



photographer / Sesse Lind  
writer / Eric Enno Tamm

## 079/ Summer of Sámi

Europe's only ancient indigenous people have undergone a make-over. At the heart of their revamp is a futuristic concept – a borderless Sámi supra-nation. *Wallpaper\** heads north for what historians will record as the 'Arctic Renaissance'. You read it here first



AS your SAS twin-prop Fokker 50 skims the northern fringe of Norway, you spot a glacier oozing towards the ocean's edge and tiny turquoise lakes dotting the barren, stone-grey mountain-top plateaus like scattered gemstones. Fluffy angelic clouds cling to the elongated, craggy fjords like cotton candy to fingertips. From 4,000 feet, the view is sweet. But dipping below the clouds on your approach to the North Cape Airport on what is – geographically speaking – Europe's rooftop, you soon realise that brutalism is Mother Nature's only design dictum here. This is an indomitable land of scrawny birch trees, jagged gorges, rocky tundra and dusty plateaus hundreds of miles above the Arctic Circle. Locals here refer to Icelanders as 'southerners'. The North Pole is a quicker commute than Frankfurt or London. 'It's the place God forgot and the Devil left,' are my Sámi guide's parting words one week later.

When it comes to reporting on the planet's hottest – or coolest as the case may be – trends in design, fashion, food and culture, no cost is too high, no risk too great, no climate too inhospitable. So what brings a pampered *Wallpaper\** correspondent to the very ends of the earth? A frozen-in-permafrost 1960s Alvar Aalto-designed city, perchance? No, but we did happen upon one – Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland, whose postwar reconstruction was executed by the functionalist master. After a week-long expedition in the deep freeze of Europe, we unzipped our North Face parka, threw off our Prada fur gloves and can report that there's something decidedly futuristic and even glamorous about Europe's only indigenous people – the Sámi.

Maybe it was that stunningly bespangled Sámi *yoik* singer in Sweden's entry to this year's Eurovision Song Contest ('When the Spirits Are Calling My Name') that stole our vote and left us teary-eyed. Or maybe it was the Sámi reindeer herder quoted recently in *Fortune* magazine

clockwise from right: Rock carvings at the Alta Museum; road sign on the Finnish border; the first snow in Karasjok – last year the temperature fell to minus 53°C; a school in Karasjok; Johan Aslak Eira, reindeer herder; working huskies, Karasjok

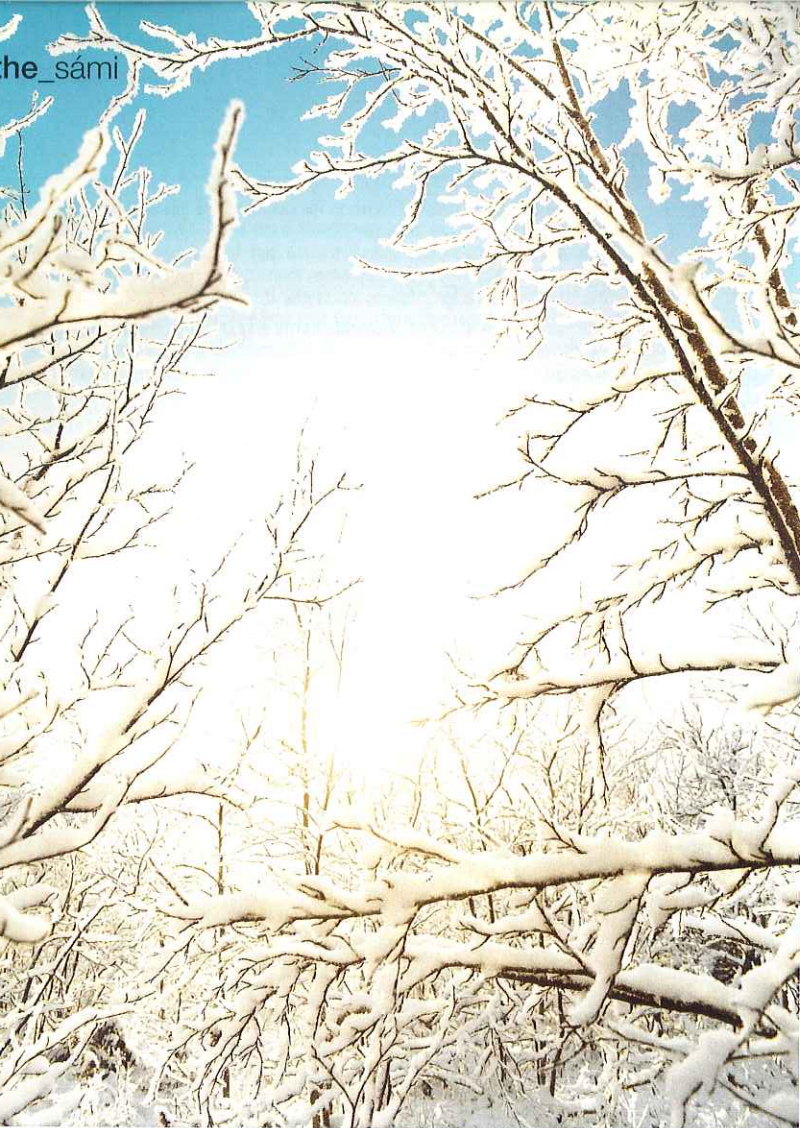
– 'The internet is the best thing that ever happened to me in my entire life' – that caught the attention of us technophiles. Or perhaps we just feel a spiritual kinship to these modern-day nomads who, like us, are constantly on the go and have little time for international borders and humourless Customs officers. Or it could just be their stunning *gákti* costumes – which could teach Versace, Fendi, and Dolce & Gabbana a thing or two about the fundamentals of fur, pewter embroidery, gorgeous rosette patterns and dazzling bejeweled accoutrements – that made us want to sign a licensing deal on the spot.

So when we heard that the Sámi – sparsely scattered across the tundra, mountains and boreal forests of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia – are constructing a borderless supra-nation called Sápmi, with all the requisites – parliament, flag, anthem etc – the super-regionalists at our London HQ immediately put *Wallpaper's* Stockholm-based Arctic Reconnaissance Team (ART) on standby. Tipped off that the Sámi were putting the finishing touches on an architectural wonder in their fledgling frost-bitten capital, our team donned its down jumpsuits and jetted 400km north of the Arctic Circle. We took along with us King Harald V of Norway, who opened the new Norwegian Sámi parliament building on November 2.

CONSTRUCTING a new nation, or reconstructing an old one, can be a tricky business. When the tiny Balts were splitting from the Evil Empire, the West squeamishly gawked, 'They'll never be able to do it' and then quickly took credit once they had. Legend has it that Helmut Kohl ditched the D-mark for the Euro in return for Francois Mitterand's blessing of his marriage of East and West Germany. Once you've established your territorial base – no small feat as CNN's nightly dose of Israeli-







Palestinian bloodletting reminds us – you still have to give it a name, audition songwriters for your anthem and pick out some fab fabrics to make your flag stand out. Then you have to select the perfect plot for your capital's locale and call in the architects to work their magic.

In little more than a decade, the Sámi have done all this with a savvy, panache and friendliness that has gone virtually unnoticed – and completely unappreciated – in a warmongering world. That, more than anything else, affords them *Wallpaper*\* 100 status. What's more, they've done it in their own unique way, devoid of the 20th-century chauvinism that has the justices still pulling all-nighters in The Hague's War Crimes Tribunal. 'We are Sámi and want to be Sámi, but without claiming to be either better or worse than other peoples in the world,' states their 1971 nationalistic rallying cry almost apologetically. Suave, multilingual, cosmopolitan, highly learned, modern yet steeped in their own ancient history, they are the Sámi and, yes, they are still herding reindeer. But that, my friend, isn't even half of it.

'THIS is the wild west,' says Nils Kristian, my loquacious Sámi guide and lead-footed driver, who punctuates my week-long tour of Finnmark with tall tales, Sámi lore and frequent stops to worship supernatural *stállo* rock formations. Hemmed in by the Barents Sea to the north, Russia to the east and Finland and Sweden to the south, Finnmark is Norway's most northern region. It's here, and in Finnmark's border regions, where the majority of some 80,000 Sámi live today. Few lanky, blond Scandinavians colonised inner Finnmark – its two main settlements, Karasjok, the Sámi capital, and Kautokeino, a reindeer herders' village, are 90 per cent Sámi, making them unique in Scandinavia.

'We have a good foreign policy here,' one local Sámi joked to me about why few outsiders move here. 'Mosquitoes in the summer and freezing cold in the winter.'

*clockwise from top left: Snow clings to the Karasjok trees; a lávvu, or teepee, temporary housing for nomadic herders; reindeer furs hanging out to dry in a Sámi summer village; Sara and Eillin, from Karasjok*

Everything about the region is extreme: the land's strong magnetic pull which forms a halo of glowing energy particles, aurora borealis or northern lights over the polar region, the summertime 24/7 midnight sun, and winter temperatures dipping below minus 50°C. The Sámi 'are born to hardship as birds are to flight' wrote one 18th-century adventurer. Indeed, Karasjok's high school is rolling out a new fluorescent green Astroturf field (grass just doesn't grow here) and late-night TV features kimono-clad Finns giving t'ai chi lessons; no doubt Zen meditation helps them through winter's endless nights. Yet the region has seen its share of jetsetting tycoons and royalty, who have been coming here for the Alta River's exalted salmon angling or pilgrimages to the North Cape.

IF you've heard of the Sámi, chances are it was from that dog-eared issue of *National Geographic* you thumbed through once, while in your dentist's waiting room. Who could forget those 'little people of Lapland – a strange and primitive people stoutly resisting the inroads of civilization'. And this being the yuletide season, you can be excused if you mistook the photos and zany descriptions of these dwarfish reindeer herders who 'dress like jesters' for Santa's little helpers. That fairy-tale image may have come from 1954, but it has been largely the one that's stuck, frozen in time like a woolly mammoth in a glacier. This is the equivalent of PR purgatory for a people who want to be taken seriously by the modern world. The stereotype of the drunken *yoik* singer or Santa's elves resulted from a people who had lost control of their own identity.

The origins of their ancient identity are shrouded in mystery or who-was-here-first ethno-politics, depending on who you talk to. Everyone





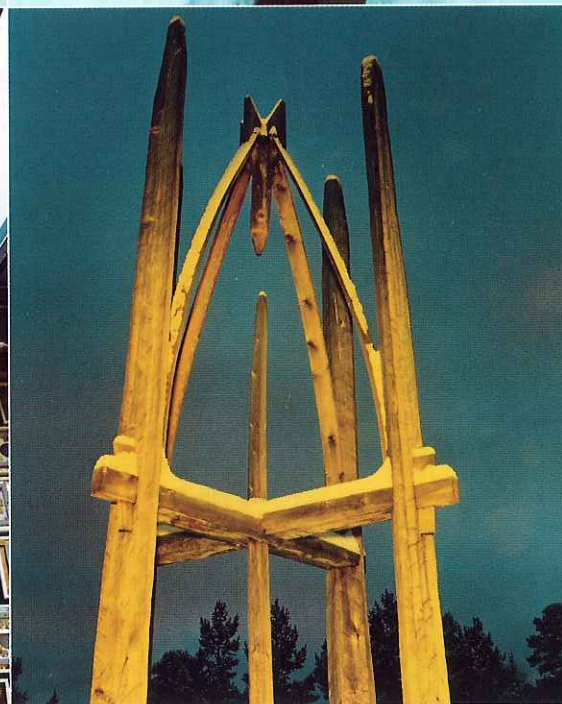
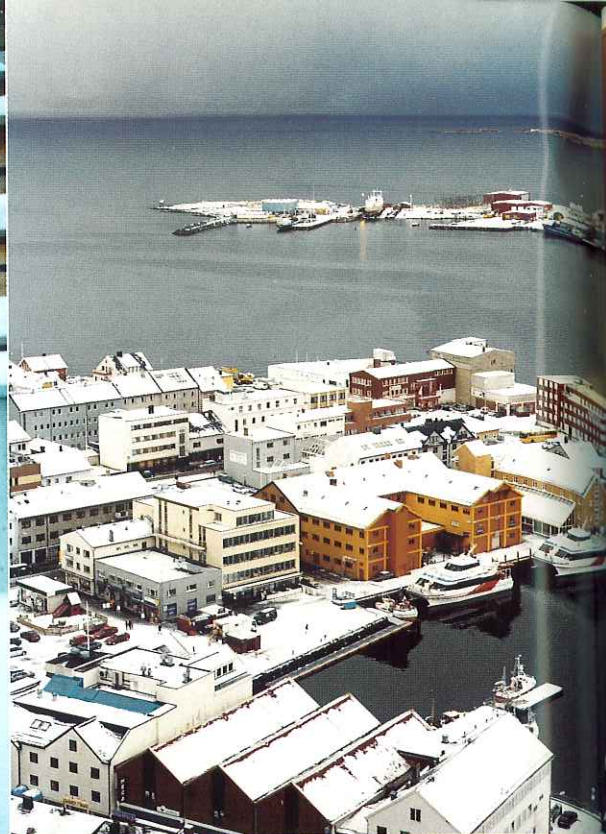
agrees there was an Ice Age: the 3km-thick glaciers melted about 10,000 years ago and then reindeer pranced north chased by hunger hunters. Where they came from is anyone's guess. Even recent DNA research can't find a genetic link between the Sámi and any other Europeans. Theories abound as to why they speak a Finno-Ugric language related to Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian.

Still, ever since their first mention in AD98 – when Roman historian Tacitus called them 'Fenni' – they've let other people define their image. Until now. The Sámi are gearing up a PR machine of their own. 'This is about the right to a self-image,' says Magne Ove Varsi, the head of the new journalism program at the Sámi University College in Kautokeino. Already, there are two Sámi-language newspapers, a pan-Nordic Sámi radio network and a number of internet portals. And in March a new hi-tech 44-million-kroner TV studio in Karasjok will start pan-Nordic broadcasts of news and children's programming in Sámi. All of this adds up to a renaissance for a people whose culture has been besieged by puritanical missionaries, who burned their shaman drums and completely snuffed out their 'primitive' religion, and were later bullied by bureaucrats with their 'Norwegianisation' policies.

THE Sámi burst on to the international stage in the early 1980s. The Norwegian government dammed the Alta River, ignoring protests about environmental destruction. So the Sámi took their case to the international court of public opinion, meeting with the Pope, lobbying the UN, engaging in civil disobedience and going on hunger strikes. The world took notice. The country that had been pompously doling out Nobel Peace Prizes had its own dirty little secret.

After retreating Nazi soldiers burned to the ground all of Finnmark and thousands of Sámi homes and *gamme* turf huts in 1944, an army of Norwegian bureaucrats invaded to start the postwar reconstruction. Everybody got the same standard-issue prefab bungalow. But for the Sámi,





## Sámi pathfinder

Wallpaper's explorers' guide to the Arctic's coolest spots

### How to get there

Daily SAS flights from Oslo, via Tromsø, where you should stop over a night or two, will take you to Alta, Finnmark. From there drive 150km to Kautokeino, then to Karasjok and finally to the coastal fjords and the North Cape Airport in Lakselv for your return flight. Hire a Sámi guide to stay safe and entertained

Wallpaper's guide, Nils Kristian, Karasjok Opplevelser AS. Tel: 47.78 46 88 10. E-mail: koas@koas.no

### When to go

The good, the bad and the ugly come together in Finnmark: winter has freezing temperatures that make fuel turn to jello, but the sublime northern lights; summer has mammoth mosquitoes, but the midnight sun. Easter is party time – weddings, festivals and reindeer races

### What to wear

Fur has been trendy here since the Ice Age melted. No hue is too outrageous as long as it's yellow, blue, red or green – Sámi national colours. Dress in layers and peel off during the warm summers

### Where to stay

Rica Hotels: don't expect too much pampering. The Rica Hotel chain has comfortable accommodation all over Finnmark and a spanking new waterfront Ishavshotel in Tromsø

Rica Hotels, [www.rica.no](http://www.rica.no)

Engholm Husky Lodge: if you're dog-tired after a day's exploration, this lodge (and Alaskan husky kennel) outside Karasjok is the perfect place to kick back and

relax. Built by Sven Engholm, a Swedish dog breeder, the lodge's five log cabins have rustic wilderness motifs which are cosy and romantic. The 'Dansk' cabin features a shower, mini-kitchen, dishwasher, TV and sitting room with an open fireplace

Engholm Husky Lodge, Karasjok Highway. Tel: 47.78 46 71 66. E-mail: [sven@engholm.no](mailto:sven@engholm.no), [www.engholm.no](http://www.engholm.no)

### Where to eat

Storgammen Restaurant: an eatery in a traditional *gamme* or turf hut, here you can chow down on traditional Sámi cuisine (ie reindeer) smothered in lingonberry sauce. A carnivore's delight with a smoky ambience. Sámi yoik singing will keep you entertained

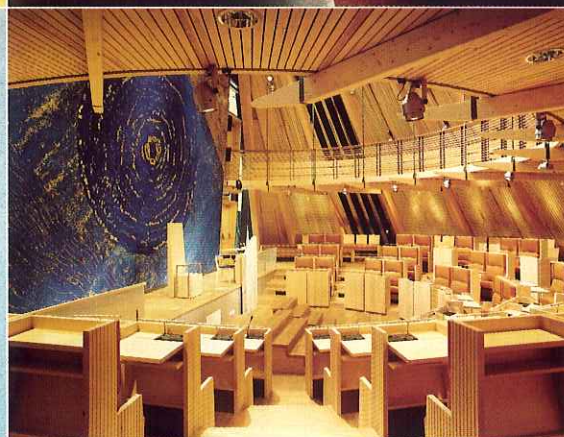
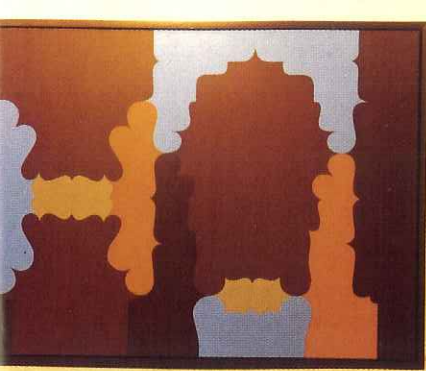
Storgammen Restaurant, Porsangervn. 1, Karasjok.

Tel: 47.78 46 74 00

### Where to explore

Tromsø Museum: stop over one night in Tromsø to check out the museum's recently opened modern Sámi exhibit, the first of its kind. This will bring you up to speed on contemporary Sámi politics, culture





and society. Don't be left out in the cold when small talk turns to Sámi current affairs. Buy a copy of *Sápmi – Becoming A Nation* for quick reference

**Tromsø Museum**, Lars Thoringsveg 10, Tromsø. Tel: 47.77 64 50 00

**Alta Museum.**: set at the end of a rocky fjord, the museum is home to the largest prehistoric rock carving site in northern Europe. Excellent examples of Alta stone slate or *skifer* used as tiles in Finnmark architecture

**Alta Museum**, Altaveien 19, off E6. Tel: 47.78 45 63 30

**Sámi Parliament**: architects Sundby and Halvorsen's dazzling combination of ancient Sámi forms and Scandinavian modernism. A building truly fit for a nation. The interiors are graced with Sámi artwork

**Sámi Parliament**, Karasjok. Tel: 47.78 74 000

**Stállo rocks**: across the bridge to Kvaløya, beside the main road to Hammerfest, stop at a soaring *stállo* rock formation which, according to the Sámi's pre-Christian religion, possesses supernatural powers that bring good fortune and happiness to people who worship and make sacrifices to them

### Where to shop

**Juhl's Silver Gallery**: part Frank Lloyd Wright estate, part Buddhist temple, this sprawling, palatial complex with sweeping roofs was built by a Danish-German husband and wife over 50 years and houses an enormous collection of traditional and modern Sámi silver jewellery made on site. Do view the ornamental ceiling in their Afghan room, dedicated to nomadic Sámis

**Juhl's Silver Gallery**, Kautokeino. Tel: 47.78 48 61 89. E-mail: juhls@online.no

**Sámi Artists' Centre**. Located in a former secret military facility, this gallery has the best selection of contemporary Sámi art from PoMo abstractions, tabletop design, graphics, fabrics, prints, sculptures, just name it

**Sámi Artists' Centre**, Jeagilvarmadli 54, Karasjok. Tel: 47.78 469 002

### How to survive

Probably best to pass on the reindeer blood balls or, if you must, smother them in lingonberry sauce. Politely decline any traditional Norwegian fish dish (dried cod smothered in lardons)

top row, left to right: Johan Aslak Eira, reindeer herder, Karasjok; Randi Romsdal Balto, Karasjok; the port in Hammerfest; Gamme restaurant in Karasjok; at the Sámi Artists' Centre, Karasjok; Polar Bear Society, in Hammerfest; Juhl's silver gallery, Kautokeino; Sámi parliament, interior; Sara Marielle Gaup, yoik student, Kautokeino

bottom row, left to right: Ceiling detail, from Juhl's silver gallery, Kautokeino; sculpture by Ivers Jåks; Per F Eira, reindeer herder, Kautokeino; the Sámi Radio (and now TV) centre; Line Nilsen, student, Karasjok; Sámi parliament, interior



below: Sámi parliament, exterior;  
right: the central building of Sámi parliament

Norway's 'Society of Equality' was like living on Orwell's animal farm: some were clearly more equal than others. Forced assimilation meant that, by 1950, entire villages were denying their 'Sámi-ness'. 'You couldn't even speak Sámi in the school yard,' says Johnny Edvard Kemi, a shaven-headed, bespectacled Sámi who went to school in Karasjok and is now a TV news producer. 'There were teachers watching all the time. It was like an East German Stasi operation.'

As Black Power grew in inner-city America in the 1970s, so a new 'Super Sámi' emerged, a breed of highly educated Young Turks who were mainly artists and radical students like Kemi. Fed up with the brainwashing that left their communities ethnically cleansed, a 'Sámi movement' was born, reawakening Sámi *duodji* (handicrafts), traditional *yoik* singing and *gákti* costumes which had all fallen out of fashion. Rallying behind their Inuit and Indian brethren internationally, the Sámi pushed their language rights and land claims. The UN's Human Rights Committee even sent a letter to Norway last year still badgering them about Sámi 'rights to self-determination'.

You won't find any firebrand separatists hailing for breakaway republics though. 'Nation-states are an old-fashioned way of looking at things,' says Else Grete, a doctoral student at Tromsø University. The Sámi aren't even republicans; most adore the royals even if Prince Haakon is shagging a commoner. Having lived with their Scando neighbours for some thousand years, the Sámi are bicultural beings. When I meet Grete, singsong Norwegian and Sámi are effortlessly rolling off the tongue of her eight-year-old boy, who's coaxing some kroners from her for Pokémon cards.

Yet most Scandinavians know more about the Cherokee than the Sámi. Relations are still strained at times. Hicks have shot out the Sámi

place name on Kálfjord's bilingual signpost four times. The last pock-marked target is now in the Tromsø Museum's modern Sámi exhibition.

'The artists have been the pathfinders for the politicians,' says Ragnhild L. Nystad, the Sámi's dark-haired, diminutive VP. As we're touring the new parliament building, I sense the architects are doing some trailblazing of their own. The parliament may have weak realpolitik muscle today, but its monumentalist aura exudes a sense of nationhood and authority. 'You have a real living parliament as it struggles for power,' Nystad muses. Designed by Oslo-based architects Christian Sundby and Stein Halvorsen, the parliament combines the lightness of Scandinavian modernism with an ancient Sámi structure – the *lávvu* or teepee that was used as housing by nomadic herders.

ITS legislative chamber is located in a towering *lávvu* abstraction that rests in an inner courtyard on a precipice overlooking Karasjok's winding river valley. The complex's exterior siding is unfinished Siberian larch that will turn a dull silver in time. Taking a cue from the pewter embroidery of Sámi costumes, the architects tucked strips of stainless steel between the *lávvu*'s wooden groves which will make its conic façade magically glitter under the midnight sun. Drawing heavily from ancient traditions, Scando influences, organic forms and local materials, the architectural creation is an icon of Sámi modernism.

While the politicians are transforming Karasjok into the Sámi's Rome, it is Kautokeino, 130km away, that is their Milan. During its Easter festivals, you'll see its streets transformed into a veritable catwalk of *gákti* spring fashion. Europe's oldest ethnic costume is also its most trendy. I hear all the fads: silver is hot, gold is not and a retro-1850s look is back in vogue. Weddings, too, are lavish affairs that would make Liberace gush.





clockwise from right: Inger Seierstad and Kristine Nystad, who both work in the education department at Sámi parliament; the new church in Karasjok; ice by the side of the road from Alta to Kautokeino, in Ghost Gorge

TAXES and borders have been the bane of the Sámi's existence ever since the Middle Ages when Russian, Swedish and Norwegian-Danish kingdoms competed for control over them through usurious, multiple taxes. When borders were finally settled they just broke apart the Sámi's ancient *siida* communal territories. So with bitter-sweet irony, Jan Even, a flamboyant thirtysomething Sámi millionaire who's made a fortune from an automated gaming machine empire, takes me on a lunch date to a Finnish bordertown 14km from Karasjok. In his silver Mercedes (he has two), we breeze past the EU border guards without even slowing. At the drab cafe, Even bumps into a cousin.

'Everyone here is Sámi,' he says. 'I can't even see the border.' After a dish of greasy chicken, we head back to Norway (and its high taxes) and he tells me about how Nils Kristian was in a fiery car crash while escorting the French ambassador and his wife. (This explains Nils Kristian's hobbled gait.) Fearing for my safety, Even offers to loan me his sleek 300SL Mercedes cabriolet for our 500km tour along the north coast. I graciously accept his offer of German-engineered safety.

We set off early the next day on a snaking road along the Finnish-Norwegian border and Tana River, past abandoned cabins and the occasional farmsteader desperately trying to raise a few cows. 'I'm an asphalt Sámi, not a reindeer Sámi,' Nils Kristian announces when we arrive three hours later at a Sámi archeological site on Varanger Fjord. Back on the motorway we cruise 100km up to a remote mountain-top hamlet where a few reindeer herders are preparing to leave for their wintertime home in Karasjok before snowstorms hit. We pull up to a tiny cabin tucked next to a crystal lake. Everyone is related to Nils Kristian.

Inside, I meet blonde, blue-eyed Marit Laila, 24, who's helping her mother prepare reindeer cutlets, hearts, bone marrow and boiled blood

## Savvy Sámi

**Name** Dr Ole Henrik Magga  
**Age** 53  
**Profession** Statesman and Sámi linguistic scholar

The first President of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament (1989-97), Magga has represented the Sámi at the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and numerous UN conferences and commissions

**Name** Nancy Porsanger  
**Age** 22  
**Profession** Reindeer herder

A graduate of the Reindeer Herders' College in Kautokeino, Porsanger is one of the few young women to take up this ancient profession in Norway

**Name** Hans Ragnar Mathisen  
**Age** 55  
**Profession** Cartographer and artist

Responsible for literally putting the Sámi on the map, Mathisen illustrated the first-ever borderless map of their homeland, Sápmi, in 1975, and edited the first Sámi World Atlas in 1996

**Name** Nils Gaup  
**Age** 45  
**Profession** Film director

Nominated for a Best Foreign Film Oscar in 1987 for his film *Pathfinder*, Gaup is rumoured to have turned down Hollywood blockbusters for projects closer to home. His next film is about an 1852 Sámi revolt in Kautokeino

**Name** Nils-Aslak Valkeapää  
**Age** 57  
**Profession** Multimedia artist

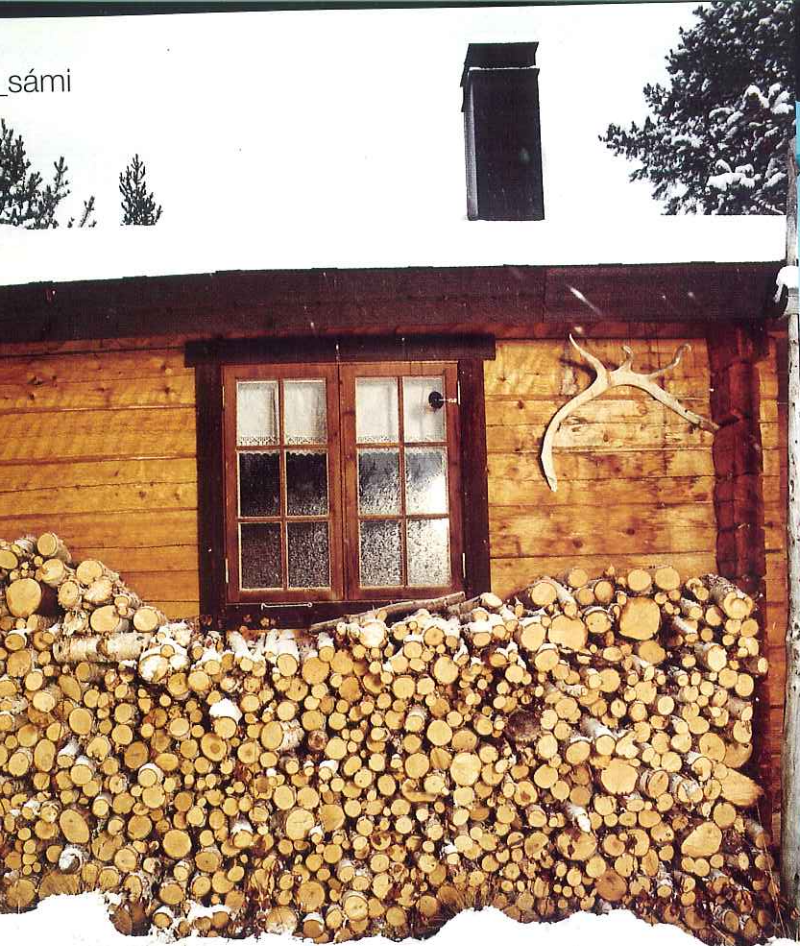
His *yolk* singing stole the show at the founding of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975. Also an award-winning writer and painter

**Name** Ivers Jåks  
**Age** 68  
**Profession** Graphic artist and sculptor

Jåks's works have appeared in galleries throughout Europe. His PoMo sculptures in Karasjok combine traditional Sámi materials with eerie, apocalyptic Cold War motifs







clockwise from above: Well-stocked for winter in Karasjok; the view from the window of Juhl's Silver Gallery, Kautokeino; a reindeer on display in the Tromsø Museum

balls for dinner. Fur skins are drying on a line overhead and the carcass is dangling out back. Laila's impeccable English catches me by surprise. She's studying journalism at university, has spent a year in Santa Barbara – of all places – and can also speak German, Spanish, Norwegian and a little Russian. 'The girls in Karasjok are some of the most educated in Norway,' she says. 'Unfortunately, the boys are not.' (The local joke is that Karasjok guys are like Jesus; they stay at home until 30 and if they do anything with their lives it's a miracle. Nevertheless, many brag vicariously about how smart their girlfriends are.)

**SURROUNDED** by the bloodied parts of a dismembered reindeer, you might become romantic about the Sámi living in the past. But these people aren't letting their history hold them hostage. Synthetic rayon scarves adorn their centuries-old *gákti*. Marit Laila's brother may be herding reindeer like his ancestors 300 years ago, but he's doing it with the help of Nokias, helicopters and Bombardier Ski-doos.

Her grandmother may know 30 Sámi words to describe snow, but the language also has a word for computer, *dithor* (the knower). They wear down-stuffed Gore Tex, but any Sámi will tell you that no technology is as warm as reindeer-fur boots stuffed with grass.

Alas we slip out of the sleepy hamlet at dusk and down into a valley on our long haul to the North Cape Airport. At 210kph, the Merc glides effortlessly across the Arctic autobahn on top of the world. 'I can squeeze another 20km per hour out of her,' Nils Kristian says slyly. 'What's the rush?' I reply. Before us lies an immense moss-covered moonscape with smoky blue mountains in the distance and the moon dripping radiantly above. The scene looks extraterrestrial, like a backdrop for George Lucas's next prequel. From my leather passenger seat at this moment in time, everything about the Sámi's ancient homeland seems oddly futuristic. \*

