

Peak performance

The northern lights aren't the only reason to visit Scandinavia, finds Laura French

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With their electric swathes of colour exploding across the sky, the northern lights are one of the most talked-about phenomena on the planet.

And although rumours of their disappearance are much exaggerated – after the recent peak in sightings, the latter phase of the solar cycle just means you might have to go farther north to see them – it's worth pointing out some alternative activities.

A northern lights holiday would be nothing without everything else that goes with them: days spent bumblin

around in the snow, whizzing along on snowmobiles, gliding past reindeer and sledding with huskies against a backdrop of snowy peaks and pristine scenery.

Of course, it's not only the active attractions that appeal. Home to the indigenous Sami people, the frozen landscapes of Lapland are gifted with sweeping mountain scenery, one-of-a-kind wildlife and a diverse culinary scene that attracts foodies from across the world. That means even if clients don't catch the northern lights, there are plenty of other things to get stuck into.

FINLAND

Think Finnish Lapland, think Father Christmas, and for families who don't get to see the northern lights, there's no better consolation than a trip to see the big, bearded man in his cheery red suit. Newmarket Holidays has day trips for time-pressed parents, while operators such as Best Served Scandinavia offer longer adventures, such as its Snow and Santa in Finnish Lapland tour.

If it's not the season to be jolly, though, fear not; Finland is a magnet for adventure-seekers

year round, with activities to suit all ages and interests. Snowshoeing, reindeer safaris and snowmobile expeditions are all available, and there's plenty for skiers too, according to Katherine Page, Lapland and Norway product manager for Inghams.

"Downhill skiers can enjoy uncrowded pistes and modern lift systems," she says. "Lapland is also an ideal place to learn cross-country skiing."

For the best resorts, suggest Levi and Ylläs, where blindingly white slopes plunge down

FAST FACT
Icelandair will start a three-times-a-week service between Belfast City and Reykjavik on June 1



LEFT:
A Karelian
pasty

RIGHT:
Dog
sledding
in Sweden



PICTURES: GRAEME RICHARDSON/LAPLAND TRAVEL SERVICES; SHUTTERSTOCK

➔ into quaint mountain villages.

But if it's less burning calories and more consuming them that tempts your clients (we wouldn't blame them), highlight Finland's food heritage, says Andrea Godfrey, general manager for Regent Holidays.

Sweet cardamom-flavoured buns called pulla and karjalanpiirakka, a traditional pasty from Karelia, count among the tempting delicacies they'll find in the region. There is also a host of culinary experiences available to occupy clients who aren't blessed with a northern lights display.

Among them is Regent Holidays' Culture & Cuisine trip, which gives guests the opportunity to cook local specialities – think warm loaves of rye bread and fluffy Finnish cakes – while exploring the picturesque area on hikes and bikes.

► SWEDEN

It's not only in Finland that clients can find a trove of cultural and gastronomic treasures, however. Swedish Lapland offers plenty of opportunities to meet the Sami communities indigenous to the region. Taber Holidays – which is rebranding itself as Scandinavia Only in January – has added a tasting experience at Biergo in



Housed in two igloos, the concerts feature ice violins, ice drums and ice xylophones

Luleå, on Sweden's northern coast, where guests can learn first-hand about Sami cuisine from the people who produce it.

Luleå isn't just about the food, of course, and if you thought the Icehotel in Jukkasjärvi was quirky, this town takes things one step further. "Music lovers can revel in an concert, which takes place in a concert hall complete with ice instruments," says Suzel Taber-Shaw, managing director of Taber Holidays.

Housed in two igloos, it features ice violins, ice drums and ice xylophones carved by artist Tim Linhart. Weekly concerts take place from mid-January until the end of March, with luminescent lights flashing to the beat of the music – a worthy alternative to the aurora borealis.

Northern Sweden is also a hotspot for adventure, with the usual Arctic options – including snowshoeing and reindeer

sledding – rubbing shoulders with ice fishing and hovercraft sailing on the Luleå archipelago.

The Aurora Zone offers the latter as an add-on to its Brändön Lodge – Aurora Highlights tour, providing travellers with the chance to explore the frozen waters surrounding the 3,000 islands in a unique way, and throwing in a dinner-on-ice experience and husky safari.

It doesn't have to be all about doing things, though. Chris Graham, founder of specialist operator Simply Sweden, recommends heading to a quirky abode such as the new Treehotel, set in the Lule River valley, and taking some time out to relax in the unique surroundings.

"Everyone is so keen on going hunting, or on a northern lights chase, or doing other kinds of activities," he says. "But how about staying right where you are? It's all about appreciating the silence and atmosphere of the Arctic."

► NORWAY

Sweden's Nordic neighbour offers the chance to do exactly that thanks to its crystal-blue fjords and mystical snowy peaks, which provide an idyllic backdrop for tranquil boat journeys where

clients can take in the glorious, snow-capped scenery.

For a more intense way of experiencing the fjords, however, suggest a RIB boat tour. Hurtigruten offers one as an optional excursion around Frøya – one of more than 5,000 islets and reefs that pepper the area (from £149 per person).

These legendary waters are also a favourite haunt for whales, so for wildlife aficionados, suggest an orca safari. On The Go Tours' Arctic Experience combines one with a visit to a reindeer farm and the Polarpark: the most northerly wildlife park in the world, it's a vast stretch of land home to wolverines, elks, Arctic foxes and plenty more.

Norway has plenty to offer when it comes to creature spotting, and eagle-eyed birdwatchers will be especially in their element in the Vega islands, a cluster of more than 6,000 Unesco-listed isles located just south of the Arctic Circle. Hurtigruten's Vega and the Eider Museum excursion is an excellent option for clients looking to get to know the archipelago.

Then, of course, there's the country's cultural side. Trondheim is home to several annual festivals and cultural sites,



RIGHT:
Trondheim

BELOW:
Gullfoss



→ while the fjordside town of Tromsø – located at the centre of the northern aurora zone and known as one of the best places for spotting the northern lights – is filled with pubs, museums and galleries.

If clients are heading to Tromsø in January, they'll catch the International Film Festival as well as the Northern Lights Festival, a week-long extravaganza featuring musical performances and more.

And if it's these attractions that get your clients giddy, the Andøya Space Centre in Sortland may also tickle their fancy. This futuristic outpost launches several rockets each year in the name of atmospheric analysis, and visitors can experience a realistic space simulator while learning about the northern lights from those who really know their stuff.

The Aurora Zone's Sortland – Adventure with the Aurora Addicts trip focuses on this side of things, and it's well worth recommending to enthusiasts who want to understand more about how the luminescent green magically appears.

▶ ICELAND

Over in Iceland, there's even more cause for excitement, as volcanic activity, steaming geysers and otherworldly landscapes make up this unique country and provide a worthy alternative to the northern lights.

These characteristics mean this island is getting ever more attention,



The futuristic Andøya Space Centre launches rockets in the name of atmospheric research

according to Paul Melinis, head of sales at Insight Vacations. "Iceland has been a hugely popular destination this year, with the majority of our tours selling

out fast," he says. "The chance to see the northern lights is a big selling point, but there is so much more to the tiny Nordic island nation than just the spectacular natural light show."

The Gullfoss waterfall with its crashing white foam, geothermal fields with Mars-like coloured pools and the Grabrokk volcano crater are all major draws according to Carl Cross, managing director of On The Go Tours.

Meanwhile, Dean Stilwell, product manager for Newmarket Holidays, recommends Thingvellir National Park, a lava field characterised by its black and rocky landscapes. "Iceland offers plenty of unique experiences that customers will never forget," he says.

And when it comes to culture, there's plenty to satisfy, from tales of the mythical huldafólk to farming families who provide a warm welcome to visitors. The latter are a key selling point on Insight Vacations' Scenic Iceland & The Northern Lights tour, which takes guests into the heart of local communities with various authentic and immersive experiences.

They include a visit to a family-run farm to sample homegrown tomatoes, and a geothermal bakery experience where visitors feast on freshly baked rye bread dug hot from the ground. Now there's something you can't do in Blighty – and all without the faintest mention of a solar-charged particle. **TW**



Hurtigruten offers a seven-day Classic Voyage North: Bergen to Kirkenes trip through Norway from £615, including visits to Trondheim, Tromsø and beyond. hurtigruten.co.uk

Newmarket Holidays offers a four-day Iceland & the Northern Lights trip from £609. The price includes return flights, accommodation and visits to Reykjavik, the Thingvellir lava fields and Gullfoss waterfall. newmarketholidays.co.uk