

# Destination

# North: A Sub-Zero Adventure

Text and photos by Hendrick de Backer

Spur of the moment! In October 2007, a trip to Morocco we had been planning for a few months turned out to be difficult and impossible to accomplish. We needed a new destination to test out our 2007 Wrangler Rubicon Unlimited, and it didn't take long to decide that turning the map upside down would offer a nice alternative: going north, up to the Arctic Circle in Finland. So, a few nice ingredients for an interesting journey came together: a cool destination, a three-week holiday, and an opportunity to drive our Red Rubicon Unlimited to get us there.

We decided to plot an initial route by boat from Germany to Helsinki, starting with an 800-kilometer drive to the Lubeck Harbor. Then, a 27-hour boat trip would deliver us to the south of Finland. From Helsinki on, we would travel upward along the west coast of Finland for a week and a half to reach the Arctic Circle near Rovaniemi. We would then descend back down the western border of Russia and relax with the rental of a traditional Finnish cottage (with a sauna, near a lake) for a week of rest and calmness in between.

The boat journey is great; only a few non-commercial passengers sail on what essentially is a cargo vessel for trucks and containers. Internet onboard and in the cabins provides us with a great planning tool for the journey ahead, plenty of time to spend on reading travel journals, and even learning a few words of Finnish. Finnish is a member of the Finno-Ugric group of languages of which the only related modern language is ... Hungarian. Luckily, most of the younger Finnish people speak English very well.







Rubicon posing before the lake.

### Up North, Helsinki to Rovaniemi

Although a number of weather forecasts promised mostly rain and above zero degree temperatures prior to departure, the purser on the boat, upon arrival in Helsinki, surprised us with good news, telling us "to be careful, because it had started snowing and freezing." Yes! This was why we came with the Jeep!

From Helsinki, we planned a route to cross the city of Tampere, moving up to Vaasa. In Vaasa we stayed in a small hotel, located on an island outside of the city. It was a former bunker room, meant to protect hotel guests and inhabitants "from grim ideas of big neighbor Russia" (quoting the hotel owner). Now though, it had been converted into a children's playroom. From Vaasa, we planned to move further up north to Kokkola and Oulou, to arrive in Kemi, before going straight to Rovaniemi.

We had a fixed schedule for the first part of our holiday: Do the driving in the morning, until noontime, and then stop for a soft off-highway and exploration trip, allowing us to have a picnic "in the wild," and in the afternoon, some more driving on the smaller roads and tracks and some city exploration. Our goal was to get to the Arctic Circle, but we also wanted to enjoy the Finnish nature and cities in this "Land of a Thousand Lakes." Traveling alone, however, can be limiting in the possibilities of really going off-highway for more advanced crawling and wheeling, something we had wanted to do.

The days that passed brought us a lot of amazing scenery along the coastal line and through deserted forests, on unpaved

roads that had rarely been used and often end near a lake or a lonely cottage. On one occasion, after driving for about half an hour through the forest from the nearest normal "road," we arrived at an empty shed, totally constructed as a kind of free-for-all guesthouse with a great view on the lake, a fireplace, and an improvised sleeping shelter. I left a note in the guestbook.

During this trip, Finland turned out to be a most amazing and pleasant holiday destination. People are friendly and very interested to hear and tell stories. We often stopped and stayed for longer than intended in order to chat with local people. We enjoyed the local delicacies, including berries, reindeer, special cheeses, and, of course, the world-famous Finnish Kossu, or Koskenkorva, the most common clear spirit drink in Finland. If you ever get the opportunity, be sure to try the Salmiakki (salty licorice) or "Fisherman's Friend" versions, which offer insight into special Finnish tastes.

### Rovaniemi, capital of Lapland

In Kemi, the weather changed and conditions got worse, or at least colder. It snowed with constant temperatures below zero degrees. The road to Rovaniemi is deserted and follows the flow of the Kemi River, banking and bending around a seemingly unlimited number of small lakes. One of the lakes is dammed to produce electricity, and provides a great stopping place for a picnic.

We had a very busy time during this part of the trip. In fact, as we passed through through the Lappi regions, one of us was driving and the other not only navigated with the GPS, but also

constantly watched out for reindeer and elk crossing the roads. Each year, a number of people die in fatal accidents with elk, crashing their car against a 500kg. road-crossing animal that, standing high on its feet, has the nasty reaction of crashing through your windshield with its antlers.

The city of Rovaniemi was cozy and warm upon arrival. We booked our stay in a hotel; not a real luxury with the kids and the cold. Every morning and evening, a vast amount of work needed to be done in dressing and undressing them. The youngest one, 1-½ years old, always ended up falling on the ground once he was fully dressed and packed, just like a little Michelin-man. The comfort of the hotel and friendliness of the staff was amazing!

Rovaniemi is a small city, consisting of only 60.000 inhabitants, and it's the last city of any importance before entering the northern vast open spaces of Lapland. The city nearly lies on the Arctic Circle and is home to the Santa Center, which is the permanent residence of Santa Claus. It is also the hometown of Lordi, the cult hard rock band who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2006. You can even dine on monstrous dishes in the Lordi Rocktaurant.

In all, Rovaniemi is a place where you can easily stay for a long time, given its attractive tourist facilities. It's also a great starting point for journeys into the open spaces of Lapland. We only stayed in Rovaniemi for a few days, visiting most of the major points to see (such as the great Arktikum museum), either through the snow with the Jeep, or on foot using the city sidewalks, which were covered with layers of gravel to avoid slipping.

Rovaniemi, the "official" crossing of the Arctic Circle, was also the destination we had set as a goal, and it was the starting point for our journey back south. We continued our traveling, driving southeast towards the Russian border, in the direction of Kajaani. On the long and desolate route between Kajaani and Rovaniemi, which is about 360km. at low speed over ice covered roads, we stopped to visit the Ranua Zoo.

The Ranua Zoo Wildlife Center is a most attractive initiative, where live animals from the northern regions around the world are kept in big, open spaces and walking around freely. Needless to say, with all the snow, this offered a few amazing scenes, with polar bears in frozen waters, wolves and lynxes running around hunting through the snow, and elk and reindeer very near.



Arctic Circle destinations.



The official Arctic Circle line in the sky, Santa's home in the back.



The long and snowy road to Kajaani, resting stop near a WWII memorial.

### Visiting the Ranua Zoo in the snow.

Once near Kajaani, we had a hard time finding the home of the owner of our rented cottage. In heavy snowfall, and with darkness settling in, we navigated a lonely road, up to the point that we were sure to be lost, then all of a sudden, a little light shined and we found the house of the owner hidden in the woods. He greeted us very heartily upon arrival and spoke Finnish. With gestures and some German, we explained that we had had a great journey until now, and he showed us around the cabin. The little house was built of wood, and had everything you need to focus on three things: rest, nature, and holiday. The sauna was outside, next to a giant pile of wood, and just up the pathway which leads about 150 meters further to Lake Oulujärvi, which is, of course, frozen. The owner of the cabin, when seeing our two little boys, was quick to provide us with two sleds for sleighing on the lake. He turned out to be an avid elk hunter at the age of 78 and also a great grandfather.



The stay at the cottage was spent quite differently from the first two weeks, which consisted mainly of driving. We were now in the raw nature of central Finland. Every day, we went “walking with the car,” or took walks in the woods with the kids in the sleds. When we went out with the Jeep, we drove very slowly to get through the snow and ice, and we entered paths and sceneries that were really unbelievable and deserted. The light and the colors produced by the very weak sun played a big role in creating a relaxing and humbling natural experience. This was why we came to Finland, and it was most impressive.

View on lake Oulujärvi from the cottage.

At around 3:15 in the afternoon, it got dark, so the day ended with the same ritual: wood chopping, stove filling, heating the sauna and then entering it, followed by a snow dive (a great and awakening experience!), then doing some cooking, and reading in the evening. This was one of the most relaxing things we had done up to this point.

Kajaani, which is in fact the closest city to our cottage, at around 20 km, is also a good starting point for excursions and activities: we visit a traditional reindeer farm, and help with grooming and feeding the animals. We learned that every reindeer has a unique marking in its ear, indicating its owner. The markings are personal, so father and son have different ones, and are also an indication of the family who herds the animals. We also took a course in sleighing; the kids were thrilled with the wild and enthusiastic Husky dogs as they started pulling us faster and faster through the snow-covered plains. These are truly unique and recommended experiences!

The end of our journey was near. We had some distance to drive through the lake district in Central Finland to Jyväskylä before continuing further down to catch the ferry back home from Helsinki, which is, by the way, the nicest capital we have ever visited. Whoever fancies Finnish design should really book a shopping trip here.

The stay on the boat back home left us with a lot of time to play with the overwhelming impressions Finland and the Northern regions left us. To know that even today, in modern concrete-filled Europe, similar experiences and nature can be found, was a heart-warming thought. Soon, plans will be made to come back to Finland. Next time, it will be in the summer.

Links:

Finnlines ferry company: <http://www.finnlines.fi/>

Rovaniemi: <http://www.rovaniemi.fi/?deptid=17958>

Rovaniemi City Hotel: <http://www.cityhotel.fi/>

Lordi Rocktaurant: <http://www.rocktaurant.com/>

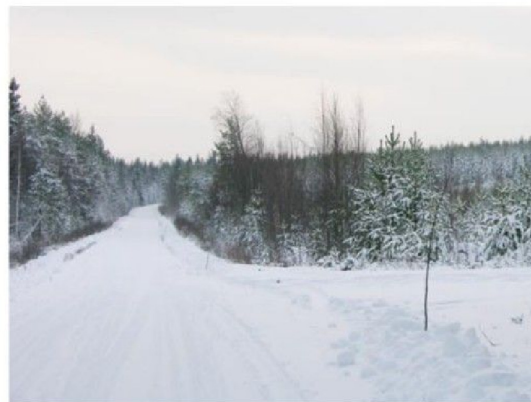
Arktikum: <http://www.arktikum.fi/>

Ranua: <http://www.ranuawildlife.fi/?deptid=18397>

<http://www.outdoors.fi>

Kajaani: <http://www.kajaani.fi/>

Husky farm: <http://www.vuokattihusky.com/>



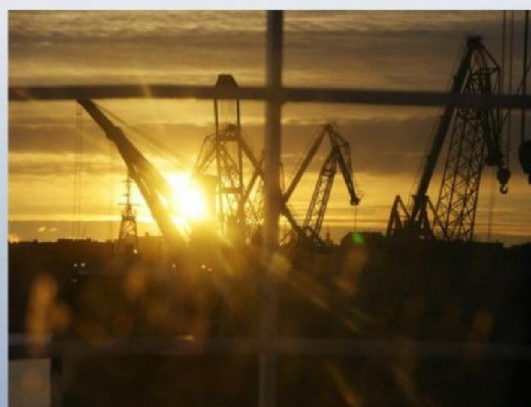
Resting stop near Oulujärvi.



First Husky sled runs ...



Cargo Vessel Finnlady waiting to be loaded.



Last sight on Helsinki.

