FROM THE ARCHIVES

Snow, Sauna and a Husky Safari: My Journey to Ruka

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What began as a company reward trip to Finland became one of my most memorable journeys—through Helsinki, snow-covered Lapland and a few experiences I had never imagined having.

When we arrived at Kuusamo Airport in the Lapland region of Finland, we did not have an inkling of what we were going to see. A day later, we trekked along a 1.7 km trail in Riisitunturi National Park, and what we saw was just a dream come true. The candle-like spruces - widespread coniferous trees which have a distinctive conical shape and hanging cones, widely used for Christmas trees - were clad with a thick coating of white snow, creating a photogenic white forest. Flashed before our eyes were Bollywood movie scenes of DDLJ and Yeh Jawani Yeh Diwani. This was definitely the best place I had ever visited on earth.





We arrived at Helsinki from Delhi on a very cold Sunday evening. When Finnair Airbus A320 approached the Helsinki area, we were in for a treat. Frozen lakes and sea, snow-clad forest- an important and abundant natural resource of Finland…..We saw only snow and snow and snow…..The aircraft made a very smooth landing, a usual phenomenon I have experienced with FinnAir. I was wondering: if any Indian city witnessed rainfall of equivalent extent, why would our system go out of control whereas in Finland such things do not throw their routine life out of gear?

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As it was a Company-sponsored trip as a reward for winning Safety Award, we boarded a pre-arranged minivan after completing the formalities of Passport Control at Helsinki Airport. It was very swift and without any hassles. To have a fast immigration at Helsinki airport while coming from India, it is advisable to keep one's return ticket and travel plan ready as the immigration officer might demand the same to ensure that you are leaving the Schengen Area – comprising of 26 European countries. We had arrived at a time when the temperature was around -10 degree Celsius and it was expected to fall to -30 degree Celsius in Lapland, where we were to go after a two-day stay in Helsinki. We were taken to our company in the Espoo area where we were provided with snow shoes, jackets, and face masks to weather the adverse conditions from an Indian point of view. It was Sunday, and our host Ms. Anja was kind enough to receive us at the Company gate and take care of us by giving an appropriate briefing about our schedules for the next five days. We checked into our hotel in the city centre of Helsinki.

The next two days we spent visiting Riihimaki, Waste to Energy Plant, about 150 km from Helsinki; Suomejna CHP plant in Espoo; and Jeranpaa CHP and Battery Storage plant. Riihimaki plant is one of the Company's flagship WTE plant where hazardous wastes are treated. It was an excellent learning trip to these plants. Despite dealing with huge amounts of waste, the plant was neat and clean and almost odour free.





During our stay in Helsinki, we met with senior Management Team Members of the Company who shared their vision with us besides congratulating the team for winning Safety Award. For us, it was quite rewarding that one of the Management Team members came to visit Lapland, stayed with us for one day and shared his thoughts. Group Sustainability Head and Corporate EHS Manager travelled with us to Ruka, Lapland and took good care of us. It was a very humbling experience. They were giving so much importance to the entire trip. This was very motivating.

We spent two days in Helsinki where we explored Indian cuisine – there are a number of Nepalese and Indian Ravintola (restaurant in Finnish language), and other sightseeing spots. Unfortunately, Olympic stadium was closed due to renovation.

On Wednesday, we set off for what was to turn out to be a dream place, Rukatunturi - a 490-metre-high hill and a ski resort in Kuusamo, Lapland, Finland. We arrived just past noon to witness a beautiful scene. The airstrip at Kuusamo was covered with snow. Wind was blowing at about 10 km/hr, creating a bone-piercing chill, and the temperature was -20 degree Celsius. We got a few pictures clicked to keep a memory of our first tryst with such a magnificent landscape. Kuusamo is a small airport in Lapland. The aircraft from Helsinki was packed with ski lovers – in the arrival hall we saw hordes of ski bags getting picked up from the conveyor belt. We travelled in a minivan from the airport to the resort at Ruka for about 30 km along a splendid landscape. In this season, when the area witnesses extensive snowfall, roads are clear and free from any potholes and humps. The 30 km distance was travelled in less than half an hour – something we dream in India even during normal time.





In the evening on Wednesday, we went to Ruka City Centre to enjoy Bowling - a good family sport in this part of the world. We took a 90-minute slot and we were given two lanes. As we were seven players including our host, we divided into two groups. I was part of a group of four. It was my first bowling experience, as it was for three of the other group members. It is a fantastic game. It requires concentration and focus on the direction for throwing the ball. After two rounds of the game – each round having 10 frames – I emerged the highest scorer with 368, which comprised five strikes. A strike is when all 10 pins fall on the first attempt. It was an extraordinary feat for a first-time player. Similarly, a couple of months back I had made our team victorious in curling in Vierumaki in southern Finland. Curiously, I am considering playing bowling regularly. I believe I can be a good player of this game and might secure some medals at national level.



After sweating out in the Bowling arena, we went to a much-needed “sauna” in our cottage. This was our first experience of sauna. A sauna is a small room designed as a place to experience dry or wet heat sessions. The steam and high heat make the bathers perspire. Though I keep visiting Finland regularly, I had never gone to a sauna; the reason I do not know. It was an amazing experience. Minimally clothed – typically a Finn would not have any clothes inside a sauna – we learnt the art of sauna. Post a one-hour sauna session, we felt rejuvenated and relaxed.

Next two days of our trip in Ruka turned out to be two of the best days of our lives. The trek in Riisitunturi National Park was a treat. The two-and-a-half-hour trek took us to the top of the hill. Complete serenity….surrounded by white snow and spruces….. it was a blissful experience. Honestly, I missed my wife who loves getting clicked in picturesque milieu. I would bring my wife to this place next year. She would simply love it.

In the afternoon of Thursday, we went to a Reindeer Farm where a reindeer herd was waiting for us, with a lot of reindeer to drive us in a sledge. It was a short ride but enjoyable. We were experiencing such a ride for the first time. Post our ride, we fed the reindeer. They were very friendly.



But the best adventure was yet to come. On Friday, after a practice session of skiing, we went for Husky Safari – a 12 km ride in a sled driven by six dogs. What an exciting experience. It was a very cold and windy Friday. We arrived at the Husky farm in full winter safari gear. Eight of us were divided into four sleds, each driven by six dogs. This is an interesting ride – the driver has to stand on the rail to

guide the sled. During the trail, sleds have to be stopped or slowed using a pedal brake. It was adventurous.



Finally, when we bid adieu to Ruka with an inner promise to return next year, we were taking a lot of memories with us.

It was an exceptional trip arranged by our Company. If there is such a rejuvenating and experiential reward, one shall remain motivated to deliver.