

THE reindeer looked at us and we looked at the reindeer. We were at the top of the main ski lift in the Finnish resort of Salla, within the Arctic Circle in Lapland. The reindeer were munching grass after scuffing their hooves in the snow to reveal a midday snack.

'This is very unusual,' whispered Jonne, my ski instructor. 'Usually we don't see them at all – or if we do, they run away.'

The deer normally stick to the surrounding spruce forest here, just a few miles from the Russian border. But with few skiers about, they had ventured closer by.

Skiing in Finland is eye-opening and fun. After our impromptu encounter with the reindeer, we made the most of the almost empty, well-maintained slopes. We raced down pleasingly steep red runs on a par with anything in the Alps. We glided along slightly easier blue slopes. And we took on a hairy, exhilarating black run, on which the French national squad had just trained.

Salla has only six miles of runs (plus 100 miles of cross-country routes), but that makes it perfect for novices, those regaining a feel for skiing after a break, or intermediates honing their technique. It also throws up some surprises.

One of those is the chance to grill your own lunch at brilliant little mountainside barbecue huts that come with a fire-pit, logs and even axes to chop up the wood – all you need to bring is matches and food. This was how I found myself splitting logs, while Jonne started a fire. Sausages were soon sizzling on the grill and a pot was boiling with water from a flask.

The barbecues are a great way to save cash (Finnish prices can be steep) and warm up in temperatures that often drop to minus 20C.

During my time in Salla, it began to get light at 10.30am and darkness fell by 3pm. This isn't a problem for skiers as floodlights illuminate the runs and it's curi-



PRISTINE SLOPES: A skier enjoys the fantastic off-piste conditions in Salla, left. Above: One of the barbecue huts in the resort

Reindeer, floodlit pistes, DIY barbecues and VERY chilly swims – Tom Chesshyre plunges into the unique world of Finnish winter sports

Lap up some Arctic skiing

ously enjoyable zooming through the gloom.

But there is much more to Salla than skiing. On Mondays and Fridays, if you're feeling brave, tourists may join local ice-lake swimming enthusiasts. It works like this: you go to a remote spot

on the edge of Lake Ruuhijarvi at 6.45pm, pay €7 (£6.30), jump into a hole cut in the frozen surface, then retreat to a shed-like sauna heated by a wood-burning fire. Repeat this procedure as many times as you care or dare in an hour.

While this may sound like mad-

ness, it is wonderfully refreshing and somehow life-reaffirming.

Food in the Arctic Circle is a treat. My favourite restaurant was Kiela, where reindeer burgers cost €16 (about £14) and a bowl of bear stew will set you back €32 (£28). A beer at the Papanu Pupi pub next door is €6 (£5.40) (sallatunturi.fi).

Yet the real joy of Salla is its otherworldliness: the short winter days, the possibility of seeing the Northern Lights, the bracing reindeer and husky excursions offered by local tour companies (a six-hour sleigh ride costs €180, or £160), the freezing conditions, and the mysterious forest spreading for

miles around. Salla's motto is 'In The Middle Of Nowhere'. And after bobbing about in the freezing waters of Lake Ruuhijarvi, it was impossible not to feel that they've got it spot-on.

Finland has 75 ski resorts, but if Salla is not for you, there are others worth checking out. Ruka, just south of the Arctic Circle, is popular, featuring 12 miles of slopes, plus a compact town centre featuring lively restaurants and bars.

The skiing would suit intermediates, although there are a few challenging black runs.

Snowmobiling, reindeer and husky trips are available from Ruka Safaris (rukasafaris.fi) and Rukapalvelu (rukapalvelu.fi).

Seven nights' self-catering in a smart Ruka Suites apartment with Crystal Ski (crystalski.co.uk) costs from £566pp, including flights from Gatwick and transfers. Lift passes cost from £174 for a week and equipment can be hired for £140.

Not far from Salla is Suomu, a tiny resort with just three miles of runs and a single 35-room hotel, Hotel Suomutunturi.

OFFICIAL slopes are limited, with a couple of red runs and one black run, although experts can enjoy off-piste forest skiing.

It's also brilliant for absolute beginners: a good nursery run faces the hotel. Guests often feel as though they have the entire resort to themselves.

Seven nights' self-catering at Hotel Suomutunturi, which has had a recent revamp and now features a slick spa, costs from £547pp, including flights from Gatwick, transfers and lift passes (crystal ski.co.uk). Equipment hire for a week costs from £126.

Levi competes with Yllas for the title of Finland's largest ski resort. It is 110 miles north of the Arctic Circle – particularly good for the Northern Lights – and has more than 40 runs suited to all levels, as well as a renowned 'snowpark' for jumps and tricks.

Seven nights' B&B at the four-star Break Sokos Hotel Levi costs from £708pp, including flights from Gatwick and transfers (crystalski.co.uk). A lift pass costs from £164.



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GETTING THERE

Seven nights' self-catering at **Salla Cabins** costs from £444pp, departing February 10, including flights from Gatwick and transfers (crystal ski.co.uk). The cost of ski equipment for a week is from £137, and a lift pass costs from £167. For more details on Salla, see visitsalla.fi.

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