi is the main airport in Lapland. It's also where the main, huge Santa's village is. So it's a very international destination for that! I wasn't interested in Rovaniemi because I wanted to get away from the light pollution as much as possible to see the lights. But if you want to have a ton of things to do or if you have kids, Rovaniemi might be good for you. It also has the most flights per day.

KEMI

I originally was interested in flying to Kemi because they have this excursion on an ice breaker ship where you can float on the ice in giant waterproof suits. It sounded so unique! Flights from London to Kemi weren't great, and it's also further south in Lapland. I'll talk more about that excursion below.

KITTILA

If you really want to ski during your Finnish vacation, then this is where you want to fly into. There are two ski resorts in this area – Levi and Ylläs. I read that at night Levi shuts off all the lights at the resort to eliminate light pollution so it's easier to see the Northern Lights – so cool!!

ENONTEKIO AND KUUSAMO

These are two additional airports in Lapland that I didn't do any research on. Enontekio looks far north like Ivalo. [This article](#) shows what you can do there and it sounds exactly the same as Ivalo!

Kuusamo is the furthest south airport, similar longitude to Kemi. It looks like it is most known for a giant ski resort – but if you want to see the northern lights it's probably not a great choice.

So in conclusion, Ivalo or Enontekio are probably best if you want to see the Northern Lights and do winter activities. Kittila is best if you want to ski and stay in a bigger resort area with more amenities and also see the northern lights. There are winter activities other than skiing from here too. Rovaniemi is best if you want to see Santa or have the best flight deals to there, and Kemi is best if you really want to do the ice breaker excursion.

Check out [Google Flights](#) to book your flights to Lapland or set some flight trackers.



IS THERE A LANGUAGE BARRIER IN LAPLAND?

No. Tourists are aplenty in this region so all the tour operators and hotels have good English. Our **AirBnB** host did not have great English but he had enough to get by.

WHERE SHOULD I STAY IN LAPLAND?

One reason why people want to come here so bad is to stay at the amazing hotels! You can stay in a room completely made of ice or completely made of glass. You can stay in a luxurious wilderness hotel with all-inclusive gourmet meals and excursion packages. The hotels here honestly look amazing. To choose what part of the country to stay in, reference my above section "How do I get to Lapland".

WHERE WE STAYED – HIGHLY RECOMMEND!!!

My husband and I ended up staying in an **AirBnB** after I was getting the sweats about how much we were going to spend between the pricy excursions and pricy flights. I just have to give a true, genuine plug because it was definitely one of my top three favorite AirBnB experiences of all time. The reviews were incredible which is why I booked it, but I really felt like the service made me feel like I was staying in a 5 star hotel!

The apartment was very new and sparkling clean, but the land and the host were what made the trip. The host lives in a neighborhood in Ivalo that backs up to a forest. Just outside his door the light pollution is low enough to see the northern lights every night. He also lives a 2 minute drive from a large frozen-over lake that has the perfect unobstructed views of the lights. Every night when the lights came out the host would call me to let me know they were out. Most of the time he would come outside and meet us with his nice camera to take pictures of us with the lights in the background. He was just the best! And we paid about 1/5 of what I would have paid to stay in one of the nice hotels.



HIGH-END HOTELS AROUND IVALO

If you are wanting to have a blowout trip, you're probably wanting to stay in an "aurora cabin" – the all glass rooms that give you views of the northern lights. **Kakslauttanen** is the most well-known resort in Saariselka with aurora cabins. The resort is HUGE and very touristy. I think the service could be better if you read through reviews, but you do get those cabins. This resort opened in 1999 and was the first resort to introduce glass rooms!

The place that I was pining over were any of the **Wilderness Hotels**. They all look so luxurious and cozy without being too touristy. Each resort seems to have it's own personality, but they're all centered around the Ivalo Airport. They have all-inclusive rate options and excursions that you can book through the hotel. Some of the locations do have aurora cabins you can book.

We met a couple having a very luxurious trip in this very luxurious and expensive hotel called **Javri Lodge**. If you are really looking to splash out some cash, check out this property. There are no aurora cabins to book.

There are lots more options of place to stay, of course, on **Tripadvisor** and **AirBnB**, at various price ranges.



HOTELS IN OTHER AREAS

I read about a few other resorts across Lapland that could be good if you are flying into different airports. In Levi, **Levin Iglut** and **Northern Lights Ranch** are popular, beautiful hotels. In Kemi, **Seaside Glass Villas** look unreal and **Hotel Merihovi** is a great location. In Rovaniemi, you can stay at an aurora cabin type hotel called **TreeHouse Hotel**. **This article** has a list of a bunch of high-end destination hotels in Lapland as well.

HOW DO I GET AROUND LAPLAND?

Depending on how much you want to spend and what you want to do, you may want to get a rental car. If you are staying in the AirBnB, you will need a rental car for your meals – either to go to the grocery store or go to a restaurant. If you are staying in one of the fancy resorts, you may get away with not having a car. You can organise an airport transfer with them and then your excursion companies will gladly pick you up for all of your excursions.

If you are planning on visiting more than one area in Lapland, you will need a car to get between the two unless you want to use public transportation. We saw that public transportation was an option in Ivalo, but do you really want to stand in freezing weather waiting for a bus to come?

We rented a car from Avis at the Ivalo Airport and had a great experience. I read beforehand that driving on snow feels no different as long as you have snow tires, and obviously all these rental cars are equipped with snow tires. They all came with a scraper for ice on the windshield as well. It was super easy to drive around Finland in the snow.

I always use **Kayak** to look up the various rental car companies at the airport I am flying into along with the ratings and price for each one. Don't forget to check automatic if you can't drive manual!

HOW MANY DAYS SHOULD I SPEND IN LAPLAND?

As much as you can afford! This place is so beautiful and there's so much to do. For us, just sticking to the area around Ivalo, 3 nights was perfect. I can imagine if you are coming all the way from the US, you would want to spend longer than that. If you are going to spend longer, I would recommend visiting several different areas in Lapland and renting a car. I'll cover that in the activities below but each location has slightly different activities you can do. I would also plan on staying somewhere nice so that even if you don't have any activities planned, you can either go to the sauna or explore the hotel grounds.

We got in Thursday around 3, went to the grocery store, cooked dinner, and then did an aurora excursion from 8 PM until midnight. On Friday we did a husky excursion in the morning and drove to Saariselka to explore and go sledding in the evening. On Saturday we did a snowmobiling and ice fishing tour that lasted until the afternoon, went to go find reindeer, and then had our last dinner at home! With an extra day, we probably would have gone skiing in Saariselka but traveling to Levi and spending a few days there to go skiing at a bigger resort would have been ideal if we were staying for a week. After that we could have gone to Kemi to do the icebreaker ship or to Rovaniemi to explore Santa's workshop.

Just some ideas showing that you should spend anywhere from 3 days to a full week in Lapland / Finland. I'll talk about this some more at the end in my ideal itinerary section.



WHAT IS THERE TO DO IN LAPLAND?

I would recommend booking all your excursions ahead of time. They do sell out.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

This was our number one reason for coming to Lapland, so I'll start here. The good thing is that this happens late at night – between 9 PM and 1 AM usually – so it won't interfere with any other plans you have! The first step to seeing the Northern Lights is to stay in a part of the country where you can see them, which I explain above in "How do I get to Lapland". The second step is to try and stay in a hotel / AirBnB away from light pollution where you can see the lights just out your back door (or through your glass ceiling *heart eyes*). However, if you can't afford to stay in an aurora cabin or you're obsessed with a particular hotel that doesn't have great conditions, you can always pay for an excursion that will take you to an open area where you can see the lights. But I would probably recommend renting a car and just driving north until you see an open area. This will be a ton cheaper and more enjoyable.

We paid for an excursion the first night not realizing **how perfect our AirBnB was** for seeing the lights in the yard. So this is the one thing I regret paying for! During the excursion, you are basically driven two hours north in a van and then you stand in the cold for an hour watching the lights go by before you drive back. It is great if this is your only chance to see the lights. For us, we could stay in the warmth of our AirBnB and our host texted or called me every time the lights were out. I would throw on my 15 layers, run outside, take some pics, and then run back inside to the warmth – much better!!

Anyways, you will need to have **this website** bookmarked to see how much activity you will have each night. The map is updated at least every hour, and the brighter the blob over the part of the country you are in, the more likely you will see auroras (Northern Lights are also called auroras). If you look at this website in the summer, it will show the Southern Lights because you can't see the Northern Lights in the summer (you have sunshine for almost 24 hours a day!). Some of the fancier hotels will alert everyone when the lights are out via speaker or text message.

If you are interested in photographing the lights, that's a whole other thing! You will need to have a tripod for sure (**our AirBnB host** had one in our room to borrow, ily), a proper camera, and knowledge on how to change the settings. I have a Canon EOS Rebel T2i and had no idea what I was doing, but our tour guide the first night set it up for me.

Set your camera to Manual. The shutter speed will need to be set to 10 seconds, aperture to as low as possible, ISO to 1600 or higher, delay set for 2 seconds so you pressing the button doesn't add a shake to the picture, and focus set on the horizon/sky. Look up instructions for how to make all these changes on your camera. All these settings essentially allow your camera to capture as much light from the night as possible. You have to take the picture in a place where there is no other ambient light at all – no street lights, house lights, headlights, etc. I used **this article** to know what to set my camera to, but I still didn't really figure out how to take good pictures until the last night.

To summarize, here are my tips for photographing the Northern Lights:

- Borrow a friend's fancy DSLR camera for your trip if you don't have one
- Borrow or purchase a tripod or call your hotel / host to see if they have one you can use
- Look up how to change settings on your camera or try and figure it out yourself ahead of time
- Change your settings to shutter speed 10 seconds, aperture as low as possible (2.8-4), ISO to 1600-3200, delay of 2 seconds, and flash off
- In the daylight before you shoot the lights set your focus on the sky and then DON'T TOUCH IT. This was for me the hardest part – getting the focus right.

Here are my tips for seeing the Northern Lights:

- Pick a part of Finland with the best chance of seeing them (Ivalo, for example)

- Pick a hotel / AirBnB with the best chance of seeing them ([our AirBnB](#) on a budget, or something away from the city)
- Book an excursion if you can't meet either of the above conditions, or rent a car and drive to an open area yourself
- Pick a time of year with the best chance of seeing them (referenced in my section above, "What time of year...")
 - Make sure and have that [website](#) bookmarked to know when to run outside to see them!
 - Know that you may not see them your entire trip due to *numerous* factors, but it will still be an amazing trip

To book an excursion, [here](#) is the tour operator we used in Ivalo. I booked them because they said they cancel the tour if there's no change of seeing the lights that night, which I really liked. They also took lots of pictures of the lights and of us and sent them after the trip for free. [Lapland Safaris](#) is super popular and has multiple locations all over Lapland. If you stay in Rovaniemi, there are several cute, small, family-owned companies including [Explore Lapland](#), [Wild About Lapland](#), and [Beyond Arctic](#).



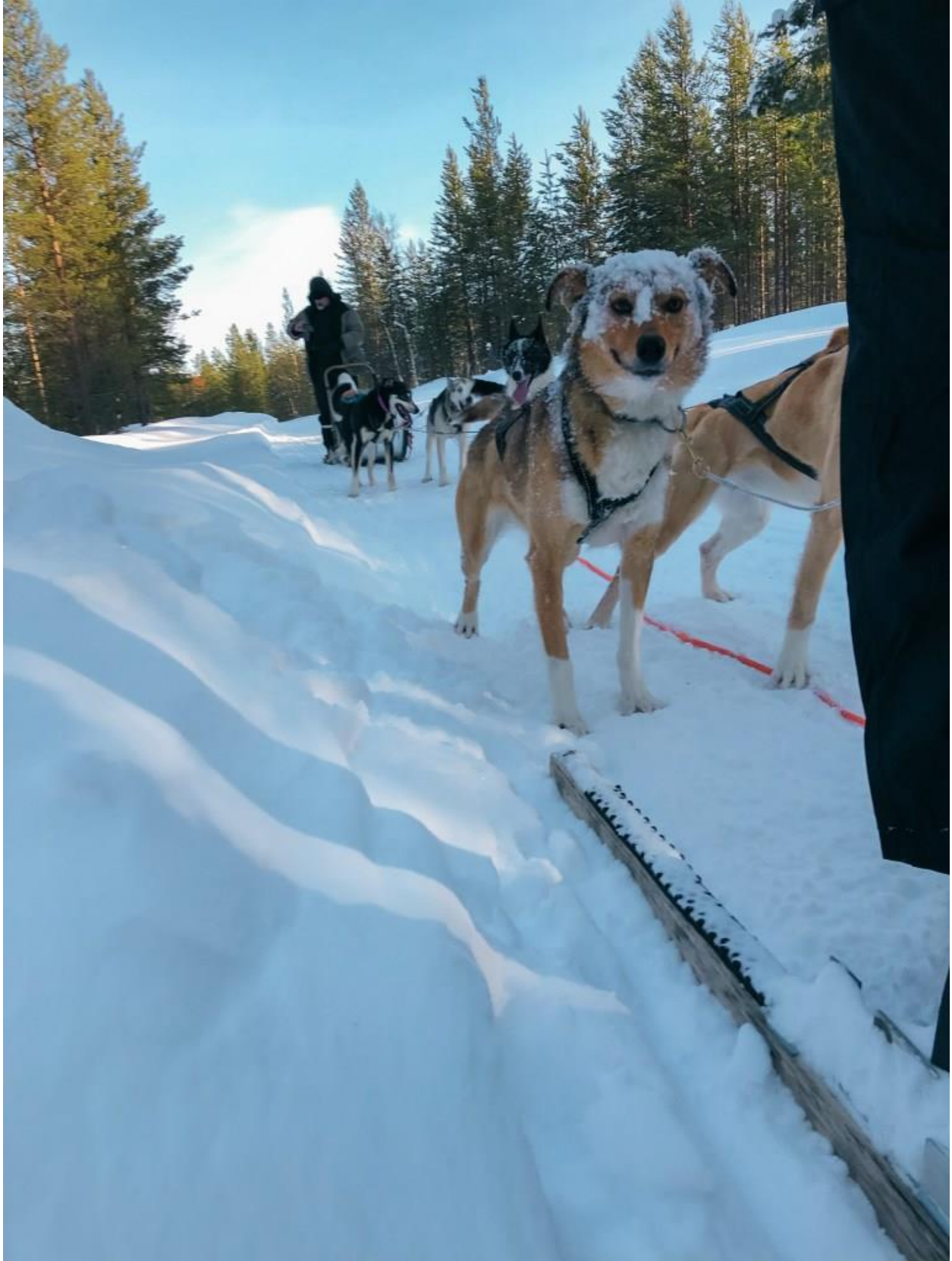


HUSKY SAFARIS

This is an activity that you can do literally no matter where you are in Lapland! There are so many operators as well. All the operators mentioned above offer husky tours. Our AirBnB host booked our tour through **Extreme Huskies**. When he booked it, only the 2 hour slot was available and I was a little bummed. But after we did the tour, we were so glad we only did 2 hours. It's super fun and cool, but it's also very cold and 1 hour is PLENTY of time in my opinion. So no matter what tour operator you go with, I would recommend 2 over 4 hours. Or at least make sure you take their offer of putting on their thick winter jumpsuits and boots.







SKIING AND SLEDDING

Our AirBnB host had told us that we could drive to Saariselka and sled down the ski mountain there, and I thought that sounded like a lot of fun! And it was! For only 25€, you can purchase a **Winterpark pass** that allows you to toboggan for 2 hours – toboggan included in the price. So we showed up to the mountain, went into the ski shop and rented our toboggan, took the gondola to the top, and then headed down! It was honestly very cold because snow flies into your face and clothes, but I couldn't stop because it was so much fun. I was crying laughing.

If you have a little more time on your hand, you can also **ski at Saariselka** for about 100€ a day including lift tickets and rentals. If you are super into skiing, you'll probably want to go to **Levi** or **Ylläs**. I know these are legitimate ski resorts with multiple mountains unlike Saariselka which is just one mountain. They also apparently turn off all lights in the resort at night to see the Northern Lights!

You can buy your Winterpark passes or lift tickets ahead of time or on the day of.





FISHING

My husband picked this one and honestly I wasn't that excited. It turned out to be so fun and I loved it just as much as everything else we did! I was about to say it was my favorite day but then I realized that every day was my favorite day. Sigh... take me back!

We specifically picked the snowmobiling fishing tour so that we could cross another winter activity off our list – snowmobiling! Our trip was 4 hours and involved snowmobiling to the middle of a frozen over lake, fishing through our cute little holes we made, and snacking on sausages and hot tea that our guides made over a grill on skis that they brought with us. It was honestly so peaceful and fun! The guides even cooked our catches in the grill for us.

Here is the [tour that we took](#), but all the operators already mentioned will also have fishing excursions. You can go by snowshoe, snowmobile, sleigh, van, and more.







SNOWMOBILING

If you love jet skiing or riding ATVs, you will like snowmobiling. I would recommend combining this activity with something else – with fishing like we did, or with seeing the Northern Lights or visiting a reindeer farm.





REINDEER FARM

All over Lapland you will have the options to visit a reindeer farm. Our host told us about one that we could drive by so we did that – but there are much more in depth experiences as well. When we were in Finland, all the reindeer had already shed their antlers for the year – so all the ones we saw didn't have their signature racks.

I would recommend booking an excursion to see reindeer if you can. We didn't have the time and it wasn't a priority, but **Lapland Safaris** has lots of options.



IGLOOS AND SNOW HOTELS

Apparently in and around Levi and Yllas there is a hotel made entirely of snow and ice that you can visit or stay in – **Snow Village**. So this is something you could only do if you were staying near there. Also in Rovaniemi there is a hotel made entirely of snow – **Snow Hotel**. Finally, in Kemi you have a **snow castle** that you can visit. These are only open during the winter season – late December to late March – but they look so cool! I definitely would have visited if I was staying nearby.

ICE BREAKER CRUISE

This looks so unique and cool! You get to ride on an ice breaker ship and then put on ice suits and float in the ice water!! It's also very expensive and very regional – you can only do this excursion in Kemi. The good news is that Kemi has lots of fun activities all around it, but unfortunately Kemi is much further south in Lapland than other areas – so chances of seeing the Northern lights aren't as great. I wouldn't make Kemi your only stop in Lapland for that reason, but I would definitely make this your second or third stop to do this activity.

I found a couple options for this trip – one includes **having lunch aboard** for 337€/person, **this one** includes the cruise and free entrance to the snow castle for €299/person – unrelated activities but two that seem to be must do in Kemi so I would probably pick this one (there are additional fees for

transferring to this activity from Kemi or Rovaniemi), or you can snowmobile from Kemi with **Lapland Safaris** for €459/person

VISITING SANTA CLAUS

Did you know that Santa lives in Rovaniemi, Finland? All the letters around the world sent to Santa go here! You can visit **Santa's Village** for free in Rovaniemi. A great option if you are obsessed with Santa of have a one day layover in Rovaniemi before heading further north to see the Northern Lights.

SO. MUCH. MORE.

There are so many more activities to choose from in Lapland for your vacation. Just look at the tour operators' websites for more ideas. There is snow shoeing, cross-country skiing, food tours, cultural museums, biking, and more. You won't be bored but you also will spend lots of money. This is an expensive place to visit, for sure.

WHERE DO I EAT IN LAPLAND?

Eating was not our priority for this trip, so we ate most of our meals at home in our AirBnB. If you are staying in a hotel, you'll probably just want to eat in your hotel's restaurant. We did eat at one restaurant in Saariselka that our host recommended that was delicious, Ravintola Pub. **Find Us Lost** has a Lapland travel guide with good restaurant recommendations in Kemi if you stay there.

WHAT SHOULD I PACK FOR LAPLAND?

Yes, you will need winter clothes for your trip. Think lots of layers and snow clothes. From the top down – some kind of very warm head and ear cover, some kind of warm neck / mouth cover, sunglasses for the snow glare, sunscreen for your face, layers – long underwear / thin layer, sweater or two on top, waterproof parka / ski jacket over that, warm glove / mitten liners and then waterproof gloves or mittens, long underwear / thermal leggings, waterproof ski pants or other warm pant, thick wool socks, snow boots. I didn't purchase snow boots beforehand and really regretted it. You will really want something super warm for your feet.

Beyond what to wear, I would also recommend bring a DSLR camera and a tripod to capture the Northern lights. If you do not have a tripod, keep your camera at home because you can't take good Northern Lights pictures without a tripod to stabilise the camera for the 10 second shutter speed. Bring your charger or an extra battery too – if you stand in the cold for 30 minutes a battery that would normally last 12 hours will be completely depleted by the cold. I had to charge my camera every night when usually I go like once or twice a year.

I would also bring hand and foot warmers – you will definitely want them especially while watching the Northern Lights at night.

This is all you need! I wore the same outfit every day so only had a small carry-on with my hand-warmers and layers on layers on layers.



MY PERFECT LAPLAND ITINERARY

If you only have a long weekend... stick to one location.

Book your round-trip flights in and out of Ivalo and stay for 3-4 nights.

If you want to save some money, **stay in our AirBnB**. I don't think you'll regret it. If you want to spend more, stay in a Wilderness Hotel. You can arrange pickup with the Wilderness Hotel if you don't want to rent a car. You can also rent all your winter equipment for free from them if you don't own a parka or winter boots and don't want to buy them.

Day 1

I wouldn't book an excursion for your first day. Get in, get comfortable, and have dinner wherever you're staying. We grabbed groceries at K-Supermarket in Ivalo. They seemed to have more American products than even our British grocery stores do – so don't be nervous about not finding familiar groceries. At night, use the Aurora Tracker and go outside to watch the Northern Lights (fingers crossed).

Day 2

Start your day with whatever excursion excites you most – we chose to do our husky safari our first morning and loved it. If you are staying in a fancy hotel, you may choose to only do one excursion a day and then enjoy the amenities of the hotel in the afternoon. For us, we chose to drive to Saariselka after our husky safari and go tobogganing for a couple of hours. We then drove to **Kakslauttanen** to get a tour but are told this is something you have to book in advance – but we still got to go up to their observation tower for free and browse their very cool gift shop. After that, we had dinner at Ravintola Pub with reservations we made that morning. Northern Lights at night!

Day 3

Today we had our ice fishing snowmobile tour for 4 hours. After that we drove to this reindeer farm to get a free drive-by. For you, I would book whatever excursion you are interested in today, maybe two. You can also spend a day skiing in Saariselka. At night, we drove the 2 minutes to an empty lake behind the AirBnB and watched the Northern Lights dance across the sky for half an hour – it was so beautiful.

Day 4 – if you are staying longer

If you stay in Ivalo, book another excursion you haven't done yet. Or travel to a new destination. Levi or Yllas are the closest, but only go if you are interested in skiing. All the other excursions you can do there you can also do in Ivalo. Maybe you take a flight to Rovaniemi and spend a day doing Santa's village. Or maybe you **fly, drive, or take a bus to Kemi** to do all the activities there. Personally, I would choose Kemi as my next stop and make today a travel day. The driving route passes through Rovaniemi – so I would probably take a 3 hours stop to see Santa's Village and get a bite to eat. Once you get to Kemi, check into your hotel and relax

Day 5

Today I would do the ice breaker tour and snow castle in Kemi with that package that combines both – so cool! There is also a pink church called Kemi Church that you can visit.

Day 6

If there was an excursion you didn't get to do in Ivalo like husky sledding, snowmobiling, or ice fishing, you could do it on this day. Or you could just relax. If you want to hurry on, I would take today to fly to Helsinki and spend a day or two exploring that city before heading back home.

Day 7 – 9

Hang out in Helsinki before heading back to the US. What a fun trip!