



THRILLING: Taking a husky-sledding excursion was one of the highlights for Jo and her young daughter Coco

Reindeer, huskies and Santa - in just one day

FOUR Go To Lapland sounds a bit like an Enid Blyton escapade, doesn't it? And in fact, the reality of my day-trip to the snowy lands of the north pretty much lived up to that spirit of adventure. Together with my eight-year-old daughter Coco, my friend and her 15-year-old son, I flew to Rovaniemi, the official home town of Santa Claus, on a 7am flight from Gatwick. Well, we had to start early if we were to get all the way to the North Pole and back in one day. I felt festive as soon as we arrived. Trees were covered with snow and when we shook the leaves, flakes gently drifted all around us. It was utterly magical.

By Jo Whiley

have only two hours of sunlight in Lapland in winter, so the resulting glow was ethereal, and lent a marvellous atmosphere to the place. You won't be surprised to learn that it was absolutely freezing during our trip, so we were togged up in industrial snowsuits. Thankfully there were stands everywhere with elves (yes, real elves!) handing out hot, spicy berry juice, which was just what we needed. We didn't need much encouragement to keep moving, however, as the day was action-packed. Our first activity, sledding, was just as exciting as we'd hoped. Coco's eyes were as round as saucers as the huskies pulled us along. The snow-

mobiles were also great fun as we were allowed to drive them ourselves. Coco sat behind me and we headed off into the forest. The light was beginning to fade by this point, but candles were dotted around the trail for us to follow, which was a beautiful touch. One of our favourite activities was the trip to the elves' workshop. Santa's helpers even divulged a few of their secrets to keep the kids completely entranced. Next was the visit to Santa himself, and we promised him we had been good all year because no one wants to miss out on a little gift, do they? Even

GETTING THERE

Thomson (thomson.co.uk, 0871 230 2555) offers day trips to Lapland from £372pp. This includes return flights from Birmingham on December 4, transfers, sleigh rides, a snow village tour and meeting Santa Claus.

though this was the climax of the visit, the whole day was so enchanting that meeting Santa was more of a sideshow for Coco really. Her favourites were riding with the huskies and meeting the reindeer, although to be honest, it was exciting to just walk in the beautiful forest and play games (well, it was for me anyway). It was ambitious doing it all in one day and we were exhausted - but happy - by the end of it. It's funny seeing the photos of Coco all bright-eyed and twinkling in the morning compared to how shattered she was when we got home at 11pm. We were sad not to see the Northern Lights, but then again, it's not every day you're handed a present by Father Christmas himself.



FEELING FESTIVE: Santa with one of his reindeer in Lapland. Below left: Jo and Coco during their day trip



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I'm off to Mordor with my very own Hobbit...

By Alice Bianchi-Clark

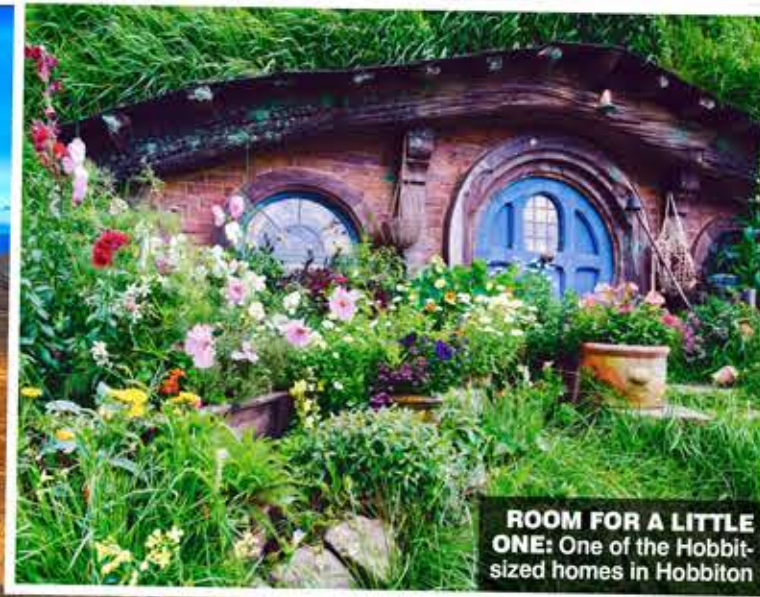
MOUNT Ngauruhoe looms over a wilderness of desolation. Offset against the cerulean sky, this active stratovolcano has a dark, conical shape and clouds bubbling around its blood-red crater like dry ice in a lab experiment. It's the sort of volcano my son Edward would draw. Edward clammers on to the bus that will escort us to the start of our trek with a spring in his step. 'That's Mount Doom,' he says to the bus driver, just in case he didn't already know. Edward has only just turned seven, but he's already watched Peter Jackson's *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy and its prequel, *The Hobbit*. His bedtime reading is Tolkien's *The Hobbit* - illustrated but unabridged. No wonder, given that his father is both a movie buff and a voracious reader. We're attempting the Tongariro Alpine Crossing in New Zealand's North Island (tongarirocrossing.org.nz). Apparently the best one-day hike in the country, it's a



FIRE AND ICE: Volcanic Mount Ngauruhoe features in the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy as Mount Doom

12-mile adventure across the Tongariro National Park. This is the setting for Mordor in the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, and Mount Ngauruhoe stars as Mount Doom, where Frodo, the hobbit entrusted as the ring-bearer, is tasked with destroying the ring. The driver pulls Edward back by the hood of his waterproof. 'Hobbits aren't allowed on board,' he says, gruffly.

Edward gasps. 'I'm not a hobbit. I'm a child.' 'You know this isn't a child-friendly hike?' says the driver, concerned. This time, he's addressing us, not Edward. 'If it were easy-peasy-lemonsqueezey, it wouldn't be called Mordor,' pipes up Edward, before we can articulate an adequate reply. 'I prefer glamorous heels to hiking boots any day of the week so I'm



ROOM FOR A LITTLE ONE: One of the Hobbit-sized homes in Hobbiton

miffed to find that even a cyclone won't put daddy and Edward off visiting Mordor. However, the delay buys us time to explore caves at Waitomo, where the luminous bottoms of glow-worms create stellar constellations in the darkness; bubbling muds and jewel-coloured geothermal pools at Waiotapu; bird sanctuaries inhabited by threatened species of fluffy, nocturnal kiwibirds in Otoro-

hanga Kiwi House; cruise the Lake Taupo caldera aboard a Romancing The Stone sailboat; stay in a homely, picturesque farm and visit Hobbiton, the film set of *The Hobbit*. Edward is totally at home among its undulating hills, enchanting vegetable patches, flowering gardens and quaint houses with hobbit-sized doors. North Island is often skipped in favour of South Island, but it

GETTING THERE

Hilton Lake Taupo offers rooms from 189 New Zealand dollars (about £100) per night. Visit tinyurl.com/yb5vuvmc. For information on farmstays visit depreauxlodge.com. For cruises on Lake Taupo visit sailbarbar.com and for tours of Hobbiton go hobbitontours.com. **Air New Zealand** (airnewzealand.co.uk) flies to Auckland from Heathrow via Los Angeles from £951 return.

needn't be. The Tongariro crossing averages eight hours and comprises steep, rope-assisted climbs to the 6,200ft summit. It's not a trek for the faint-hearted, but the gritty volcanic landscapes, scorched crater ridges, gem-coloured sulphurous lakes and tussock grasslands merging into forests of mountain beech and kaikawaka are spectacular. Never mind that I'll be stiff tomorrow. Edward tingles with excitement and daddy is in his element. 'Even the hobbit made it?' says the driver, congratulating us at the end of our adventure. 'Perhaps hobbits and children are not so dissimilar, after all.'

LATE DEALS OF THE WEEK

BARGAIN BEST FLIGHT
AIR Transat (airtransat.co.uk) has a seat sale until October 23 for travel up to October 2018. Return fares to Toronto start from £315, Calgary £363 and Vancouver £376.

BARGAIN BEST CHRISTMAS MARKET
BOOK by the end of the month and spend two nights in Vienna's Donauwälder Hotel between November 18 and December 23 from £129pp, including return flights from Heathrow. Visit ba.com or call 0344 493 0125.

BARGAIN BEST FERRY
DFDS (dfds.co.uk) is offering day crossings from Dover to Calais or Dunkirk from £35 return for a car and up to nine people until December 10. Three-day trips start from £59 and five-day from £69.

BARGAIN BEST LONG HAUL
FLY to Thailand on October 17 on a ten-night holiday staying at the four-star

FLIGHT OF FANCY: See Toronto's spectacular skyline from Ontario's spectacular capital Centra Coconut Beach Resort Koh Samui. It is situated on Tanote Beach with an outdoor pool. Prices start at £753pp, including B&B accommodation and return flights from Heathrow. Visit awayholidays.co.uk or call 020 8705 0107.

BARGAIN BEST HOTEL
SAVE more than 50 per cent at the Golden Fleece Hotel at North Yorkshire. Two night B&B costs from £108 per room, you book by Tuesday for stay between October and February. Visit secretescapes.com or call 0843 2277 777.