

MIDSUMMER MAGIC IN FINLAND

By Jessica Wynne Lockhart

One of Finland's national holidays, Juhannus, is the first long weekend of the summer. However, it's more than just an extra day off work – it's a night of magic.

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Every year, Finns gather on Midsummer, the longest day of the year, to light *kokko* (bonfires), which ward off bad spirits and bring good luck for the harvest ahead. Saunas are heated and families gather for a night of revelry, including weddings, which are often hosted on the auspicious night. But the most powerful rituals are love spells that celebrate the region's strong connection to nature – and one of the best places to experience it is high in the Arctic Circle.

Originally called *Ukon juhla*, for the god of weather and crops, Finland's summer solstice celebrations can be traced back to pagan times. Although the name has changed to reflect the country's contemporary values, much of the same traditions that were rooted in ancient belief systems continue today.

My friend Helka and I are eager to experience the magic for ourselves, so we board a plane from Helsinki, travelling north to Inari. After settling into our cabin at the edge of Urho Kekkonen National Park – a vast wilderness area known for hiking – we opt for a short hike to Kiilopää Fell. From the top, the hazy blues and greens of the valley below spread out, and Helka swears she can see Santa's workshop in the distance.

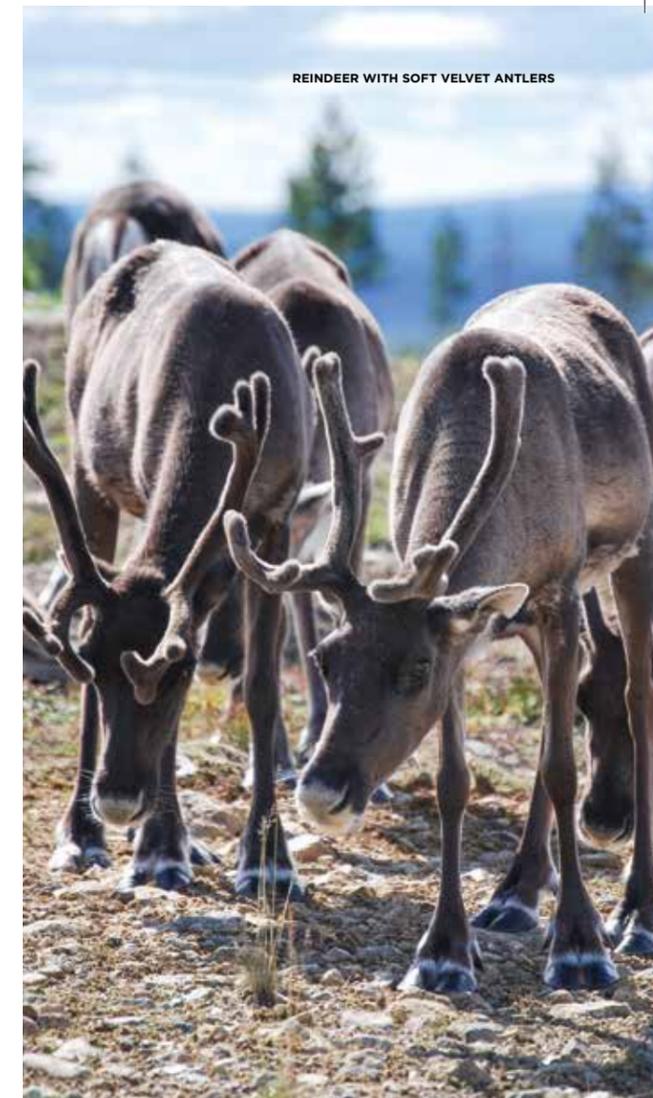
Later that night, after sitting in the traditional wood-fired sauna and jumping in the ice-cold spring, we discuss how to best take advantage of the night's power. Rumour has it that on this night, if a girl rolls naked in a dewy field, she is sure to meet her fiancé. Others believe that standing naked over a spring or lake at midnight will invoke your future spouse's reflection.

As game as I am for embracing the Finns' enthusiasm for nudity, I'm also keenly aware that there is nothing magical about mosquito bites. Instead, we settle on one of the most popular rites – collecting seven flowers to induce prophetic dreams.

Wandering through the woods, we start our treasure hunt for blooms hidden in the moss. As it turns out, getting naked may have been easier. Finally, after locating bearberry and cranberry buds, we each have a delicate bundle to place under our pillows. With any luck, we'll dream of our future husbands.

That night, after watching the bonfire, we crawl into bed, bouquets in place, and the warm glow of the Midnight Sun illuminating our room. Gazing out the window, I can see reindeer grazing, their antlers covered in soft velvet.

I can't help but think that even if the magic doesn't take hold, Finnish Lapland has cast its spell over me.



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WHEN TO GO:

Midsummer celebrations are hosted on the first Saturday after June 19th. From late May to July, witness the Midnight Sun, or head north in the winter for the northern lights, which are visible up to 200 nights a year.

NEARBY:

Hike through old-growth forest and ancient glacial fields to discover an 18th century church hidden in a meadow of flowers. Only accessible by boat or foot, Pielpajärvi Wilderness Church is open daily.