



Picking up Pace

Scandinavia is speeding ahead as the family destination du jour, finds Katie McGonagle

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If there were a kids' version of a bucket list - things to do before I turn 10, perhaps - then meeting Father Christmas in his wintry home would surely rank near the top.

That explains why every year, thousands of parents dig out their thermals and dip into their holiday fund so they can bring their brood to the icy reaches of Lapland to see the man in red.

After all, can you really put

a price on watching a child's face light up as all the magic of Christmas comes to life before their very eyes?

Well yes, you can - and it's not cheap, making it a good commission-earner for agents - but why stop at Santa? Scandinavia is going from strength to strength across all markets, whether winter or summer, and for families as well as couples.

So now is the time to jump on the bandwagon (or sled) and make sure your Scandinavian sales are off to a flying start.

▶ SANTA'S LITTLE HELPERS

There's a small window when families will get the most out of a trip to see Santa: too young, and kids won't appreciate the magic of the place while parents just worry about whether they've got enough layers on; too [→](#)

old, and you won't get that unabashed wonder as they meet Santa up close. Get them at just the right age and it's an unforgettable family moment that will put any sunny beach break in the shade.

Monarch has expanded its Lapland programme this year, with twice-weekly scheduled flights to Finnish airport Kittila starting December 2 from Gatwick and Manchester, running until February 14 and January 3 respectively.

Expect to pay a premium for the most popular dates: packages lead in as low as £489 per adult and £375 per child for flights and three nights' bed-and-breakfast; but rise to a respective £899 or £735 for a four-night stay departing on December 23 – though since this includes meeting Santa on Christmas Day, it might be a price worth paying.

New destination Yllas – an hour west of Kittila – has also broadened Monarch's programme in northern Finland, as a base for a new three or four-night Arctic Experience trip suited to older children able to take part in activities such as sleigh rides and snowmobiling.

If squeezing a Santa stay into the busy Christmas break is just too much, Newmarket Holidays also offers



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Lapland day trips, with a Search for Santa experience, private family meeting with the man himself, a sleigh and snowmobile ride, husky dog experience, plus flights and transfers to Pajala in Lapland, from £529 for adults and £499 for children under 15.

WILD AT HEART

Don't admit this to the kids, or at least not until they're older, but reindeer aren't just there to pull Santa's sleigh. They're only one example of the incredible wildlife native to this region that – along with its summer and winter activities, and reputation as a safe, family-friendly destination – make Scandinavia a viable choice for family holidays, whatever time of year.

It's not the cheapest by any stretch, but Visit Norway has found favourable exchange rates between the pound

and krona sparking a rise in British families skiing in Norway; so much so that largest resort Trysil has added English-speaking ski schools and nannies to cope with UK demand.

Perhaps it's not the pound, but the *Frozen* effect, as youngsters use good old pester power to talk their parents into visiting the land of Anna and Elsa. Family specialist Activities Abroad offers a trip to Kirkenes to see the spectacular landscapes that inspired Arendelle, visiting the Snowhotel, embarking on a husky safari through the snow and hunting for the northern lights. Prices start at £1,445 per adult, £1,260 for children 12-16, or £975 for under-11s, including flights, transfers, four nights' B&B, and guided activities.

Neighbouring Sweden offers just as much of an adventure, with scenery and wildlife sure to excite children of any age. Taber Holidays introduced a family wildlife tour this year, which includes the chance to spot moose on a safari through the forest; to canoe through wolf territory at night then listen for tell-tale howls while eating around the campfire; and spend the night in a forest hide looking out for brown bears and wolverines.

Simply Sweden has also tapped into growing fascination with



Sweden's Wildlife Tour from **Taber Holidays** starts at £1,745 per adult and £995 per child aged eight or above. The price covers Heathrow-Stockholm flights, six nights' accommodation with breakfast and selected meals, guided wildlife tours in Skinnskatteberg, Dalarna and Halsingland with a night in Stockholm, and car hire. Departs Mondays May to September. taberhols.co.uk

Regent Holidays offers its eight-day Iceland Family Encounter Fly-Drive from £1,240 per adult and £1,197 per child under 12, based on four sharing and including Icelandair flights from Heathrow, car hire with insurance, and seven nights' accommodation in family rooms with breakfast. regent-holidays.co.uk



PICTURES: MONARCH; NEWMARKET HOLIDAYS; ANTTI PIETIKAINEN

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**ASK THE
 EXPERT**



Alistair McLean,
 managing director,
 The Artisan
 Travel Company:

"Northern Scandinavia has been very much in the spotlight in the past few years due to the northern lights. However, visitors are realising there is much more to this stunning part of the world. The aurora apart, activities include exhilarating husky safaris, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, ice-fishing and reindeer-pulled sleigh rides; while accommodation includes cosy log cabins, ice and snow hotels, and glass igloos. It's a pristine winter setting where reindeer outnumber humans; it's like holidaying in Narnia but without the Snow Queen."



➔ Scandinavia in summer, with a new self-catering break to Swedish Lapland, staying in log cabins on the banks of Lake Saggat. Set on a historic migration route for local Sami people and their reindeer, guests can use this as a base for hiking, husky-sledding and lake-fishing, all in the light of the Midnight Sun. A week starts at £835 based on six sharing, including flights and car hire.

▶ CITY STAYS

Think city breaks and family holidays don't go together? Try Reykjavik, with its winning combination of a short flight, comfortable accommodation and - most importantly - child-friendly activities within easy reach of the city.

Selected SuperBreak hotels offer free accommodation for children and a free excursion package for under 11s. As long as the family is staying three nights or more, kids enjoy a free Ultimate Iceland package, which includes transfers, a Golden Circle tour, admission to the Blue Lagoon and either a whale-watching cruise in summer or northern lights tour in winter. For adults, it costs £185 for the summer option or £147 in winter, while 12 to 15-year-olds get a reduced rate.

Reykjavik is also a good jumping-off point for self-drive holidays, which are gaining popularity in Iceland, offering the freedom to explore the island's rugged scenery with little traffic and next to no chance of getting lost. Regent Holidays added an Iceland Family Encounter Fly-Drive to its 2016 brochure, which ticks off key stops like the Blue Lagoon, Thingvellir National Park and the golden-sand geothermal beach at Reykjavik, while keeping driving times short and including activities such as snowmobiling and seal-spotting en route.

Independently-minded mums and dads will also find the mix of guided sightseeing and free time in On The Go Tours' new Finland city break a good fit. Managing director Carl Cross says: "Helsinki is an incredibly family-friendly destination, which is fun and educational with a friendly and relaxing vibe. The city has so much to see and experience and is reasonably priced, with convenient public transport. The city also has free entry to many attractions that are perfect for families."

The Helsinki city stay starts at £499 for two nights' B&B, a tour of Prvoo and Helsinki and transfers, applicable May-October. **TW**



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