

## Club Holiday to Salla in Finnish Lapland.

By Deb Johnston

This was my third cross country ski week and my first club holiday. I was looking forward to seeing how the ski experience in Finland compared to previous weeks spent around Nordsetter and Sjusjoen in Norway.

After a 3hr 20m flight, the plane with this year's club trippers, Helen, Martin, John, Nigel, Chris, Ed, Jane, Judith, Anna and myself, touched down at a tiny airport in Northern Finland which was a joy compared to the half term madness of Manchester. A scenic coach trip took us through dense forests and across the arctic circle to our destination- Salla.

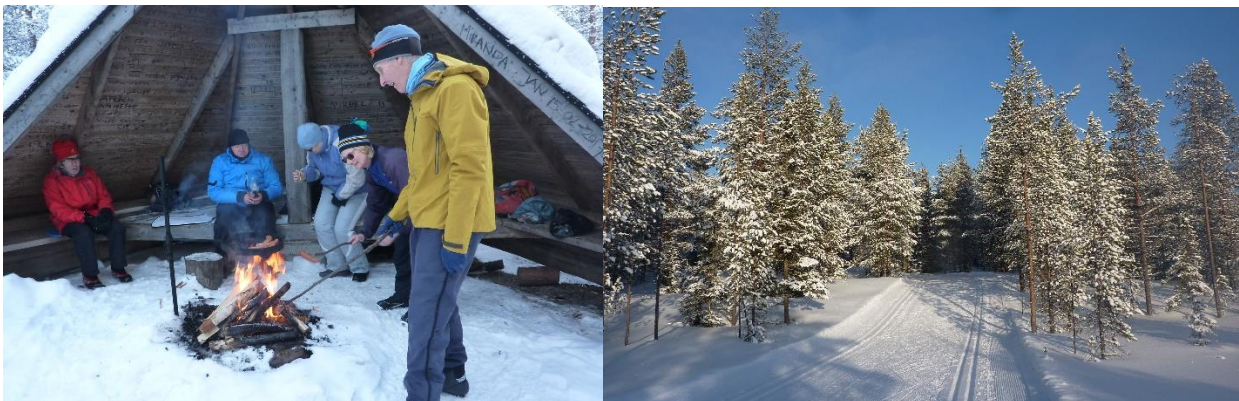
The Hotel Revontuli was perfectly situated with the cross-country ski tracks leading across the rear of the hotel and the main downhill slopes just beyond. The ski hire shop was a mere 300 metre walk away.

As soon as we had checked in, those of us without our own skis headed off to the hire shop. In contrast to Norway, we were each provided with skis to match our weight. (In Norway, Anna and myself had been given skis which were exactly the same, despite a difference of almost 4 stone between us! Consequently, we had never known if we were skiing on the correct skis.) Setting off on the tracks the next morning, we immediately had confidence in our skis, the Atomic 'mohair' strips providing better grip that we had ever felt on fish-scale skis.

Another immediate difference was the temperature. We had skied in Norway at Easter with spring conditions and above zero temperatures. I found myself loving the sharp, icy, cold air of Finland. But I learnt very quickly that a rehydration bladder was not the best idea -the tube had frozen solid within 10 minutes of leaving the hotel! During the week in Salla, the temperature varied between minus 16 and minus 8. This meant that outdoor drink or food stops were short, as the chill quickly seeped into your bones and made you very shivery.

The route on the first day took us along the valley bottom, though trees whose branches were heavy with snow, to the local reindeer farm with its wonderful café and visitor centre. This became the favourite refuelling stop of the holiday. As the week went on, the group of 10 split up and progressed onto more varied terrain depending on fitness and ability levels, but on most days, without any forward planning, we would each meet another club member or two at a café or picnic hut. The tracks were very quiet and on some days it seemed that the Yorkshire Dales Club had the area to itself!

One advantage of Salla was the variety of activities on offer in or around the resort, making it ideal for a mixed ability group or families. The reindeer farm and visitor centre was a picturesque 4.5 km ski away. A few of us took to the walking tracks which lead to the farm in one direction, and around a frozen lake in the other. Skidoo, husky dog, reindeer sleigh and snow shoeing trips were all bookable at the hotel, and the pool and spa complex was a welcome unwind after a day on skis in freezing temperatures. (Some of us even went native in the Finish sauna.) And along the ski tracks were plenty of picnic huts with supplies of firewood for sausage cooking.

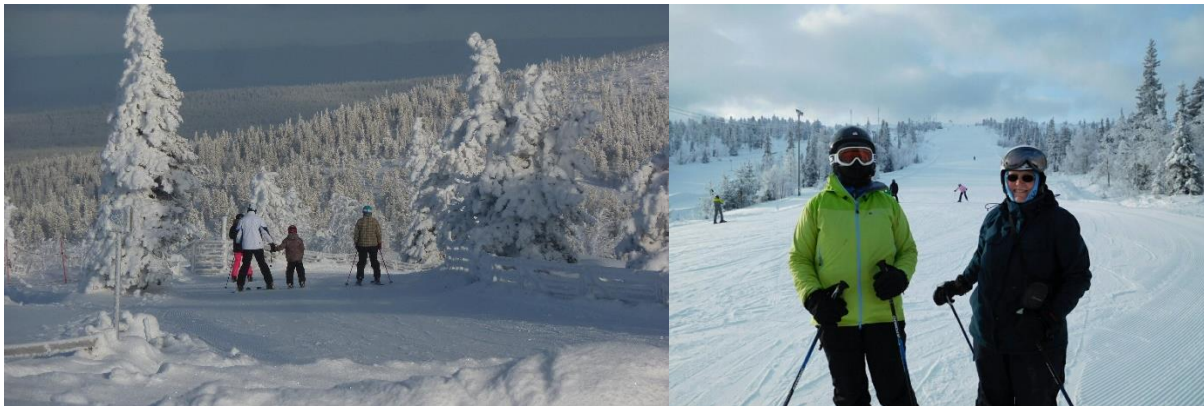


I had been led to believe that Finland was fairly flat compared to Norway. (Just as I had been led to believe that Nordsetter was 'undulating') And I guess that some of the valley routes were flatter than those we had encountered in Norway. But to take advantage of the area and the more open hill top views above the valley, uphill techniques are a must. After a week of struggling to keep up with most of the group, the reason for the different interpretations of terrain dawned on me. To a fitter person, the tracks in Norway probably do feel undulating! And to a fitter person,

the tracks in Finland probably do feel fairly flat! Technique in cross country skiing is everything. But fitness is essential to holding on to your technique and mastering the terrain. Aching legs and general fatigue after a few kilometres each day meant that I felt every incline. But the great thing about the club holiday is that there is always someone to ski with. Whatever distance or whatever speed you are going, you are never alone or left behind. And although my fitness levels and technique will never match those of some of the group, I'm still doing much more than most of my non-skiing friends. And I have my friends at the YDCCSC to thank for this.

On day 3, with the anticipation of a clear morning with amazing views, Jane and I swapped cross country skis for down-hill skis and tackled the dreaded T-bar drag lift to the top of the hill. The view from the top more than made up for the howling wind and biting cold temperatures! We could look down onto the dark forests and see the white shapes of the many frozen lakes dotted around the area. We saw trees completely covered in frozen snow, and we almost certainly looked across the border into Russia, though we couldn't stand still for long enough in minus 17 degrees to get our exact bearings! We had enough slopes to keep us moving for a few hours, with a mixture of steep red and blue runs. (The black runs were closed for a slalom competition. Such a shame.....)

It was a great day. I realised just how much I love the exhilaration and speed of down-hill skiing, even though cross country has stolen my heart in recent years. The availability of the down-hill slopes, albeit not enough to keep you occupied for more than a couple of days, made Salla a perfect resort choice.



Our last day of skiing saw the whole group stay together for a steep climb away from the valley bottom up to a fantastic viewing point on the edge of a frozen lake. After much frivolity and photo taking, some of us skied onto the lake itself, the powder snow covering our skies and boots. This was the best day of the trip, and high-lighted where cross country skiing beats down-hill. That feeling that you are skiing at one with the landscape, almost as if no-one has skied there before you, where the silence across the snow and through the forest is like no silence you've encountered before, where the landscape is so magnificent that all of your problems become insignificant.....there are no crowds, no queues, no traffic, just a handful of amazing friends to share this beautiful experience with....No words can do this feeling justice. Its spiritual, humbling, and truly wonderful.

A few of us then skied onwards and upwards, benefitting from the wonderful fell-top views. Up until this point I had doubted that the landscape in Finland could match that of the unlimited and open fell-top views above Nordseter. But here, above the valley floor, where the forest opened up onto the fells, I fell in love with Finland and its mixture of trees and hills. And yes, I came realise that hills were essential, for only by going up them can you see such stunning vistas. We kept climbing until we reached a small refreshment hut on the top of the mountain. It felt like we were on top of the world - the views were amazing. (Indeed, I launched into a rendition of 'I'm on the Top of the World' by The Carpenters. It wasn't pretty but I couldn't help myself.)

And inside, hot drinks in hand, gloves drying by the open wood fire, we fell into a conversation with a local reindeer herder's wife. Our Finnish experience was complete.



