

All quiet on the eastern frontier

The reindeer prove elusive, but in every other way dog-sledding through the Finnish wilderness is the perfect festive adventure, says Isabel Choat. Read on for more Christmas and New Year ideas

[Isabel Choat](#)

[The Guardian](#), Saturday 1 November 2008

[Article history](#)



Oh what fun it is to ride ... husky dog sledding in Finland. Photograph: The Border Inn

"Welcome to The Border Inn", reads the sign in Philip Ross's hands. A nice touch, but not entirely necessary. He is wearing a fleece printed with huskies. Even without the dogs emblazoned across his chest, we would have clocked him at Kuusamo airport immediately. He stands stock still amid a gaggle of over-excited ski reps, who flirt with each other and brandish clipboards at new arrivals. As they shepherd their charges into coaches bound for the ski resort of Ruka, we jump into Philip's 4x4, destination: somewhere near the Russian border.

Perhaps the husky sweatshirt is ironic, I think, as we head east along an arrow straight, icy road. But it soon becomes clear that dog sledding is not just a livelihood for Philip, it's an all-consuming obsession. He talks of nothing else. The journey passes quickly with tales of arduous sled races, a rundown of the individual characteristics of (almost) all of his 67 dogs and reminiscences about dogs he's loved and lost.

An hour later, ensconced in the pine-clad basement of The Border Inn, Philip's home and our base for the week, the first thing he does is switch on the telly. "There's something I want to show you," he says. It's a video of him dog sledding. With a Boney M soundtrack.

Well, there's no doubting the man's authenticity. Which is reassuring when you're about to set off on a four-day dog-sledding expedition into the wild. The plan is to travel in a big loop,

averaging 30-35km a day and spending the night in remote cabins. But first we have to get naked.

Philip; his friend Ant, a former client who loved the experience so much he came back to help out; young Rob, whose parents gave him the trip as an 18th birthday present; my boyfriend, Rory; and Richard, a retired architect, all pile into the sauna. I'm invited to sauna with Philip's wife, Mira, and their two young daughters. I try to hide my awkwardness at meeting someone for the first time starkers, and make small talk in the 100C heat.

The next morning, we pull on our snowsuits for the first time and head out to meet the dogs. There are traditional white huskies with piercing blue eyes, but also smaller, black Norwegian huskies, and grandest of all, gorgeous Freddy, the top dog, half setter, half Siberian husky. The dogs are adorable, bright-eyed, sleek-coated and frisky. They snarl at each other but are pushovers with people.

Father Christmas-style sleds are dragged out of storage and the dogs are let out of their enclosures. Thirty-five huskies charge towards us, barking, yelping, howling and haring up and down the driveway like they're on doggy speed. It's chaos. The four of us are introduced to our own teams and handed a bundle of harnesses.

This is the moment I realise that behind Philip's gruffness is a sense of humour. My boyfriend's team includes three sisters: Wibble, Wobble and Wu. I am laughing so much watching him race around the yard, shouting "Wibble! Wobble! Wu!", that I can barely hold on to the dogs, let alone harness them up.

After what feels like hours, the dogs are paired and matched to their sleds and we're ready to roll. They are making even more of a racket now, straining on the ropes. Finally, we get the signal from Philip, I raise my foot, the sled hurtles forward, the canine chorus abates, and we're off.

Silence. We fly out of the gate and into the forest and suddenly I get it. It's the most amazing feeling, gliding through this fairytale land where everything is pure and white and glittery. The world looks like it's been frozen forever. The fir trees are tall and crisp and splendid in their white coats, the branches sparkling like Christmas decorations. It's hard to imagine that the spell will be broken and that the snow-laden trees glinting in the sun or the frozen lakes as smooth and delectable as icing will ever defrost and come back to life.

The practice run lasts an hour and much to our surprise, no-one falls off. When it's time to turn back I feel like a kid who doesn't want to go home for tea - I want to stay out and play in this wonderland. But we head back to the lodge, where Mira is preparing reindeer stew with lingonberries. It's the only time we see reindeer during the entire week.

Day two is the big one - the start of our adventure. We take the bare necessities, most of which are blocks of frozen meat for the dogs, although I'm pleased to see beer and wine count as necessities. Same routine: the dogs go bonkers, barking for 45 minutes until we finally set off. The sled jerks forward and whoosh, we're weaving through the forest and out onto the empty expanse of the lake.

Each of us drives our own sled, pulled by six dogs. We travel in single file, with Philip up ahead, dead cool, smoking and listening to his iPod. I wonder what's on it. Boney M? Motivational music for mushers? For the rest of us, the world is silent, as if someone's pressed the mute button. It is utterly, unnervingly still too. There's no breeze, nothing moves, not even the spindliest twig.

The track varies, at times cutting through woods where we duck low branches, then out again into the emptiness; occasionally, we come to a hill and have to get off the sleds and run behind, jumping back on just in time before it hurtles down the other side, the wind bringing tears to our eyes. The air is so cold and fresh it smells of metal.

After four hours we turn into a wood, and find ourselves outside a log cabin. Inside it's as snug and inviting as Goldilocks'. We're knackered. Standing on the back of a sled for four hours is surprisingly tiring. But chores come first - it's down to the lake to collect water. If Bear Grylls were here he'd probably crack the ice with his bare hands, and have a quick dip for good measure. We bore down with a giant drill and fill two old milk pails with the brown-coloured but clean water. Standing in the middle of the lake, I wonder aloud what it looks like in summer. "Where there's trees, that's woods, and where there ain't no trees, that's water," comes Ant's retort. Stupid question, I guess.

The "bedroom", with a double bed and a bunk on top, is just off the dining room table. It's spacious compared with the cubby hole in the eaves above the sauna that Richard has to sleep in. He emerges the next morning pink faced - he's been slow-cooked in his sleeping bag overnight.

Philip's three favourite dogs are allowed into the cabin; they curl up on the floor, doubling up as foot warmers. With six of us, the three dogs, the sauna fired up, candles lit and dinner on the go, the cabin soon heats up until it's positively steamy and we start to shed layers. The guys troop into the sauna, and out 20 minutes later dripping sweat. There's not a whole lot to do in a cabin in the middle of nowhere. You can go ice-fishing with a comedy, Noddy-sized rod and toddler-sized stool - and a lot of patience. The likelihood of a bite seems miniscule. Or you can eat, convinced you need to double your normal calorie-intake to stave off the cold. No sooner have we scoffed tea and hotdogs on our arrival, than dinner is served, massive plates of pasta or curry or stew.

The next day I wake up freezing. It's -7 outside and -5 inside. Cold, but not cold enough, according to Philip. The ideal for dog racing is -20 - warmer weather makes the dogs lethargic.

The temperature seems to slow us down, too. It takes us about four hours to get ready - about three of which involve us getting dressed, layer upon thermal layer, until we're wrapped up like Michelin men and bumble out of the cabin. We eventually set off at midday. Hello, white world! A day driving the sleds has made us more confident, but no more adept. One by one, we fall off. At one point I turn round to see an empty ghost-sled flying through the forest, with Richard nowhere to be seen. He emerges five minutes later cadging a lift with Ant. Rounding a corner, I tip over into a snow drift, and lie there flailing like an upturned beetle. Watson, Sherlock and the rest of my dog team are long gone. I lollop after them in knee-deep snow.

Our second lodge is a pretty dove-grey cabin. It too is like something out of a storybook. Five single beds in a row pull down from the wall but instead of the three bears, the six of us and the dogs have to squeeze onto the beds. Cosy is the operative word. Someone snores until they're prodded and told to shut up. I wake up to the sight of Ant's naked backside a few feet from my face. "Morning!" he chimes.

Bare bums are less alarming than the smell of the dogs. Three large dogs, a protein rich diet, small enclosed space . . . I'll spare you the details, but it's not pleasant. Outside, where the rest of the pack lie chained up in pairs, the snow is far from pure. I walk around with a scarf wrapped round my face until we're well away and back in the wilderness where all is pure and clean. Philip thinks I'm a complete wuss.

Once we're on the way, the dogs know exactly where they're going. Thank goodness. It would be impossible to navigate your way through this nothingness. There are no distinguishing features, just mile upon mile of white under a grey sky. Occasionally we come across a wooden border post marking the frontier with Russia, and on the third day we spot a lookout post but see no guards. In fact, we see no one, full stop. And no wildlife, bar the occasional snow grouse and a lone woodpecker.

On the final day, we pass through a wooded area that Philip has dubbed the Martian Army, where the snow is particularly thick on the trees, making them look like strange creatures marching up and over the hill. It's spectacularly pretty but also slightly sinister, as if the trees are closing in on us. We stop for photos but don't hang around. Instead we career downhill on our way back to the main lodge, almost taking off as we gather speed.

To welcome us back, Mira has prepared a celebratory meal - lamb fillets and red wine. The conversation, of course, is about the dogs. Philip's off again, going over the details of next weekend's race, the gruelling 320km Pasvik Trail. But this time, I listen and understand why he is so excited, for I too want to experience once more the lurch of the sled and the thrill of being pulled into that soundless, white world.