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INTRODUCTION: WHY LAPLAND? WHY ME?

Not many people would have thought that I would end up traveling through Lapland and Northern Norway. The girl from Brisbane by way of Texas dealing with the extreme cold? No way she'd survive.

I thought that too — after all, I was the one that would put on a jacket if the temperature dipped below 15°. That was before I was given the chance to head to Lapland for a few days prior to a business trip; it was then that I became fascinated with this place that was a polar (ha ha) opposite to most places I had ever visited.

In those initial planning stages, I realised how little I knew about travelling in an area with a semi-permanent cold climate (I say semi-permanent because winter takes up over half the year in these locations — more than every other season combined). Since I was used to hearing about Britain or the US South in the grips of a cold snap (i.e., Heathrow closing down after the first flake of snow or Atlantians being stuck in a 24-hour-long traffic jam), I thought Lapland would have the same level of dysfunction in winter.

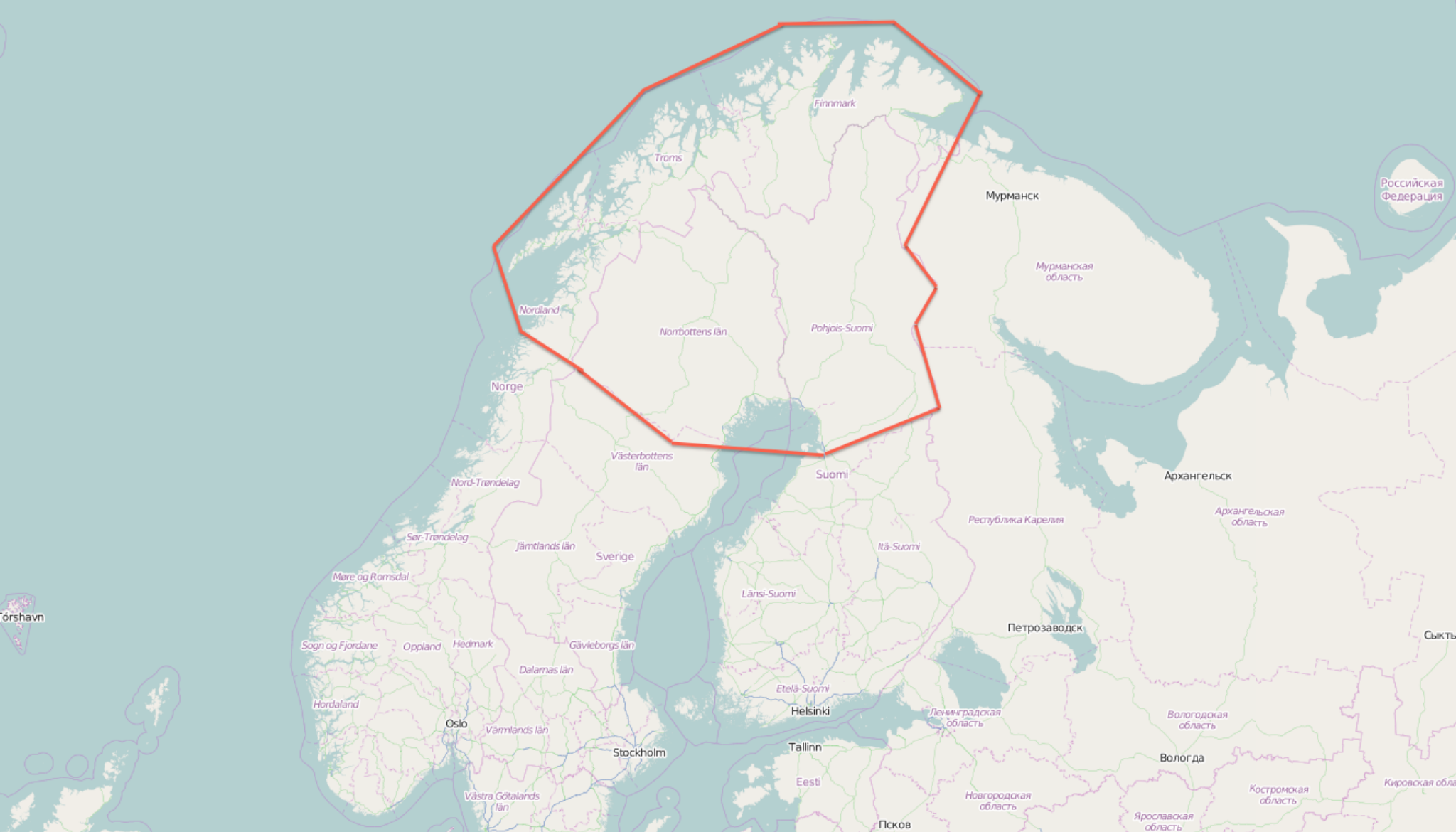
As I found, this is absolutely not the case in Lapland or Northern Norway. The buses there are more on time than in Brisbane, which has balmy, sub-tropical weather year-round. The same applies to nearly all modes of public transport. The whole region seems to come to life in winter, when tourists flock there to

experience the northern lights, winter activities, and cold that doesn't feel quite as cold as it should because it's so dry. It's about as far from Heathrow or Atlanta as you can get.

There were plenty of other logistical concerns that dogged me on both my introductory trip and my extended trip the following year. How would I deal with exchanging money so I didn't end up in a financial bind after crossing the border into a very small northern town? How would I ensure I was adequately insured for all of the adventurous activities I'd be taking on, especially given I broke my leg on my first trip?

I eventually found answers to these questions and many more, but researching all of these concerns (and planning my itinerary around Norway, Sweden, and Finland) took more than double the length of my actual trip (which was roughly one month long).

The goal of this guide is to answer those burning questions you may have about planning a trip to Lapland or Northern Norway — or, if you're not already in the planning stages, to inspire you to travel to this extraordinary destination. It is by no means a comprehensive, Lonely Planet-style guide of everything you can possibly do in the region, but rather, it is a primer that should answer your logistical questions as well as providing a taste of the many opportunities that await you should you decide to travel there in the months between October and April.



The region covered by this guide. Map courtesy of [OpenStreetMap.org](https://www.openstreetmap.org).

I'd also like to show 'winter beginners' that there's nothing to be afraid of when traveling to this region in winter. Regardless of whether you've never experienced a proper winter, with preparation, you will really enjoy your visit here.

This guide covers the regions bordering or north of the Arctic Circle in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Parts of northern Norway are covered that are not necessarily a traditional part of the Lapland region, but as travel there is very similar to travel in the northernmost county of Norway (Finnmark), they are still included in this guide. Russian Lapland is not covered here as I did not cross the Russian border (mainly due to visa restrictions). Specific locations mentioned include:

- Lofoten Islands (Northern Norway)
- Tromsø
- Lyngen Alps

- North Cape & Finnmark
- Inari and Saariselkä (Lapland, Finland)
- Rovaniemi
- Kemi
- Enontekiö
- Jokkmokk (Norrbotten, Sweden)
- Abisko
- Kiruna

I hope this guide helps get you even more excited about what will be a trip of a lifetime to the Arctic north. If you have any more questions that aren't answered here, please visit my blog, A Pair of Boots and a Backpack, at <http://www.bootsandabackpack.com> or email me directly at kristin@winterinlapland.com.



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WHEN TO GO

No two months of winter in Lapland are the same (which is reflected in the fact that the Sami actually divided winter into three different seasons — early winter, winter, and late winter). So when should you go to Lapland? What part of winter is best based on the activities you want to do?



Early January.

OCTOBER & NOVEMBER: EARLY WINTER

These late fall/early winter months offer more sunlight but in general do not offer nearly as much snow as the months with the equivalent light at the end of winter. In addition, you will likely miss the vibrant colours of autumn — called ‘ruska’ in Finland — which occur for only a couple weeks a year (usually at the end of September).

In late October and November, the landscape is only just starting to be covered with the snow that will last until April or early May. This means you can't rely on any winter activities being available, so unless your trip revolves around the northern lights or cold-weather hiking, you may be at a loose end for things to do. Your northern lights photos will have less snow but will have the added element of reflections in the lakes of

Lapland. From December onward, those lakes have frozen and you'll have to go to the fjords of northern Norway for a chance at capturing reflection photos.

DECEMBER & JANUARY: POLAR NIGHTS

Lapland and Northern Norway both experience polar nights for at least part of December and January. Everywhere north of the Arctic Circle will have polar nights on at least December 21; places as far north as Tromsø (at 69° north) have polar nights from November 21-January 21. This time of dim bluish light is known as ‘kaamos’ in Finland.

Once the sun has started peeking above the horizon again, the days will still be very short (sometimes so short that sunrise and sunset blend into one) and what daylight you do have



No matter what time of year you travel, you'll see some amazing colours in the sky. This was in late March.

will be very blue. It's not very good for daylight photos, but it is a really interesting time of year to visit since there are very few other places where you'll ever be able to experience this. Plus, the long nights mean you'll have extra time to look for the northern lights.

Depending on how late winter has arrived, you should find that, by January, nearly every activity is available. By this point, the snow and ice are thick enough to be safe (and to make snow-based activities more fun). That said, some winters (like that of 2011-2012) arrive quite late; [dogsledding in January that year](#) was limited to an alternative route due to thin ice on the usual track.

FEBRUARY: COLD BUT BEAUTIFUL

While the days are getting substantially longer in February, the temperatures tend to be at their lowest during this month. You need to be prepared for temperatures as low as -50° in Lapland and -15° in coastal northern Norway. Fortunately, as noted in the Activities chapter, you'll only need gear for the things you'll be doing on your own time (going out to dinner, waiting at bus stops, watching the northern lights, etc) since you'll be provided with Arctic overalls for nearly all organised activities.

One thing you will only see in January and February are the snow-encrusted trees so often pictured in winter photos of the region. This iconic Lapland sight isn't visible by March, probably because the snow is so heavy that it eventually breaks off the tree branches and falls to the ground.



MARCH: LATE WINTER

Many people believe that March is the best time to visit Lapland. By this time, the days have stretched out to a normal length, which makes a huge difference in the activities you choose to do. The snow cover is complete so no matter what you want to do — snowboarding, cross country skiing, hovercrafting — you won't be stopped by a lack of ice and snow.

The light is almost as perfect as you can get and you won't be forgetting the sparkle of sunlight on the snow in a hurry. Golden hour colours hang around for much longer than an hour (which is perfect for photographers) and the sunrises and sunsets are spectacular. The temperatures have started to increase but don't let that fool you; you still need to pack for the extremes because you don't want to be caught out in a unseasonable cold snap (like -38°C as happened at Kakslauttanen in mid-March 2013).

Statistics compiled by NASA show that the northern lights are more active around the fall and spring equinoxes (September 21 & March 21). They are supposed to be even more visible around the spring equinox than the fall — and having seen them for 9/18 nights around the equinox, I can agree!



THE OFFICIAL “WINTER SEASON”

Importantly, the season for many activities in Lapland runs from December to the end of March/middle of April. If you want to do an independent holiday (for instance, backcountry cross-country skiing) outside of these times, it’s definitely possible; however, you won’t have organised activities to fall back on. Here are a few sample seasons for various popular attractions:

SnowCastle (Kemi, Finland): January 25 - 6 April

Icehotel (Jukkasjärvi, Sweden): December - 15 April

Aurora Sky Station (Abisko, Sweden): 5 September - 28 September (limited), 1 November - 30 November (limited), 1 December - 30 March

Kakslauttanen Igloo Village (Saariselkä, Finland): December - April

Lyngsfjord Adventure (Tromsø, Norway): 1 November - 15 April

Reindeer sledding to Santa's Village (Rovaniemi, Finland): 1 December - 15 April

It's also important to note that the majority of hotels and tourism in general in Finnish Lapland shut down for all of May to get over the winter season and prepare for the summer. This would make planning a trip during May difficult unless you're completely self-sufficient.

If you want to guarantee that everything you want to do will be running, you should make sure you finish your trip by the end of March. That said, it's also been said that the [best time to hit the slopes is in early April](#), when the days are very long and the lines are short.

Possibly the most crowded time, at least in parts of Finnish Lapland, is leading up to Christmas in December. Lots of charter flights fly straight into Rovaniemi at this time of year for families and charities taking children to [meet Santa](#).

Overall recommendation: March.

It's the best mix of daylight and darkness so you can do winter activities during the day and northern lights watching at night. It can be slightly warmer but that's not guaranteed. All organised activities are still running so you won't have trouble doing exactly what you want.