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Scandi escapes
The cosiest breaks to book for 2025



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'A former member of a notorious gang now runs walking tours of Casco Viejo'

Jane Mulkerrens travels through a changed Panama



Loggers Lodge, Sweden

TANVEER BADAL PHOTOGRAPHY

The best Scandinavian escapes

From a stay in a luxury cabin in Sweden to a ski trip in Norway and a Danish city break — **James Stewart** on what to book

There was a flicker of concern among tour operators when the northern lights illuminated British skies in October. Would they affect demand for aurora holidays? The short answer is no. Abta reports that 18.4 per cent of Brits who intend to get away this winter are planning a trip to see the lights, up 3 per cent from last year. That's partly because we're at "solar maximum", a period of increased solar activity and a bonanza moment for aurora-spotters. Mostly, however, it's because of the long answer: that the northern lights alone don't explain the appetite for escapes to the far north in winter. I've gone on several in

Scandinavia, a region that covers Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, and represents most of the following list. I've experienced the euphoric rush of an ice bath in the Swedish Arctic and goggled at the northern lights shimmering above a Norwegian wilderness cabin. In the wider Nordic region, also covered here and which includes Finland and Iceland, I've watched whales blow in frigid Icelandic seas, and skated and mushed huskies in Finnish Lapland. While each of these activities was a blast, I'd come above all to experience something the Inuit call *nanurevinja*, an untranslatable concept that combines



Hotel Budir, Iceland

ideas of wonder and reverence in nature. The winner of this year's *nanurevinja* hunt is Norway. Nine new flight routes to the country have been launched by five airlines from four UK airports recently. Two thirds go to Tromsø in the far north, where awe is baked into the landscapes; the nearby Lofoten islands and lesser-known Senja look like settings for Viking sagas. Upping the ante is Norway's Svalbard archipelago — it's the last stop before the North Pole, as close as most of us will come to experiencing the empty

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► Arctic Circle known to polar explorers. If Sweden and Finland are less dramatic, their wilderness has a mesmerising minimalist beauty that stills the mind. They're also home to Lapland's indigenous Sami, expert reindeer herders and dog-sledders. Iceland in winter is another place to the summer version — more elemental.

Wherever you stay, from luxury lodge to wilderness cabin, the consensus is that you'll be nudged outside for an adventure, big or small — all these trips include activities unless stated. And when you do get outside you'll discover, like I have, the silent, snow-draped awe of the Nordic winter, regardless of whether you see the aurora.

Norway

Island-hopping in northern Norway

Winter is the time for the Lofoten islands because they're teetering on the edge of overtourism in summer. Always astonishing, the mountainous archipelago has a mythical quality in winter, especially when the northern lights shimmer above. Rather than being confined to one destination, this new self-drive trip takes you island-hopping. After fjord cruises, an orca safari with marine scientists and fishing trips off Senja, Andøya and the Vesteralen islands, you arrive in the Lofotens for six nights, split between Nusfjord and the area's foodie capital, Svolvær. Accommodation at both is harbourside in posh-up rorbuer (fishermen's cabins).

Details Thirteen nights' B&B from £3,200pp, including flights and car hire (originaltravel.co.uk)

A long weekend in the high north

In 1899 Norway built the world's first northern lights observatory in Alta. The "city of the northern lights" is just shy of the 70th parallel — as far north as our list goes (except for Svalbard), yet accessible thanks to flights to Tromsø. Quite the long weekend destination, then. Come to hunt the aurora on a guided trip on the Finnmarksvidda, Norway's largest mountain plateau; glide in snowshoes to a lake for a spot of ice fishing and spend a day grinning inanely behind a husky sleigh. But come too to experience northern Norway's pleasingly quirky second city and its futuristic Northern Lights Cathedral.

Details Three nights' B&B from £950pp, including flights and transfers (best-served.co.uk)

Husky-sledge adventure

A woman in Svalbard once told me she survived the perma-night of winter with red wine, fires and a handsome companion in her house. As soon as the sun reappeared, she said, she preferred to be out in the wilderness. Those first days of daylight from mid-January are when this new trip begins. It explores the epic emptiness of Spitsbergen by dog sledge after two days in the frontier town of Longyearbyen. Alongside the thrill of piloting a team of overexcited dogs through a meringue whip of icy peaks, there's the adventure-lite experience of staying at the remote wilderness lodge Juva Cabin: a fire crackling in the burner, a barrel sauna and no light pollution when the aurora flickers.

Details Five nights — three nights' B&B

in Longyearbyen and two nights' full-board in the wilderness cabin — from £2,745pp, including flights and transfers (regent-holidays.co.uk)

Aurora-hunting on a fjord cruise

So confident is Havila Voyages about encountering northern lights on its winter cruises, it promises a free seven-night voyage to any guest who doesn't experience the phenomenon on a 12-day winter trip. Book an Astronomy Voyage from Bergen to Kirkenes and back. It provides lectures by scientists from the Royal Astronomical Society when it's not nosing into Norway's fjord-fractured coastline to go husky-sledding or crab-fishing. In keeping with one of the world's purest settings, Havila claims its hybrid eco-ships are the most environmentally friendly in Norwegian waters.

Details Eleven nights' full board from £1,355pp (havilavoyages.com). Fly to Bergen

Arctic fun with the kids

Huskies, sleighs, proper snow — Norway with children is a no-brainer as long as you plan activities with youngsters in mind. This new group trip scheduled for the school holidays keeps things accessible in the Rondane National Park, three hours from Oslo by train. There are trips with huskies and on horse-drawn sleighs to toast marshmallows in the forest. There's also a snowshoe walk to spot animal tracks and regular cross-country skiing lessons. Back at the ski-up hotel, your kids and their new bezzies will dash off on a treasure hunt and to the pool. After skiing you may prefer the free sauna and yoga classes.

Details Six nights' full board from £1,800pp, including flights and transfers (keadventure.com)

Sauna and fjords in Oslo

It's worth visiting Oslo just for the sauna company Kok. Alongside its floating sauna with a view of the opera house, it runs two-hour fjord cruises in a sauna boat (£263pp; koknorge.no). The beauty of compact Oslo is that it's a great all-round winter city break. Thirty minutes from the Munch Museum are the pistes of the Oslo Winter Park — rent kit from Skimore (skimore.no) — while you can join skaters on a rink at Frogner Park, with sculptures by Gustav Vigeland; skate and helmet rental is available after 3pm. You're staying at Oslo's hottest hotel, Sommerro, a glamorous art deco job with a sauna and pool on the roof.

Details B&B doubles from £156 (sommerrohouse.com). Fly to Oslo

A bargain ski break

Searches for Norwegian ski holidays are up 107 per cent on 2023 as holidaymakers seek guaranteed snow. If you can find better value than in the country's Telemark region, I want you as my travel agent. It's in Gausta, with 20 meandering green runs plus 16 combined blues and reds, which make Alpine pistes feel like a commuter train at rush hour. This price is for January at Gaustablikk Mountain Resort, a four-star spa stay of relaxed Scandi cool. When I asked how they did it they credited savings via charter flights and said they don't charge a half-term premium. Ski passes aren't included either but cost from £146 a week.

Arctic Bath Hotel, Swedish Lapland



Details Seven nights' B&B from £573pp, including flights (glu.com)

Sweden

Forest cabin retreat

It doesn't take much to explain the appeal of one of Sweden's finest forest retreats. A rust-red cabin in four acres of private woodland north of Luleå, Loggers Lodge is warmed up with reindeer skins and weathered wood-panelling, with a huge bathroom in chic black granite. A dash through the snow brings you to a new(ish) glass-walled sauna and outdoor hot tub in which to wallow with fizz beneath the northern lights. After a day's snowshoeing, Nordic skiing or snowmobiling, you return to a crackling fire and cracking meals prepared by lovely owners. I think that about covers it.

Details Three nights' full board for two from £7,788, including transfers (loggerslodge.com). Fly to Luleå

Stockholm city break

Stockholm in winter is more than its centre. Sure, you'll take selfies in Stortorget square — its historic houses remind me of an Advent calendar — and go ice-skating in the Kungsträdgården.

You'll find January bargains in the Slow Fashion District around Hornsgatan, the street recently named a world style hotspot by Time magazine. But it would be a shame not to go for a kayak trip now the harbour is quiet and twinkles in the half-light (£104; stockholmadvatures.com). If Michael Portillo can manage it for Channel 5's *Long Weekends* so can you. Book Villa Dahlia, the new sister spa hotel to the acclaimed Villa Dagmar.

Details B&B doubles from £150 (hotelvilladahlia.com). Fly to Stockholm

Discover Sami culture in Lapland

While this week-long small-group trip to Jokkmokk includes the standard dog-sledding, moose-spotting, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, the difference is the perspective of your Sami hosts, who lend the Nordic activities cultural depth. The surrounding Lapponia region is the ancestral home of the indigenous Sami people, built from mountains, tundra, taiga forest and lakes, with a 400-year-old market that pops up in early February. Two of your nights are spent in a tented camp with the Unna Tjerusj Sami community. They don't have electricity, so you can forget about wi-fi, but they do have heating.

Details Seven nights' full board — five in Jokkmokk and two in a tented camp — from £2,593pp, including transfers (responsibletravel.com). Fly to Luleå

