

And breathe...

The Nordics are hard to beat when it comes to pristine national parks. **Rhonda Carrier** offers a look at the region's newest, plus four more top Scandi nature spots

With a reputation for natural beauty – and sporty inhabitants who like to make the most of it – it's little wonder that the Nordic region has so much protected land. Norway is currently busy creating 10 new national parks, and expanding eight existing ones, in a bid to protect its nature and biodiversity.

In Iceland, around 25% of land is protected, with the country embracing its Unesco World Heritage-listed natural sites, such as Vatnajökull National Park. And around 15% of Finland's land is protected too, whether as a nature, forest or seal reserve, a wilderness area, a national hiking area – or a national park.

Scandinavia's newest national park is Salla National Park, established on New Year's Day this year, up in the north in Finnish Lapland – all choppy fells and pine forests. Finland's 41st national park has just 0.6 inhabitants per square kilometre, making it one of the least densely populated areas of Europe.

In winter, this highland wilderness of ancient forests is a place for spotting the northern lights while on a reindeer safari, snowmobiling or snowshoeing. And in summer, there are incredible hiking, cycling and fatbiking routes easily accessible from Salla town.

Whenever clients go, they can experience Arctic wellness at its finest in Salla's vast spas and saunas. Accommodation includes authentic

guesthouses and wilderness cottages to give visitors that get-away-from-it-all feel.

Salla also leads the way in Finland's sustainable tourism drive, with the area having been one of the pilot areas in Visit Finland's Sustainable Travel Finland programme for several years, and local companies already holding environmental certification.

With the popularity of nature breaks showing no sign of waning, here are four more Nordic national parks to set your clients up with the ultimate wilderness breaks for summer and winter.

Book it: Crystal Ski offers seven nights' self-catering at Salla Cabins in Salla from £730, including flights from Manchester, departing January 8, 2023. crystalski.co.uk

BEST FOR HIKING: Rondane, Norway

One of the best-loved spots among hiking-fanatic Norwegians, Rondane in eastern Norway is the country's oldest national park, founded in 1962. Responsible Travel's Walking Holiday in Norway takes visitors up some of the park's 10 peaks that rise more than 2,000m and offer magnificent views.

Book it: The seven-day Walking Holiday Norway costs from £991, including breakfasts and dinners, plus daily lunch packs, but excluding flights. responsibletravel.com

Salla National Park, Finland

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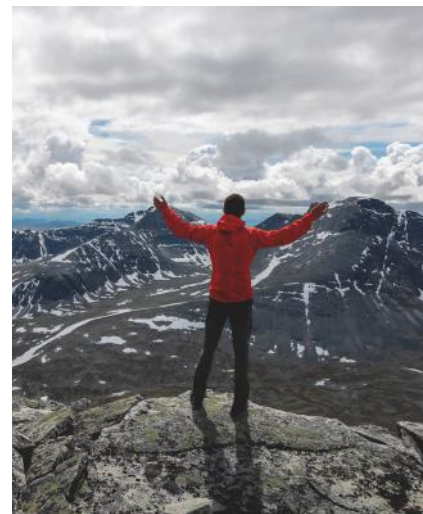
DESTINATIONS

THE NORDICS | NATIONAL PARKS



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Thingvellir National Park, Iceland; Rondane National Park, Norway; Kitkajoki River, Oulanka National Park, Finland; northern lights, Abisko National Park, Sweden

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Michal Sanka, Kjetil Alm-Kristiansen, M-P Markkanen, Conny Sjoström



BEST FOR NORTHERN LIGHTS:

Abisko National Park, Sweden

Sweden's Abisko National Park is said by experts to be one of the world's best places to see the flickering magic of the aurora borealis because of its low rainfall, remoteness and almost entirely clear skies. Sunvil's Northern Lights Holiday in Abisko bases you at the STF Abisko Turiststation in the heart of the national park for activities including an aurora photo tour, a visit to the Icehotel, a Sami and reindeer tour, dog-sledding, a snowshoe hike, ice climbing, ice fishing and a day trip to the Norwegian coastal town of Narvik.

Book it: Three-night trips cost from £1,279, including flights and meals, for departures until November 2023. sunvil.co.uk

BEST FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES:

Oulanka National Park, Finland

Located on the borderland of Salla and Kuusamo, Finland's Oulanka National Park has its very own foundation, WildOulanka, dedicated to the preservation of the local taiga forest – part of a wildlife corridor across the Russian-Finnish border. Careful management of this protected area has led to the reappearance of bears and several other species. Exodus Travels' Finnish Wilderness Week takes you to stay at Basecamp Oulanka, a self-sustaining complex of wooden buildings from which you can try activities including dog-sledding and snowshoeing under the northern lights.

For summer, Baltic Travel Company's Finland Circle Fly Drive (inspired by the BBC series *The Hairy Bikers' Northern Exposure*) includes an incursion into Oulanka



TOM WILKINSON

Senior product manager for Europe, Exodus Travels

"We are seeing an increase in demand for nature trips to Scandinavia. Finland for example, gives a great introduction to outdoor winter activities in this region, including cross-country skiing, dog-sledding and snowshoeing. Oulanka National Park, where we base most of our trips, is one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe, so is a great retreat for those wanting to disconnect and have a real wilderness experience. The national park is home to pine forests rich with wildlife and is a place where travellers can appreciate the serenity of a snow-laden landscape. Travellers will get the chance to snowshoe under the stars and, given the right weather conditions, the magnificent northern lights."

National Park as well as time in Helsinki, Tampere, Hämeenlinna, with its medieval castle, and sunny Vaasa, with its fishing and boating between the islands of the archipelago.

Book it: The eight-day Finnish Wilderness Week costs from £2,599, including flights and most meals, for a departure on December 16, 2022. exodus.co.uk

The 11-day Finland Circle Fly Drive trip costs from £1,195, including flights, car hire and daily breakfast, departing any day this year until September. baltictravelcompany.com

BEST FOR GEOLOGICAL WONDERS: Thingvellir National Park, Iceland

Iceland's Thingvellir National Park is not only steeped in history (it was the site of Iceland's Parliament from the 10th to 18th centuries), it's also a place where you can see the country's dramatic geological processes playing out right in front of your eyes. Intrepid Travel's Iceland's Golden Circle in Depth tour leads you on a loop from the capital, Reykjavik, taking in the national park and its glaciers, geysers, geothermal pools and waterfalls. Enabling visitors to experience another side of Iceland, the trip also includes a stay on a sustainable working farm with a farm-to-table meal there, plus a visit to a geothermal bakery to watch rye bread cooked beneath the ground by the hot black sand.

Book it: The five-day Iceland's Golden Circle in Depth tour costs from £1,459, including some meals but not including flights, departing on September 15, 2022. intrepidtravel.com **TW**