



North Queensland writer Georgia Monaghan and photographer husband Darren Wagner decide to take their two children to Finnish Lapland in the Arctic Circle for a Christmas none of them will ever forget

EVER see that footage at the end of the news on Christmas Eve of Santa with his reindeer heading out from his snowy, wintry home for his longest night of the year?

Ever wished you could take your children, or yourself – somehow – some way – to see this magical person in his natural habitat? No, not the Santa's helper that sits outside Woolies in December, but the Santa that resides inside the Arctic Circle 365 days a year. This was the Christmas fantasy that taunted me every year, ever since my children could say, 'Ho, ho, ho'.

With an overseas wedding approaching and our two sons now aged 7 and 8, it seemed like a now-or-never moment. And so this was the crazy notion that led us to the Arctic Circle in Finnish Lapland, with our two sons, in search of Santa.

Santa being Santa, and therefore all knowing and omniscient, had read our minds (or perhaps more appropriately our hearts) and a personal invitation to visit Santa at his workshops at the North Pole arrived addressed to our two children. My oldest son, Trystan, read the invitation aloud:

Dear Trystan and Austen

Thank you so much for the kind snacks that you have left for me and my reindeer over the years. I have noticed that you will be going on a grand world adventure. I would like to invite you to visit my special workshop and village near the North Pole, if your parents have time and don't mind. I hope to see you there! Love Santa

PS My address is: Santa Claus Village, Rovaniemi, Finland, Arctic Circle

Trystan's dimples emerged from his cheeks as the meaning of this unexpected invitation gradually dawned on him. He looked like Charlie receiving the golden ticket to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory.

I checked with my husband, 'Do you think we have time?'

'Hmmm, I think we can fit it in,' he replied.

Thoughtfully, as well as his very kind invitation, Santa had sent woollen gloves, scarves, balaclavas, two winter coats and a beautiful book all about Santa Claus and his life in the Arctic Circle.

This was all too much for Austen; he had to get some clarification: 'Are we really, truly going to Santa's? Or is this just a joke or a dream?' 'We're really going, Austen,' I replied.

And then Trystan uttered the words that are every parent's silent Christmas wish for their children, 'We're the luckiest children in the world!' The magic had started already.

For children raised in tropical North Queensland, where it's beautiful one day and perfect the next, cold is a two-week period in late July. Arriving in Rovaniemi, Finland, in winter, is an introduction to a whole new concept of cold. The minute we leave the protection of the airport and enter the bracing minus thirty degree celsius air, their father kindly invites our children to breathe in deeply through their noses. I can't suppress a smile while they squeal and try to get the icicles out of their nostrils.

Rovaniemi, being only eight kilometres from Santa's Village, has an abundance of modern, family-friendly hotels so there is no need to build your own igloo. Scandic Hotel, in the centre of Rovaniemi, is a great choice for family accommodation. An expansive Scandinavian hot and cold buffet breakfast is included daily. Free wireless broadband access in all rooms and free use of the computer, internet and printer at reception are greatly appreciated bonuses included in a very reasonable rate.

According to Finnish legend, Santa, known in Finland as Joulupukki, along with his wife, elves and reindeer live at a secret location far, far away in the northern wilds of Lapland, at the foot of a mysterious mountain called Korvatunturi. Although Santa wishes to keep his mountain home a secret, in 1985 he founded his own workshop village in the wilderness near Rovaniemi, so that anyone can come to meet him. (Obviously, like many who have tried working from home, he found the need to create a clear work/home distinction!)

There are many travel options when it comes to finding your way out to Santa's Village from Rovaniemi. You can choose to travel by bus, hire car, taxi, even snow mobile. But there is only one method of transportation that any self-respecting child at heart would consider for travelling to St Nick's, and that, of course, is by reindeer! And not just any reindeer but Santa's reindeer, of course!

Erasetti Safaris serve more than 25,000 clients a year and can cater for groups of up to 2000 at a time, so I am therefore delighted to find out once we meet our guide at reception that we will be the only sleigh riders for today's Searching for Santa by Reindeer Safari. We will have the privilege of being taken on very own private family expedition!

Our first stop is the Erasetti headquarters in downtown Rovaniemi to get geared up for a 90-minute reindeer sleigh ride in sub zero conditions. Erasetti provide thermal outer gear especially designed for arctic temperatures. There is no problem finding the right size with over 3500 snowsuits and 2000 pairs of snow boots available. Erasetti Safaris recommend

In search of Santa

you wear at least two layers of your own warm clothing made of natural materials such as wool, under the underwear they provide.

Layer upon layer, on go the double pairs of woolly socks, snow mittens over woollen gloves, scarves, beanies, balaclavas, bulky awkward snow boots and overalls with an abundance of zippers, velcro and double linings – all designed to keep out the slightest wisp of arctic air.

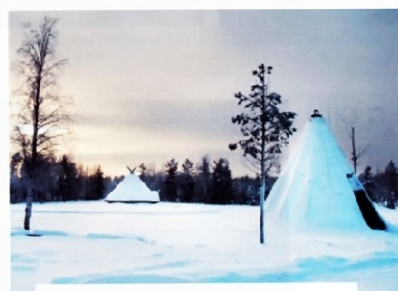
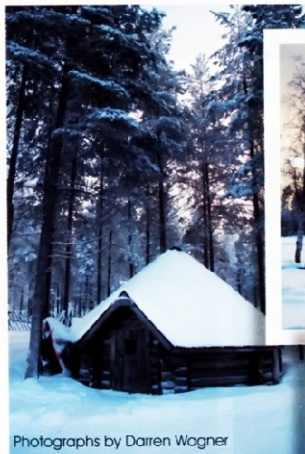
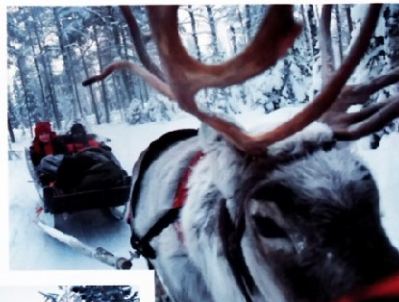
Once ready, our friendly female guide transports us by minivan to the reindeer park where Santa keeps his reindeer. Only a few miles from the office,

it doesn't take long for the township of Rovaniemi to slip away and become replaced by the fells of Finnish Lapland. As we arrive at the reindeer park, the sun is slowly rising and an eerie, otherworldly glow in the soft pastel grey skies welcomes us to a monochrome world where our red snow suits are the only trace of vivid colour.

The reindeer park is a rustic log cabin world that would not be out of place in a previous century. The Finns have constructed log cabins in the forested regions of Lapland since the 1600s. Winter has decorated these cottages until they look like thickly iced gingerbread houses and piles of snow thicker than loaves of bread sit on the timber fence rails. Traditional, wooden handmade reindeer sleighs are left upside down outside the stables so they don't fill with snow. The 'Kota', a traditional Lappish teepee, stands in the centre of the reindeer park, harking back to the nomadic reindeer herders long ago who used the kota when they travelled with their reindeer herds.

Crunching and squeaking, we make our way over the deeply thick snow to the wooden corral full of magical, mythical, fairytale creatures. This is the first time any of us have seen real, live reindeer and I am struck by their gentle elegance and grace.

Darren and I get to snuggle together in one sleigh while our two sons share a second sleigh. Reindeer furs line the bottom of the sleigh and are also placed over us as a blanket. Renowned for its warmth, the reindeer's coat is made of long densely-packed, hollow hairs that trap in the heat. Sitting in a reindeer drawn sleigh snuggled up under a fur pelt, I feel like the



Snow Queen from Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale.

Heading out into the dense snowy forest, we are C.S. Lewis' children entering the wintry world of Narnia through the wardrobe. Winter has cloaked the ground with its thick, heavy blanket of snow and snow laden pine trees fade into the horizon in every direction. We pass between towering conifers that dwarf us and within a few minutes there is no sign of civilisation: we are in a remote white wilderness. This is an incredibly quiet, peacefully serene and otherworldly place. The only sound is the crisp snow crunching under the hooves of the reindeer and the rhythmic swish of the sleigh runners over snow.

For children who have never seen snow this is a grand introduction! This really is the perfect antidote to a lifetime of intensely hot, tropical Australian Christmases. The

song, *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas* has always taunted me; it seemed an awfully cruel song to subject an Australian child to whilst Christmas shopping with their mother during a sweltering Australian summer. That song expressed such an elusive dream for a Sydney child born down under. Finally we were experiencing the snowy winter scenes that mocked us on our yearly Christmas cards.

It is not long before we approach a rustic timber archway, exquisitely decorated in snow and ice crystals, which welcomes us to the Arctic Circle (Napapi, in Finnish) and Santa's Village. We enter Santa's picturesque village to clapping and paparazzi-style photo taking. Not everyone arrives at Santa's Village by reindeer and so we are treated like arctic royalty by the other visitors milling around the quaint square. Should we give a royal wave? Just like Santa after his sleigh ride, we too have twinkling eyes and rosy red cheeks!

Disembarking from our sleighs, we have the sense of stepping into a fairytale. Around the central square, Santa's Village is a charming collection of storybook stone buildings with peaked towers and pretty log cottages.

At Santa's Village, unlike Narnia, it may not always be winter, but it is always Christmas. This is where you are able to meet Santa in person all year round. And now our moment has come: our audience with Saint Nicholas himself! Joulupukki is wearing traditional Laplander garb, he has just the right twinkle in his eye and welcomes us in a variety of languages. I hadn't thought of it before, but of course Santa must be a multi-linguist to understand the wishes of all the children of the world. He chats charmingly with us in English with a Finnish accent, asking us about Australia and our trip. But the biggest Christmas miracle of the day, and for me absolute proof that Santa is magical, is that I am stunned when one

of Santa's elves takes an absolutely perfect Christmas photograph of us with Santa – in one shot! Everyone is looking natural, rosy checked and happy, and I actually like the way I look!

It must be time for us to say our goodbyes to Santa because our cheek muscles are starting to ache from smiling. But our time at Santa's Village is not over because we have yet to visit Santa's Post Office on the other side of the village square.

Santa Claus' Post Office, a beautiful building of natural stone and aged pine, receives 750,000 letters a year from over 180 countries. At Christmas time Santa can receive 32,000 letters a day! The mail is sorted into pigeon holes and boxes according to country, by the blazing open fireplace. We made sure we found the pigeon hole, full of bundled letters, labelled Australia. Of course, we have to send some postcards to family and friends from Santa's Village. With eyes full of wonder and awe, Austen whispers to me that he can tell that the merry post office elves really are elves because not only do they wear elf hats, but more significantly, elf shoes! Sure enough, when I peer over the log counter their pointy shoes are curled up elf style. Austen wonders if he could ask them to take off their hats so he can see their pointy ears. Thankfully he realises that this might not be considered good manners at the North Pole!

I had vowed that I would be taking no souvenirs back with me other than my memories and the images in our digital camera; but just before we are about to leave, the little five-year-old girl within me just cannot leave without that soft toy reindeer from Santa's workshop.

The day we arrive back in the Whitsundays we are greeted by sweltering 30 degree celcius weather. It seems ludicrous to be writing these last paragraphs about an otherworldly arctic experience, sitting on the verandah of our traditional Queenslander in the tropical heat, trying to make the most of a balmy breeze. Riding in a reindeer sleigh through a snowy forest to Santa's seems a world away and something that maybe just was a dream. But when I pick up that soft little grey reindeer from pride of place on my dressing table, I know it was real. Yes, Trystan and Austen, there is a Santa Claus!

More info/details: Erasetti Safaris operates the Searching for Santa by Reindeer Safari daily throughout winter (December 1st to April 20th) for a minimum of two participants per departure. Santa Claus Village, 8 kms from Rovaniemi, is open 365 days a year.

www.erasetti.fi
www.santaclauslive.com
www.rovaniemi.fi

eye editor

THIS is the last issue of Townsville**eye** for the year and naturally it's a fairly festive one with some great reading.

As we start to really swelter here and devise ways to have the most sweatless Christmas possible, Airlie Beach writer Georgia Monaghan's story about she and her husband taking their two young children to Finnish Lapland for a real white Christmas

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The **eye** will return on January 16 so until then take care and have a wonderful Christmas and a happy New Year!

Christy Vene



contents

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Christy Lane

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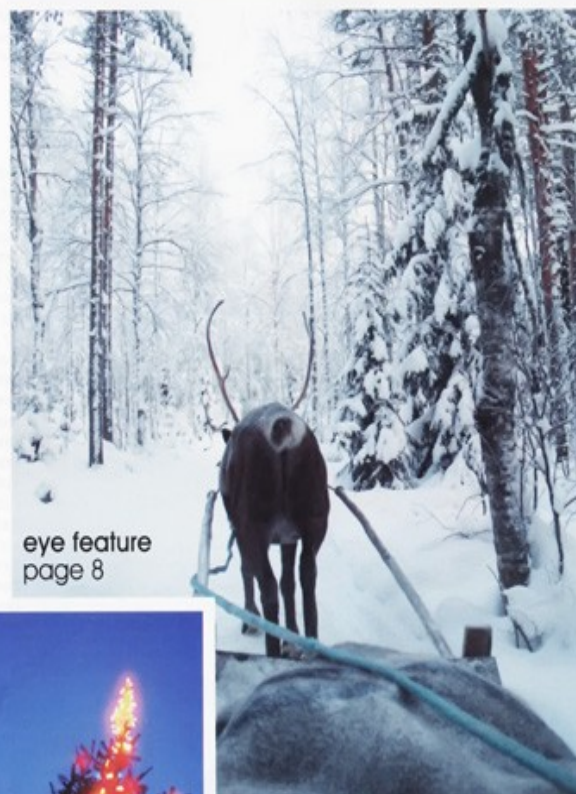


regulars

eye identity	4
eye must	5
eye spy	8
eye pick	8
eye want	26
eye need	26
eye play	27

features

feature	6,7
taste	9-11
fashion	12-13
home	18
escape	25
garden	28
property	29



eye feature
page 8



eye taste

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DECEMBER 19, 2007 - Issue 34 • people • food • fashion • cars • homes • travel

SEEKING SANTA

A North Queensland family heads to the Arctic Circle

DOING IT IN STYLE

What the latest glamour and style guides have to offer

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Festive biscuits you and the kids can make together

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