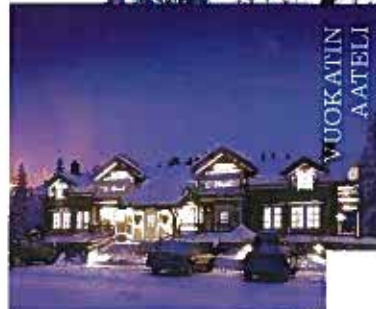


MATTHEW RHYS

VUOKATTI SKIRESORT

VILLA MARSALKKA

ELLEtrav



VUOKATTI AATELI



# OFF-PISTE WITH MATTHEW RHYS

*In search of the perfect – but action-packed – white Christmas, the Brothers & Sisters star and his family visit snowy Finland*



FINLAND



It's Boxing Day. But instead of being cosily slumped in front of the TV at home, I'm gingerly feeling my way across a frozen lake dressed in a red, rubbery survival suit. Suddenly, there is a mighty crack and an explosion of white shards, as I crash through the ice into the sub-zero water. The shock

is heart-stopping. But after a few seconds, I realise I'm neither cold, nor wet, nor even fully submerged – thanks to the suit. My sister Rachel is a few yards behind, immobilised with fear. Our instructor, Eramatkailu, casually walks over to her, and both follow me through the ice an instant later. It's called River Floating, which sounds tranquil enough, but is anything but. We smash, scramble, kick and swim our way through the thinning ice until we hit a softly moving tributary and bob about among the ice floes towards some rapids – big enough for a fairground thrill, but not large enough to be terrifying.

We shoot down in a flurry of white water and, just before our fingers and toes go totally numb, we're hoisted out by Eramatkailu's colleagues. Then we're plonked in front of a log fire in a big wigwam and a steaming cup of tea is thrust into our hands. I'd wanted a different kind of Christmas, and I certainly got it.

I'm usually quite a stay-at-home when it comes to the festive season, but this time I really liked the idea of a white, wintery

log cabin. Somewhere with open fires and twinkly lights – all the Christmas clichés – but with a bit of excitement thrown in. Finland ticked all the right boxes. And on 21 December, I round up the family – Rachel, her boyfriend Anthony, their two children, Harri (5) and Gwen (2), and Mum and Dad – and head off to the frozen north. The adventure starts when we land in Kajaani, a town about 600km north of Helsinki, in the beautiful Wild Taiga region on the Finnish/Russian border. From here, it's a 30-minute bus ride to the pretty ski resort of Vuokatti; about two-thirds of the size of Chamonix and a lot less crowded. The outskirts are made up of hundreds of log cabins, which filter out to the woods, including our cabin, Villa Marsalkka, which is right next to the slopes. Candles are flickering, a huge log fire is all ready to light and a Christmas tree is in full sail in the window. Perfect.

## MONDAY 22 DECEMBER

We wake late. At this time of year the sun doesn't rise until around 9.30am and sets around four. Luckily, skiing late into the evening isn't a problem, as the slopes are all floodlit, but the dark mornings certainly play havoc with your body clock. Rachel and I take the kids out. We've always had a classic sibling relationship: constantly at each other's throats in the early years, but I missed her enormously when she left for university. We actually became really close then, because I appreciated her more, as she wasn't around for advice on dating and women.

We make a quick tour of the resort and find that we have 13 slopes on our doorstep, including an indoor one, which offers 'tubing' – where you shoot down the piste on the inner tube of a lorry tyre. There are two bars, a burger place and a little restaurant that serves pizza. The shops are a 20-minute walk away, and if we want to buy alcohol other than beer, we have to take a taxi to the off-licence in town.

At 11am we're taken to pick up our ski clothes. You can get fitted for these on arrival, from a place called Ready To Go. But to speed things up, Black Tomato (our bespoke travel company) asked our sizes in advance, so our kit is all ready to be collected. Back at our

## HOW TO GET THERE

MATTHEW RHYS and his family travelled with BLACK TOMATO (enq102017426 9888, blacktomato.co.uk), which offers a week in a traditional Finnish cabin from £750 per person, including return flights from the UK to Kajaani via Helsinki, transfers and activities. VILLA MARSALKKA can accommodate up to 10 people. Prices vary over Christmas and New Year. BLACK TOMATO can arrange all activities. SKI PASSES are around £29 per day or £145 for six days. SKI WEAR can be hired from Ready To Go. Enq (00 358) 44 273 1779; readytogo.fi. LOMARINTEELA Enq (00) 358 08 668 000; lomarinteela.net

cabin, Matti, a local guide, arrives to take us ice fishing. He carries a big knife and looks like he could survive for months in the wilderness living on berries and fighting off bears.

He drives us through the snow to a frozen lake and, after assuring my mother that the ice really is very thick and there is no danger of falling through, we all venture out. We're each given a tiny fishing rod, a stool and some bait, a small hole is hand-drilled for each of us in the ice, and off we go. Matti explains that the locals catch salmon this way, but we obviously don't have the knack. We sit there on the ice like a row of garden gnomes, pulling only tiny perch out of the lake, which, sadly, are too small for supper. It's peaceful but after an hour the cold

has seeped into our bones, so we head home.

Next up is skiing, Harri is whisked away for his very first lesson with his dad, and I take to piste for only the second time in my life, under the watchful eye of my sister (a much better skier than me), who relishes telling me what I'm doing wrong. Then it's home to cook (shop-bought salmon), light fires, have a sauna and watch a *Two Ronnies* DVD. Well, it is Christmas, after all.

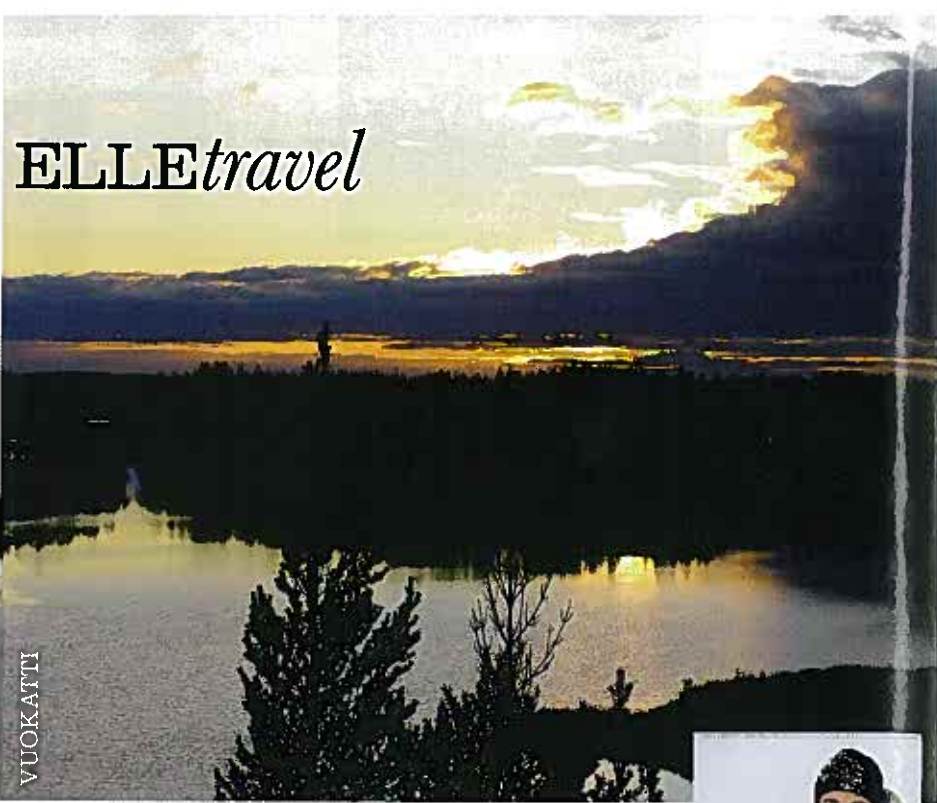
## TUESDAY 23 DECEMBER

Mum, Dad and I are booked in for a snowmobile safari. After a brief lesson, we hit the frozen lakes to get the speed and the heart rate up. Two people fit on one snowmobile, and you can swap halfway, so everyone has the chance to drive. We follow a track across the lakes and into the woods. We ridge mountains, whizz through more beautiful snow-drenched pine forests and find

AS TOLD TO SUSAN WARD DAVIES. PHOTOGRAPHS: ANNIKA ASCHBERG/CAMERALINK, NORDIC IMAGES/ALAMY, PAVEL FILATOV/ALAMY, DAVID TITLINGHAM/ALAMY, JOERI DE ROCKEN/ALAMY

MATTHEW & RACHEL





ourselves at an old farm that serves hot chocolate and cake. The place is teeming with wind-swept, red-cheeked, cross-country skiers and stuffed animals. The whole thing lasts about two hours, and I love it.

After lunch at our local ski-slope restaurant, it's a 20-minute drive to the Vuokatti Husky Centre. This is set in what they call a 'dog farm', where sled dogs are trained. It's aimed at tourists, but in the best possible way. We're introduced to excitable, baying (but friendly) huskies, and told how everything works – the rig, the dogs and the commands. Then we hop in, hang on, and are whisked away on a track that circles the farm and heads out into the forest. After this trial run, we're given command of the dogs and the sled. You're only given six dogs so you can't get up to any real speed, and the track is very safe as the dogs have run it a million times. After an exhilarating few hours, we recover in the farm with a very hearty salmon and potato soup (the Finns love their salmon).

**CHRISTMAS EVE**

Rachel and I take to the slopes again and discover a fantastic little hut on the top of the mountain that serves mulled wine, so we sit overlooking the vast expanse of snow and catch up on life, LA and having children. One of the things I love about Vuokatti is that there is no chance of running into anyone you know. The slopes are practically empty, which is a real luxury – especially if you want to learn something new like snowboarding, which I try (not very successfully) that afternoon. The strike of 6:30pm sees the arrival of Mr and Mrs S Claus (booked through Black Tomato). As Santas go, Mr Claus is a good one, with a real beard. And when he says it has only been a short sleigh ride from Lapland, he isn't lying.

**IT'S CHRISTMAS!**

Post-presents, Christmas morning is a long walk and tobogganing before setting off for lunch. I'd requested somewhere twinkly and chintzy (ie mother-pleasing). Black

*As Santas go, Mr Claus is a GOOD one, with a real beard. And when he says it has only been a short RIDE from Lapland, he isn't LYING'*

Tomato came up with a place called Loma Rinteelä, 30km out of Vuokatti, which is a family-run business out in the wilds. You can do everything here: they have cottages for rent, saunas, bikes and horses. Tuula, a real earth mother who lives for Christmas (she even dyes her hair red for the festive season), welcomes you with open arms. Her house is clearly a Christmas Day favourite with Finns from miles around. We all sit on long trestle tables and help ourselves to huge loins of local pork and venison, home-baked breads, and fantastic puddings like Lappish farm cheese with cinnamon cream, cloudberry jam and spelt wheat-nut bread. Hours later, we squeeze ourselves back into the minibus (they collect you and drive you home) and wave goodbye to our new Finnish mother.

**BOXING DAY**

So here we are, back at the River Floating. We've had a brilliant week of doing things we've never tried before – but this is definitely the most exciting – and the most frightening. Rachel and I are driven 55 minutes to Lake Sapsjarvi, wriggle into the hideous suits and brace ourselves for the icy water...

**SATURDAY 27 DECEMBER**

Departure day. The trip has been a complete success. Plenty of action, as well as time for chilling out. And it's been just the right amount of time – any longer and we'd have all started bickering. As I hug them all goodbye at Heathrow, and stand behind Rachel's car for a second as she tries to reverse, she screams, 'Get out of the bloody way!' I realise it doesn't matter how far you evolve as siblings – some things never change. ■



PHOTOGRAPHS: AIVAR MIKKOJALAMY, ANNKA ASCHBERG/CAMERA LINK, BLACKWINK/ALAMY, JIM HOLMES/ALAMY, MATTHEW RHYS, PHOTOGRAF/MATT LEVER



Nothing beats a pampering manicure or pedicure to get your nails in great condition. So this month ELLE has teamed up with The Beauty Group to offer you a free mini nail treatment at a top independent salon. With more than 100 locations nationwide, there is sure to be a participating salon local to you. HOW TO CLAIM Visit beautygroup.co.uk to find your nearest salon. Then complete the coupon (below) and send it to: The Beauty Group/ELLE Offer, Unit F, Penfold Trading Estate, Imperial Way, Watford WD24 4YY. Coupons must be received before 30 April 2010. You will be contacted within 60 days of its receipt by The Beauty Group or your allocated salon. For enquiries, please call 0844 884 4000.

**TERMS AND CONDITIONS** 1. Offer of a free mini manicure or free mini pedicure lasting up to a maximum of 20 minutes. 2. Any additional services taken up will be charged at the salon's normal rate. 3. The salon has the right to choose the level of therapist who will carry out the service and the day of the week that you can take up the offer. 4. Entrants must be over 18 and UK residents. 5. Entries must be on original coupons. No photocopies accepted. Incorrectly completed, photocopied, damaged or defaced coupons will not be accepted. Proof of posting is not proof of receipt. 6. Although The Beauty Group has a large number of salon members throughout the UK, it is unable to guarantee availability for each region. However, your details will be kept on file and you will be contacted in the event that a salon is recruited to The Beauty Group within the promotional period. 7. All The Beauty Group salons trade under their own names and are independent companies. The Beauty Group and its promotional partners are not responsible for any beauty services provided in its members' salons. 8. The treatment is subject to availability. 9. No more than one voucher per person can be redeemed within a 12-month period. 10. There is no cash alternative and the voucher cannot be resold. 11. No in-salon purchase is necessary. 12. The treatment may not be exchanged or transferred. 13. The Beauty Group reserves the right to substitute this offer for an alternative one of similar or greater value and to withdraw the offer at any time without prior notice. 14. Once allocated to a salon, your treatment must be taken up within three months. 15. Some salons may require a fully refundable booking deposit. 16. The Beauty Group cannot be held responsible should any salon choose to decline or accept vouchers for reasons of its own. 17. The Beauty Group cannot be held responsible for any personal loss or injury at participating venues, as far as permitted by law. Promotional code: B1127.

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