

Northern



Exposure

It's the journey of a lifetime when **Karla Courtney** surprises her five-year-old son with a trip to Finnish Lapland – including a sighting of the Northern Lights and meeting the real Santa.









IT'S JUST gone 4am on a characteristically soggy December morning in the United Kingdom. After doing a final pre-travel checklist in my head, I enter my five-year-old son's bedroom, raise the light dimmer just enough for my eyes to adjust and gently nudge him while he snores deeply in his bed.

"Good morning, sweetie. It's time to get up and drive Mummy to the airport."

Marshall exhales, moans, fidgets beneath his doona and whimpers: "Nooo... I don't want you to go. Stay here, please..."



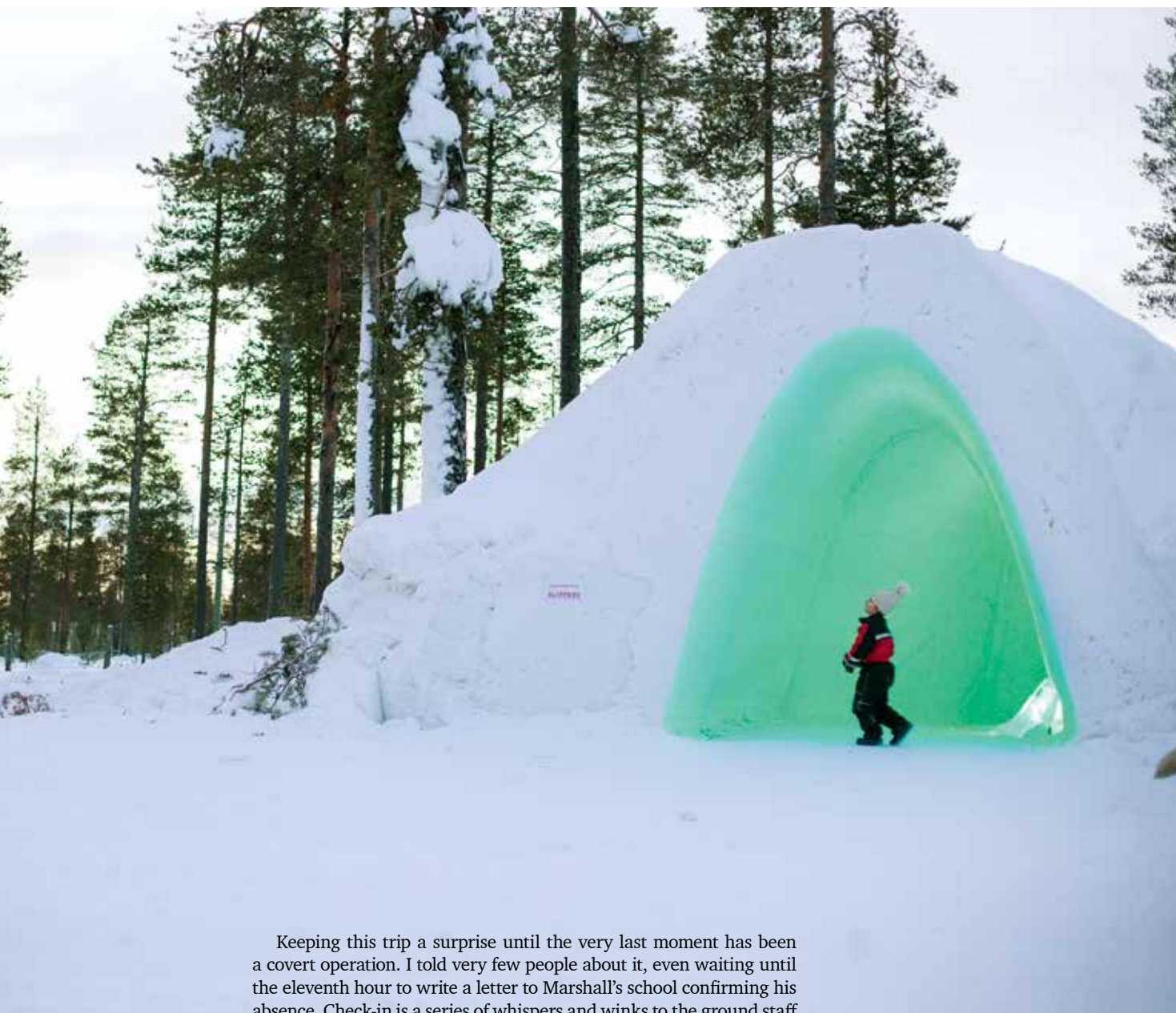
(Previous pages, from left) Waiting to go husky sledding at the Arctic Circle Centre; a snow-laden conifer forest near Saariselkä resort

(This page, from left) Reindeer at the ready; the perfect way to beat the Arctic chill

For most parents of young children, preparing for a solo business trip follows a common ritual: organising school runs, stocking up on favourite snacks and updating that prominently placed emergency contact list for all sitters to see. Then, on the day of departure, it's a highway drive filled with "Why do you have to go away again?" followed by big hugs at the airport and even bigger tears.

This business trip is going to be different, though. The past few weeks have been a charade of preparations. In fact, I've got all of our passports and not one, but three, plane tickets. And I'm carrying a larger-than-usual duffel bag arranged like a Russian doll, with a smaller bag inside, perfectly packed for a little boy. We're about to go on a surprise family holiday, travelling deep into the Arctic Circle to the wintry white dreamscape of Finnish Lapland.

Lapland is a real-life place that's everything you imagine the Arctic should be. The land is covered in coniferous trees, their branches weighted with snow and dripping with icicles. There are igloos – huge ones – that you can sit inside, cosied up in a blanket while sipping hot cocoa and stirring the bobbing marshmallows with candy canes. There are reindeer (they don't fly but they go pretty fast) and every inch of the earth is covered with snow – the kind that crunches satisfyingly under your boots and even sparkles when it catches the pale winter sun.



Keeping this trip a surprise until the very last moment has been a covert operation. I told very few people about it, even waiting until the eleventh hour to write a letter to Marshall's school confirming his absence. Check-in is a series of whispers and winks to the ground staff as we all animatedly confirm that only one person is flying today.

As the final act of subterfuge, I say my I-love-yous and goodbyes. I walk out of sight and then, after a few suspenseful moments concealed behind a large Christmas tree, I pop back into view, fanning out three tickets. "Surprise! We're all going on the plane right now – and you're going to meet Santa!"

That's the *real* Santa, of course. Not a shopping-mall stand-in who never looks quite convincing enough. I'm talking about a genuinely jolly old fellow with a curly white beard that you can pull without it coming off, rosy cheeks, a deep-red velvet suit trimmed with white fur and a generous bowlful of jelly-belly rightfully earned from eating lots of cookies. And boy, is my son excited! Probably still not fully processing what's about to happen, he bounces around gleefully singing *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* for the entire journey. It's the most joyful thing I've ever seen.

We're heading for Saariselkä, a popular winter resort with a range of two-, three- and four-star accommodation in the form of cosy log cabins and hotels (santaslapland.com).

Flying direct from London to the local airport, Ivalo, we touch down early in the afternoon under a dusky purple sky that already looks like nightfall. There's a sign on the noticeboard: "Next sunrise 8 January."

A tunnel of light carved into the snow at the Arctic Circle Centre

This is Polar Night season and for a whole month the sun never fully rises above the horizon – though we're assured there will be a modest glimmer of soft light between 10am and 2pm.

All over the resort, sleds are strewn about for anyone to pick up and use as transport on the many gentle slopes. We watch people ski right out of their front doors. And everyone is sporting the official uniform: a one-piece Gore-Tex snowsuit with chubby Moon Boots and black leather mittens to the elbows. After all, it's only going to reach a balmy -5°C today.



Flight path

IVL

Qantas flies to London from Sydney and Melbourne, with connections to Ivalo via partner airlines. qantas.com



Travel Insider

Watch the video of
this magical holiday
at [travelinsider.
qantas.com.au](http://travelinsider.qantas.com.au).



(From top) Guest log
cabins at Saariselkä;
Marshall makes a
snow angel; learning
how to drive a team
of huskies across the
tightly packed snow

At dinner there's a crowd of us dressed in beautifully tacky sweaters and paper crowns, holding plates heaped high with turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce and vegetables from the hotel's buffet. It's not exactly grandma's home cooking but it hits the spot and we're certainly enjoying the atmosphere: exposed timber, traditional carols, fairy lights, sprigs of holly, piping-hot mulled wine and many happy little faces.

Here in Lapland, it's all about the magic of winter. Owing to the very limited daylight hours, now is the prime time to see the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights. And while they can be visible from the resort, it's best to travel a bit further out where there's less light pollution.

We set out on an organised tour that takes us to a quiet spot with a few igloos and not much else. It's 9pm. We wait patiently for about an hour, dipping into and out of a large canvas tent that has an open fire and trays of hot drinks. And then it happens. At first there's a soft white line on the horizon that pulsates as it slowly gets larger and larger. Almost out of nowhere, a bright-green parabola flashes across the very top of the sky. Before we know it, there's light dancing everywhere. We're lucky to have such a clear sky and active night, our guide tells us, as it's difficult to predict when the lights will appear and a show is never guaranteed.

We're now very excited about our trip to Saariselkä's Arctic Circle Centre the next day, where there's a jam-packed itinerary of winter sports activities. We get to drive our own husky-drawn sleds, play on a huge slide built out of packed snow, ride snowmobiles and



get up close to real reindeer. And it's here that a certain someone is waiting for us to pay him a visit.

For our private meeting with Santa, we settle into a massive sled lined with animal pelts, cradling flasks filled with hot drinks for added warmth. A snowmobile tows us through a forest until we pull up at a small log cabin where a group of excitable elves escorts us to the door. We step inside to find a room filled with wrapped presents next to a glittering Christmas tree. And there, at the back in a wooden rocking chair, is the man himself.

Santa greets my son in a deep, gentle voice: "Hello Marshall. I hear you've been a good boy this year." He places his hand inside his jacket and pulls out a crinkled piece of paper, unfolding it for us to see. Enchantment takes over the room. It's the letter my son wrote to him.

This is one of those moments when what feels like a far-fetched dream actually becomes reality; when something so unlikely becomes as real as the twinkly-eyed old man sitting right in front of you.

We could go on a thousand more holidays and buy a thousand more toys yet I'm certain that nothing will ever replicate the magic of this moment. But that's okay because I'm also certain that none of us will ever forget it. ●

↑ The best ways to see the Northern Lights with kids

The spectacular aurora borealis (Northern Lights) is an elusive and unpredictable natural phenomenon that usually occurs in the dark of night in the dead of winter. Not exactly the best scenario for kids, right? However, with a bit of planning, a family aurora experience is definitely doable and, most importantly, enjoyable. Here's how...

Go in the northern winter High season is between November and March, when there are darker, longer nights.

Do an organised tour You'll see more if you're far away from light pollution so choose a tour that takes you out of your resort.

Don't book until the last minute Wait to check the weather, as you need clear skies to see the show. Make the booking after you arrive, based on local forecasts.

Stay up late It's tempting to get everyone to bed early but most guides will tell you that the lights are better late at night. Aim for a tour that leaves at 9pm to 10pm or later and sleep in the next day.

Go as far north as possible They're not called the Northern Lights for nothing. The closer you are to the North Pole, the more activity there is. Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland are among the best-equipped destinations for families to see the light show in terms of accommodation, transport and activities. In Iceland, some great spots to see the lights are just over an hour's drive from the centre of Reykjavík; try Hotel Rangá (hotelranga.is), which is a four-star resort that offers aurora viewing packages.

Be prepared for nothing There's no guarantee you'll see the lights, even if you're out at the optimal time in optimal conditions. It's better to prepare your children for nothing more than a fun, late night of playing in the snow and drinking hot chocolate – with the lights as a spectacular bonus if they do appear.

You can also go south The South Pole experiences the Southern Lights (aurora australis) in the same way. The challenge is that there are fewer accessible landmasses on the southern side of the globe. Stewart Island and Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park in New Zealand are two of the best places close to home where there's the chance of a sighting. The best time to go is from March to September.