

WINTER wonderlands

Itching to get away, but not a skier or boarder? We reveal three of the coolest destinations for a wellbeing-boosting break

'Husky sledding is the ultimate adventure'

Whizzing through Arctic Sweden with a pack of dogs left Kate Pettifer buzzing from head to toe

Best for...
ADRENALINE
JUNKIES

The air is filled with barks, yelps and howls. I'm standing behind a wooden sled, to which five large dogs are harnessed and we are about to set off on a five-day circuit of Sweden's far north.

A need to escape from it all has brought me to Kauppinen, near Kiruna, deep inside the Arctic Circle, to join this wilderness husky-sledding trip. This is how I've ended up in a thermal oversuit, with a ridiculous hat and a team of dogs to call my own.

Silence descends or, at least, the mutts stop barking, concentrating their efforts on running through the still-crisp spring snow. It feels incredibly fast – it is incredibly fast, as I discover when I lose my footing and find myself running at full pelt behind my sled (still gripping the handles, thankfully).

That morning, Jan, who is guiding our trip, had taken us through the basics. To slow down, you use the metal foot brake; if you want to get off, you'll need to secure the sled with an anchor. The golden rule, even if the sled turns, is never let go.

The terrain throughout our trip is mostly flat, across frozen rivers, lakes or what in summer would be water-veined marshland, with patches of forest. Dusk

falls around 2pm, and stays until darkness descends around 7pm. We mush for four to five hours each day, breaking only for

lunch: the going, when it's open, is fast, while the winding woodland trails prove to be treacherous yet more interesting.

On day three, failing to soak up a particularly big bump, I fall (we all do at some stage – the trick is not to mind). I grip my sled, which is now on its side, as the dogs tug keenly at their harnesses. I'm not hurt and I know I should get up and find my snow anchor, but every time I move, the dogs sense their advantage and pull harder. In the end it's too much for my far-from-Madge-like arms and I let go, the dogs running off like the wind until they decide to stop.

My fellow mushers are an interesting bunch and, at 37, I am the youngest. There's a retired army officer; a 40-ish husband and wife; and three other solo women. Our motivations vary from a hankering for Arctic adventure to a birthday treat and a mid-life crisis. Nightly, as Jan cooks, we bond over the trials and triumphs of the day. Everyone seems to have stashed some alcohol in their luggage; the foil-bag contents of a wine box strikes me as a particularly clever idea.

Our first camp, a woodland cabin, sets the tone for the rest of the trip. The single room is lined with bunks, with a table and benches at its centre, plus a wood-burning stove. In separate huts there are long-drop toilets and a sauna. Not much undressing (or washing, come to that) goes on – and



my supply of wet wipes comes into its own.

I feel like Bear Grylls as I break the ice on the well and lay a wood fire to heat water for the dogs' dinner. We feed the huskies twice a day, scoop frozen poop, and lay and clear hay for their beds (the dogs sleep outside, curled up in holes in the snow).

We try ice fishing, hand-drilling holes in the frozen lake and lying on reindeer skins waiting for perch to bite. We see the Northern Lights, an eerie display of green rips across the sky. We stay in a hostel run by Sami reindeer herders and learn about their nomadic way of life. We even manage a sauna one night, running outdoors for a skin-tingling roll in the snow.

The week teaches me to let go of my perfectionism: initially I am anxious to control every sledging bump and turn but, as the trip progresses, I learn to go with the flow. Back at base, as I repack my rucksack, I feel a huge sense of privilege: to have spent time with these wonderful dogs; to have been to such remote outposts, and to have seen the otherworldly aurora borealis. I'm left in no doubt as to why I signed up for this trip. I wouldn't dream of swapping it for a week's ski or sun anywhere.

Travel facts

Arctic Circle Dogsled Expedition costs from £2,099, including flights, transfers, seven nights' bed and meals and guide, with Exodus (exodus.co.uk). Or book your own flights: London to Kiruna via Stockholm costs from £198 with Scandinavian Airlines SAS (flysas.co.uk).

'Get a healthy glow – no skiing required'

There's more to Gstaad in Switzerland than carving down its slopes, says Caroline Hamman

My cocoon of Zen-like calm is broken. I'm standing in the hotel boot room in my dressing gown and slippers. The delectable 60-minute, head-to-toe Real Aromatherapy Experience I've just been treated to in the spa has clearly turned me into a zombie, so the therapist's directions back to my room passed clean over my towel-wrapped head.

I'm so relaxed, though, I don't care that I'm lost. From the moment I arrived at Gstaad's newly renovated five-star Grand Hotel Park, which oozes old-world charm despite its indulgent modern touches, I immediately felt every bit of

stress leave my body.

While most people come to ski the spectacular 250km of pistes, there's so many pampering treats on offer that non-skiers-and-boarders alike won't be bored. As well as an impressive spa with endless indulgent treatments, the hotel has a large saltwater indoor pool, saunas and hammam. Plus there's ice-skating, riding, dog sledding, hot air balloon adventures and even snow golf to keep you occupied. Because of its prime location at the → bottom of the mountain, the hotel has plenty of vantage points to sit back with a hot chocolate or cold beer, relax and watch all the action whizz past you.

Either way, when you've had your fill of fresh air, there's the town to explore. As picturesque as it is charming, Gstaad's main traffic-free street is the epitome of a traditional mountain village with wooden facades, après-ski spots and restaurants aplenty. Don't be fooled, though. Take a closer look and you'll see Bond Street shop signs among them. Need a watch? You've got Chopard, Rolex, Cartier and Patek Philippe to choose from – that's if you're the sort of super-rich financier or international celeb who comes here to

party in relative privacy. The food at the hotel is equally luxurious. Dining in the Grand Restaurant (one of

the four eateries) feels like stepping aboard the Titanic – all parquet flooring and original panels – and I can't help feeling under-dressed in my LBD. I forget my self-consciousness as the heavenly courses roll out; langoustines and roast tomato tagliatelli, pigeon carpaccio, tom yum soup, roasted sea bass, a trio of desserts.

At the end of our trip, while waiting for the transfer to catch the SWISS flight home, I notice a black Range Rover Sport with the town's slogan 'Do you Gstaad?' across the door. A rhetorical question I presume, but yes, I undoubtedly do.

'A wintry escape with spa wow'

Thermal treatments and a serene river-side setting make this Irish spa the perfect cold-weather escape, says Nicola Down

I like a good spa. No, scrap that, I wholeheartedly adore every single teeny-weeny thing about them, particularly when I've been burning the candle at both ends. But when it's cold outside, I also crave crackling log fires, glorious winter scenery and a warmer, more jovial atmosphere.

The Galgorm Resort and Spa in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, has the best of both worlds. It's a luxurious yet cosy Irish country house hotel in an idyllic 163-acre parkland location complete with its own picturesque brook and waterfall, and you not only get a genuinely warm and friendly welcome (there's no frosty smiles here...), but a top-notch spa experience to boot.

The thermal spa is a real escape. I could have lost whole hours admiring the glorious, tranquil wintry view from the spa's heated stone loungers and infinity pool, complete with stress-easing hydrotherapy jets. But that's not all that's available to draw out every bit of tension from your body - there are climate rooms, rainforest showers, saunas and a herb caladrium and aroma grotto all crying out to be experienced, too. The outdoor hot tub also shouldn't be missed, whatever

the weather; it had been snowing when I visited and it was wonderful to walk outside into the freezing cold, slide into the hot bubbling water and gaze out over the bubbling river.

Teamed with 11 wet and dry treatment

rooms including ones with hydro baths, hamman plinths and serail (mud bath), the spa also offers plenty of indulgent therapies for relieving winter-weary skin and aching limbs. My partner and I had dreamy Aromatherapy Associate massages in the Parisian Suite, with

a wall-to-wall tropical fish aquarium as the backdrop. The glass tea-lights, piles of luxurious soft towels and the fluffiest of robes completed the cosy experience.

If you want to stretch your legs and work up a healthy glow, there's a well-equipped gym, as well as outdoor activities aplenty which include running routes and riding at the estate's equestrian centre. Or you could just curl up in front of a large open fire and put your feet up!

Whatever you choose to do, one thing is for sure - you'll leave feeling relaxed, indulged and generally defrosted.

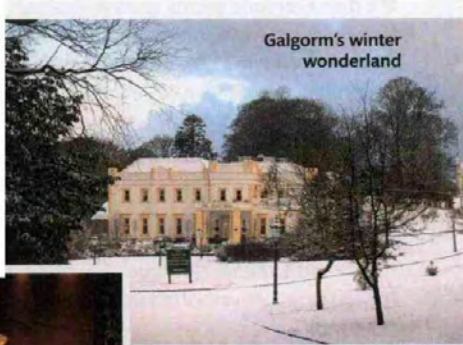
Best for...
A COSY SPA
SETTING

Travel facts

Standard double rooms at Galgorm Resort & Spa, inc breakfast, start from £95 per night (galgorm.com; 028 2588 1001). Aer Lingus flies from London Heathrow to Belfast from £65 return (aerlingus.com).

Travel facts

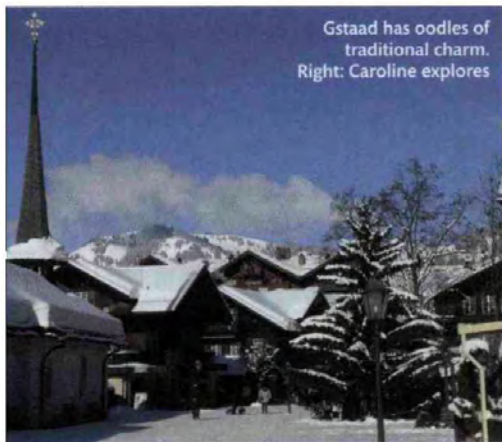
Double rooms at the Grand Hotel Park start from £272 per night (grandhotelpark.ch; 00 41 33 748 9800). SWISS flies from London Heathrow to Geneva from £101 return (swiss.com; 0845 601 0956).



Galgorm's winter wonderland



The spa's outdoor hot tub



Gstaad has oodles of traditional charm. Right: Caroline explores



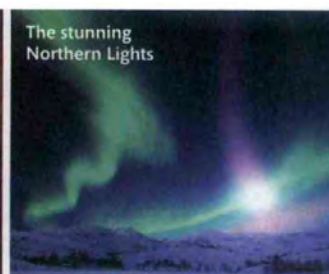
Sledding over a frozen lake



Kate and her cuddly companion



A warm welcome in a simple cabin



The stunning Northern Lights

