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The Soul of Sápmi

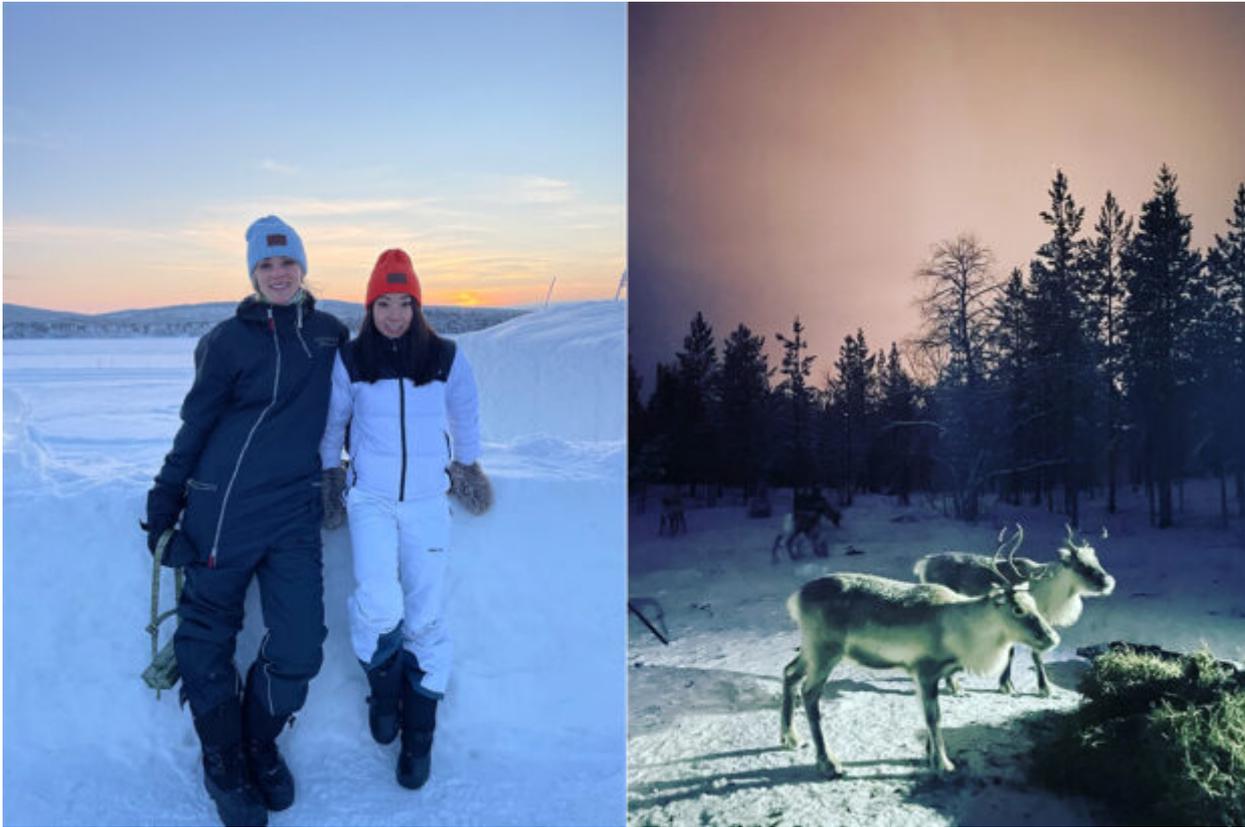


Sápmi in winter. Photo by Diana Li courtesy Indagare

Few may be familiar with the Sámi, who have lived in their homeland spanning Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia for thousands of years—long before kings drew geographic borders. They're the only recognized indigenous group in the European Union. While many travelers visit Swedish Lapland in hopes of seeing the Northern Lights or midnight sun, or staying at two of the most famous hotels in the world (TreeHotel and IceHotel). But when visiting this land, you're exploring not just a place but also a way of life—the Sámi culture, which is so beautifully and inextricably connected to nature.

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Sápmi: What's in a Name



Scenes from Sápmi. Photos by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

“Lapland” is the conventional name for the region in Arctic Europe that my colleague Elise and I explored in early February. Unbeknownst to many (even in Sweden) the name is derived from “Lapp,” a derogatory term ascribed to the Sámi people by Scandinavians. So in this article—and across Indagare—the territory will be referred to by its indigenous name: “[Sápmi](#).” There, people live with the land, not on it. People borrow the reindeer and the resources; they do not own them. As writer Håkan Stenlund so poetically captures: “The Sámi live by and from nature and are in a way bound to the soul of nature... A tree is more than just a tree, a fish is not just a fish, and a cloudberry is more than just a berry.” Swedish Sámi textile artist Britta Marakatt-Labba elaborates: “When the Sámi pick berries or catch fish, they say a kind of prayer: ‘Do not let my hands ruin the land that I have borrowed.’ ”

Within each of the nine surviving Sámi languages of the Finno-Ugric group, the vocabulary contains over a hundred words for “snow” and one thousand words for “reindeer.” For the approximately 100,000 Sami across the entirety of Sápmi, they share ways to describe the specifics of our environment that simply do not translate to English or Swedish. Through oral history and traditions, the Sámi carry their stories in their hearts. And for one short week, we were honored and lucky to immerse ourselves in their storytelling.

Exploring Stockholm



Flying Finnair (left); at Svenskt Tenn in Stockholm. Photos by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

The trip began with a stroke of luck: Thanks to the unparalleled de-icing expertise of Finnair's ground crews, our flight was one of the last planes to take off before a winter Nor'easter forced dozens of planes to stay grounded. After a smooth, restful redeye (Finnair now flies direct from JFK to Stockholm with a fleet of fuel-efficient A350 planes), we began our whirlwind extended layover: we indulged at Swedish design house **Svenskt Tenn**, visited the world's premier photography museum **Fotografiska**, and enjoyed one of the best dinners of our lives at the new **Brasserie Astoria**, chef Björn Frantzén's latest Stockholm endeavor (his other restaurant in town, **Frantzén**, has three *Michelin* stars). After spending the night at **Villa Dagmar**, a chic boutique hotel that opened in Östermalm in May 2021, we left Stockholm for Luleå, a one-hour flight north. Despite the sun fading into rays of lavender and rose at half past three in the afternoon, we couldn't contain our excitement as we laid our eyes on this winter wonderland.

Related: [The Enduring Appeal of Swedish Design \(And Where to Find It\)](#)

Into the Arctic



The Northern Lights over Arctic Retreat. Photos by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

We were staying at **Arctic Retreat**, an intimate wilderness escape featuring three timber cabins with north-facing, floor-to-ceiling windows. They're north-facing for a reason: to see the aurora borealis. But when we arrived, the forecast for the aurora was low. During a cozy, three-course dinner with the hotel's Graeme Richardson, Elise and I started our deep dive into the complex history between the Sámi and Swedes and discussed the strikingly similar treatment of "stolen generations" of indigenous peoples from Australia to the U.S. to Canada to Sweden. By midnight, I was just getting into bed when Elise caught a glimpse of light in the night sky. Without a word, we both layered on our fleece-lined thermals and down jackets and stepped out into -16 degrees Fahrenheit.

For the next two hours in 15-minute intervals, we braved the Arctic air for as long as we could endure, thawed our bodies inside by the fire, and then repeated the process all over again (and again). We squealed in delight as we witnessed the magic of the Northern Lights. At times, the green light lingered; at times, it danced and undulated like a tidal wave. Eventually, we grabbed the mattresses off our beds and made camp in the living room to face the aurora-filled windows. In this stillness and observation, we understood how the Sámi believe the Northern Lights are our ancestors. This

phenomena makes you wonder about all those who have come before, as you stare up at the same sky, and all those who will come after we are gone. The aurora borealis has been woven into folklore and creation stories of many indigenous groups all over the world. As Swedish photographer Peter Rosén writes, “When you witness the beautiful dance of the aurora, you are seeing the intimate interaction of our sun and Earth that has been going on since their very birth, and will continue on long after we are gone.”

Our first night’s magic light show laid the groundwork for the rest of our week, rooted in appreciation for nature. In the north of Sweden, you can listen to yourself, follow the moose tracks, feel connection to your surroundings, and notice your rhythms change within. The next day, on a snowmobiling adventure with Jonas Gejke, co-owner of Aurora Safari Camp, Sámi-style glamping accessible only by snowmobile, we screamed at the top of our lungs while racing across a frozen lake at 50 miles per hour. Winding through the well-kept snowy trails, we left our anxieties in the proverbial dust and basked in golden-hour light from sunrise to sunset. We had never known before how much snow could glitter.



Arctic Bath. Photo by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

After warming up with a hearty moose goulash at Sorbyn Lodge with Jonas, Elise and I continued our road trip for an hour west to **Arctic Bath**, a one-of-a-kind floating hotel and spa on Lule River that opened in 2020. Designed by architect Bertil Harström,

Arctic Bath features 12 cabins (six on land, six floating on the water) and is another example of Scandinavian design built seamlessly into the surrounding nature. (Just five minutes down the road, [TreeHotel](#) showcases the same design ideology, and features a cabin by Harström. This spring, architect firm Bjarke Ingels Group will add add a highly anticipated eighth cabin) After enjoying a refined, five-course tasting menu with local ingredients like sea buckthorn berries, we prepared for the hotel’s signature, 10-step spa ritual. With the heat of the sauna and some liquid courage, we took the plunge into a freezing-cold bath, a hole literally cut into the ice of the river. It felt wildly refreshing and euphoric and awakened both our minds and senses to the elements. No one should leave Sweden in winter without partaking in this tradition.

Related: [Where to Go in Sweden Beyond Stockholm](#)

Meeting the Sámi



With Maria Nordvall at Ájtte Museum (left); Klara Burreau, a guide at Reindeer Lodge. Photos by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

Over the next few days in Sápmi, Elise and I met two incredibly inspiring women committed to protecting the Sámi culture. First, we spent time with Maria Nordvall, an art historian of the **Ájtte Museum** located in Jokkmokk, the Sámi capital of Sweden. Through a Sámi lens, visitors immerse themselves in the history of the “people of the

sun.” As we walked through the first exhibit, we discovered two of the most important religious objects: the *sieidi*, holy rock formations found in nature, and the traditional Sámi drums. Maria studies how different museums represent Sámi drums. Throughout Sámi heritage, the shamans, or *noaidi*, would heat the instruments on the hearth and, through trance, travel to the underworld. Each drum is a bridge between the physical and spirit world. But drums were also used in each household by ordinary family members to predict the future. Five hundred years ago, Christian missionaries and Swedish authorities began confiscating and burning countless drums; today, only 70 drums remain. Many have tried to understand the meaning of the symbols on these reindeer skin-covered, wooden-frame drums, but Maria shared, “the beauty is that there is no one correct way to interpret.” Instead, she believes, we should strive to interpret these drums through the Sámi perspective, without the colonial gaze.

Another integral part of Sámi culture is *duodji*, handicrafts made from materials found in nature that serve as symbols of identity. Rooted in tradition, *duodji* has never been static. This art includes both centuries-old objects and new works by modern Sámi artisans. As one museum placard explained, “a *duodji* practitioner is a person who passes on traditions while at the same time breaks the boundaries.” When new designs are made, the traditions remain visible. Elise and I fell in love with the skilled craftsmanship of *duodji*—from antique reindeer bone-inlaid needle houses to modern birch *kuksa* cups. One way we supported new generations of artisans continuing age-old traditions was by spending hours at **Carl Wennberg**, a family-owned business since 1907 that specializes in Sámi handicraft, in Kiruna, a city with around 20,000 inhabitants.

Maria believes in three key ways we can protect the Sámi culture:

1. Acknowledge wrongdoings.
2. Recognize how the Sámi are woven into the fabric of Sweden’s complex history.
3. Return Sámi artifacts.

At the Ájtte Museum, anyone with Sámi heritage is invited to come to the archives and interact with the objects (*ájtte* translates to “storage hut”). The Sámi do not believe in locking away everything behind glass. And given this open, hands-on approach that’s been adopted, Maria is very hopeful for the future: “We can’t hold our heritage too tight or else it will die.”

The second empowering woman we met was Klara Burreau, a guide at **Reindeer Lodge**. Sámi herder Nils Torbjörn Nutti founded the lodge as a place to corral and feed his reindeer during one winter when grazing conditions were poor. Ancient knowledge

disappears when new generations do not know how to tame reindeer, and through his organization, young people like Klara can learn, reconnect with their cultural identity and create a better world. Much like *duodji*, the tradition of reindeer herding has continually evolved. Adapting old ways to the new times, the Sámi use GPS trackers, drones and snowmobiles to herd now. The climate has also changed; according to the World Wildlife Fund, warmer winter temperatures in the Arctic have increased layers of ice in snow, making food like lichen harder for the reindeer to dig up in winter. Herding patterns are also impacted by mining and deforestation across Sápmi.

Gathered around the circular hearth inside *lavvu* (a traditional tent), Klara cooked a reindeer lunch over the open fire while we discussed the centuries-old dispute between the Sámi and Swedes over land and herding rights. Today, we might forget that for thousands of years, people lived without the categorization as Sámi or Swedish. Influence was cross-cultural; you can see the Sámi in the Swedish and the Swedish in the Sámi. In fact, the Sámi's vibrant fibers of clothing originated from trade with the Swedes. For older generations, the Sámi identity may remain an open wound. For Klara, she embraces her dual identity: "I am 100 percent Swedish and 100 percent Sámi. I don't see the conflict. Identity and culture is so much more than DNA. Don't measure by blood, measure by feeling." Klara's words moved me to tears. Being Sámi is a feeling and connection to a way of life. It's about living as naturally as possible and as stress-free as possible with the land.



Peace & Quiet's Björn Hedlund at the fire (left); early morning at Peace & Quiet. Photos by Diana Li,

courtesy Indagare

Outside Jokkmokk, we met Björn Hedlund, founder of **Peace & Quiet**, a hotel comprising just two glass guest huts completely off the grid. After a chilly, 20-minute snowmobile ride to the middle of a frozen lake where Björn set our camp, I could hardly wait to feel my toes again. Snow was accumulating fast, and I shuddered at Björn's invitation to meet him for an open-air dinner once we settled in. My frozen body begged to stay indoors. But as we sunk onto our reindeer skins as close to the edge of the fire as possible, my discomfort melted away in the -10 degrees Fahrenheit. There is something so primordial and so human about gathering friends around a fire and trading stories. Nine thousand years have passed since the ice sheets melted. During that span of time, 270 generations have lived here in Sápmi, surviving with fire and human connection. It also helped that Björn is one of the most fascinating people we've ever met.

Before starting his business with his wife and joining her Sámi village, Björn served in the Swedish military and conducted wilderness survival trainings overseas. Within seconds, he demonstrated how to start a fire with birch bark trimmings. His best advice for tools to survive the Arctic: "a wife and a firestarter." His other keys to survival: "Understand your equipment, understand the limitations of your equipment, and understand the limitations of yourself." Hours passed quickly as we enjoyed each other's company and the best meal we had during our stay in Sápmi: sautéed reindeer, lingonberries and potatoes, followed by coffee cheese, a local specialty. In the spirit of the new moon and new beginnings, we set intentions into the flames. We forgot about the cold or how the stormy skies obscured our chances of seeing the Northern Lights. Though Björn is tough enough to survive the harshest climate alone, his deep warmth and hospitality demonstrate how the people in the north of Sweden survive the Arctic as a collective.

At the crack of dawn with the first tease of light, neither of us wanted to depart Peace & Quiet as Björn pulled up to our cabin with his snowmobile chariot. Elise ran off into the white, where the snow and the sky blended into one. The three of us dropped down on our backs, snow angels slowly morphing into Savasana. We meditated in the Arctic silence, in absolute quiet and solitude, until we heard birds far in the distance. I can still feel the sensation of the snowflakes melting as they met my face.

Icy Adventures



Diana and Elise at the Ice Hotel, with their room's floral Midsummer Night's Dream theme. Photos by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

We continued playing in nature when we arrived three hours north at **Icehotel**, one of the world's coolest hotels and a Swedish landmark in Jukkasjärvi. Immediately, we felt like children in this frozen playground, taking turns down the large ice slide outside the entrance of Icehotel 365, housing ice rooms year-round. The hotel is redesigned every single winter season, with unique art suites created by sculptors from all over the world. Elise and I were ecstatic to learn we were staying in the suite named "A Midsummer Night's Dream." It was designed by Prince Carl Philip of Sweden and his firm Bernadotte & Kylberg, inspired by Sweden's celebration of the summer solstice. Our royal suite featured colorful, whimsical flowers and plants frozen into the ice furniture, from the bed to the chandelier (plus a heated ensuite bathroom and sauna). Sleeping in the ice suite was in fact a midwinter's dream; cuddled into our toasty sleeping bags atop the reindeer-skin-covered ice bed, we both slept more soundly than we had in months.

Between the Ice Bar cocktails, tasting menu served on ice and ice sculpture class—not to mention the fact that the entire hotel is an art exhibit, we didn't need to step foot outside this frozen paradise. But there are such a variety of experiences unique to the area surrounding Kiruna, home to the world's largest underground iron-ore mine (the entire city is currently relocating due to geological instability from expanding the mine).

One special excursion was a private dogsledding adventure with Fjellborg Arctic Journeys, owned by a ninth-generation family with 30 years of experience. Over the course of our 15-kilometer ride up to [Fjellborg Arctic Lodge](#) for lunch, I learned the personality of each of the four Alaskan huskies that guided me. I loved the direct connection to the dogs, steering them as they ran step by step. The journey was an active meditation, forcing us as a team to focus on the trail ahead and the buoyancy of the snow beneath.

Stockholm Again... with a New Understanding



A Sámi drum at Stockholm's Nordic Museum (left); Elise and Diana in Stockholm. Photos by Diana Li, courtesy Indagare

During our two-day finale in Stockholm at [Ett Hem](#) (“A Home” in Swedish), an [Indagare Index](#) hotel, Elise and I poured over dozens of pages of our journal notes—our week learning the way of life in Arctic Sweden felt like an entire semester abroad. We needed to take time to properly integrate. We spent an entire afternoon at the Nordic Museum, comparing its curation and perspective to that of the Ájtte Museum, following Maria’s advice. One sign reads: “According to traditional Sámi religion, all living things have a soul, and one’s relationship to the spirits of nature is of essential importance. Animals, mountains, trees, stones and lakes all have spirits. The spirits of ancestors and animals are present among the living and influence their lives.” With one foot in the past and

one foot in the future, we must stand proud to help preserve the Sámi's connection to a borderless land that their ancestors have inhabited for thousands of years. Sápmi may be cold in winter, but it's the soul of the Sámi people that keeps the land so warm.

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- Diana Li on March 7, 2022

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