



Sámi Easter

A festive gathering in Kautokeino marks the end of winter, an opportunity to celebrate Sámi culture and preparation for leading 180,000 eager reindeer on their migration to the seacoast.

Text and Photos
By Randall Hyman

EACH SPRING, AMID THE VAST, SNOW-mantled high tundra of Norway's far north, one of the most unique Easter festivals in all of Scandinavia rocks the town of Kautokeino with a dazzling array of colors and events. Resplendent in a rainbow of folk costumes, or *gákti*, ornamented with meticulous needlework and silver jewelry, Sámi villagers shake off winter doldrums and celebrate for four days with concerts, reindeer races, snowmobile motocross and a variety of other activities including a film fest projected on a giant screen of ice.

A detail of the *gákti*, the colorful tunic of a Sámi men.

While snowmobile events are included in the festivities, it is the **traditional race** between teams of skiers and reindeer that provides the authentic, cultural charm.



“Traditionally this was the last time for the Sámi people to gather before moving their reindeer herds,” Knut Hansvold of the Northern Norway Tourism Board told me. “But now it’s a little of everything—celebrating Easter, baptisms, confirmations and weddings. It’s no longer so cold, the sun is back, and it’s easier to travel.”

Even though Christian customs are a relatively recent addition to the once nomadic, shamanistic Sámi culture, Easter comes at the perfect time. It is just before 180,000 reindeer feel the urge to migrate from the high

mountain plateaus of Finnmark County to coastal pastures in search of abundant food as calving time approaches.

For Scandinavia’s only indigenous people, the Sámi Easter Festival is a chance to celebrate the survival of their culture and language. With the incursion of missionaries in the 1600s, the Sámis, once inaccurately known as Lapps, endured centuries of oppression before an eventual resurrection culminating in 2005 with the completion of the Sámi parliament building in the town of Karasjok.

I arrived for the festival in the village of Kautokeino a few days before Easter after a two-hour drive from coastal lowlands through long stretches of deep snow and frozen lakes. The town's colorfully painted homes brightened the white hillsides, but the truly eye-dazzling colors were yet to come.

THAT EVENING I HEADED FOR THE town's large auditorium, the Báktehárji, where a thousand people adorned in regal attire packed the concert hall for the first of three nights of performances. It was a memorial concert for one of the Sámi nation's most beloved singers, Inga Juuso, and her praises were sung with some of the most haunting melodies, voices and instrumentations I had ever heard. They all had their roots in the *joik* (pronounced yoik), the ancient, pentatonic Sámi singing that channels the spirit of a person, animal, place or thing with sparse lyrics, improbable melodic leaps, grace notes and hypnotic redundancy.

Sámi artists from three nations (left to right):
The legendary Mari Boine from Norway, Sofia Jannok from Sweden and Ulla Pirttijärvi from Finland at the first evening's concert.



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"The traditional *joik* is without instruments," explained Anne Louise Gaup, a reindeer herder from Karasjok. "Every *joik* has its own notes, but the words change after the mood. It's very personal." Among reindeer herders, one of the most important *joiks* is the one they carry throughout life as a sort of identification, but they must never sing it themselves—that honor rests with their friends and relatives.

"Everyone can be called Anne Louise," she explained, "but no one can have the same *joik* I have. It is the mother's mother, the grandmother, who makes the *joik* for the children when they're about five or six years old. So my first one, it was very childish and was made on the way I was walking and playing. The second one you get when you are confirmed, at the age of fifteen or sixteen. That's the adult *joik*."

The festival features a capella *joik* recitals for adults and children as well as evening concerts incorporating drums, guitars and other instruments to create a unique folk-rock style. The final night's televised Grand Prix show, complete with two emcees and live audience voting, is divided into two halves, one for bands and the other for traditional *joik* singing.

One of this year's headliners, Mari Boine, is a legendary representative of Norway on the world music scene who has been presenting Sámi music to audiences across Europe and North America for decades. Her singing that first night encompassed the full range of Sámi music inspired by the *joik*. On the two other nights entertainment ran the gamut, including a rapper in folk dress ripping rhyme in *Sámisk* as an admiring crowd of hip-hop fans in *gákti* waved in unison.

DURING MY FOUR-DAY VISIT, I CAME TO APPRECIATE WHAT A homespun, grassroots affair the festival really is—exclusively produced by and for the region's Sámi population. As popular as the event is among Sámis, it is virtually unknown elsewhere, including much of Norway. The vast majority of attendees are locals decked out in their brilliant costumes with saucer-sized silver amulets and jewelry.

"I found out about it from a Norwegian tourist brochure I happened to see in California," explained Eli Marie Smedsrud, a law student from Oslo bunking in the cabin next to mine. She and two girlfriends had flown up from southern Norway on their Easter vacations and taken the bus from the northern coast just to see what it was all about. They had already enjoyed the full range of extracurricular festival activities, hopping on snowmobiles with some of the local men to go whizzing out of town across frozen lakes to the treeless *vidde* (plateau) where reindeer happily weathered the long winter.

Absent such hospitality, I drove my rental car several miles out of town along a country road steeped in snow to a makeshift parking lot in the middle



Dressed in their best finery, audience members become an attraction in their own right.

of nowhere. Lots of others managed the same route and, as the parking lot filled to capacity, a huge front loader carved it even larger, plowing through waist-deep snows and nearly taking my car with it.

With the unmistakable whine of snowmobiles filling the air, I walked over a rise and found myself at the edge of a motocross track where helmeted daredevils gunned their engines and shot airborne over hills at 60 mph, astonishingly close to the crowd of enthusiastic spectators.

Eventually race officials allowed me into the center of the track with my press pass and cameras, and I witnessed how dangerous the sport can be as several contestants flipped off their vehicles and leaped sideways to escape tumbling snowmobiles.

"We've had some pretty serious injuries before," the young female doctor in charge later told me as she stood near an ambulance. "One year we had to call for a helicopter to fly a man to the hospital on the coast."

The next day I drove to a more traditional kind of race where reindeer bulls exploded from starting gates with teenagers tethered behind like chariot drivers on skis, tearing across an icy track about a fourth of a mile long in less than twenty seconds. Frigid winds scoured the plains all afternoon and at one point an elderly woman watching from her minivan invited me inside to take shelter. As another set of reindeer and skiers burst from the gates, she gazed toward the track with a twinkle in her eye.

Inger Anna Gustad,
right, wife of the
pastor chats with
fellow congregants.



Every family has one person who specializes in sewing for everyone.

“This isn’t how we used to do it,” she reminisced. “We used sleds . . . and I won many, many races.”

On my final morning in Kautokeino, I attended Easter services in the Lutheran church that stands sentinel over town from a prominent hillside. Congregants arrived in their most elegant *gákti* outfits and hats. The inside of the church, with its warm golden walls set against a sea of blue dresses and tunics, red bonnets and silk shawls, resembled a painting. Biblical passages and a sermon floated across the cozy chapel in both Norwegian and Sámi, with a brief passage in English for the benefit of a certain journalist who was afterwards invited to the minister’s house for lunch.

“We get a new outfit every year for every occasion,” Lutheran minister Bjarne Gustad told me as we sat down to an afternoon meal of porridge and waffles. “Every family has one person who specializes in sewing for everyone.”

WHILE BJARNE IS FROM SOUTHERN NORWAY, HIS WIFE, Inger Anna, is Sámi and spent her early years following the reindeer herd with her family living in a *lávvu*, a reindeer-skin tent akin to a tepee. Looking at a painting on their living room wall of two *lávvus* dwarfed by a deep blue night sky in the snowy vastness of the high winter plateau, she shuddered.

“It was cold,” she explained. “When you live in a *lávvu*, you live in your clothes. We had outside clothes made of reindeer skins, and those we took off to sleep.” It was all quite normal, she added, and it was the only world they knew.

“We used to play, used to make small *lávvus* with birch sticks, and run and ski, and make snow houses and play reindeer and I had to pull my sister along. That was what we saw in our world, reindeer, nature—that was what we played.”

When I left Kautokeino later that afternoon, I thought how this culture of reindeer, nature and spirituality was nearly lost to the same religion that now helps preserve it through the Sámi Easter Festival.

“Most of the time,” Gaup told me, “when I am *joiking*, it’s actually in the springtime, when we are moving with the reindeer herd to the summer area. Then I *joik* because I can see the reindeer have had a good winter and the female reindeer are pregnant. I am so happy about that,” she laughed. “Then I *joik* because I am proud.”

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Two Sámi children attend church services in Kautokeino, the festival town depicted below.