

Into the wilderness

Atmospheric tours to the famous **Winter War battle sites** north and east of Kajaani bring history to life

WORDS AND PICTURES RICHARD ASHER

report from January 1940, it was among the first appearances of the word in an English-language publication. To this day, the deeply-Finnish concept is considered nearly untranslatable. If you really want to understand it, the best thing you can do is go and stand in the wilderness that inspired these words. In winter. Feel the bite of the air on your cheeks, shiver as the feeling fades from your fingers. Then try to imagine waging war in those icy woods.

There's no better place to do this than the famous battle sites north and east of Kajaani. Whether Finland 'won' the Winter War definitely depends on whose version of history you're reading, but on this front there's no doubt that sisu had the final say.

For Finns, the ultimately successful battles on the Raate Road and nearby areas have become a national inspiration. I realise this before I even arrive in Kajaani on the 75th anniversary of the Russian invasion that started the Winter War. I'm in the faraway south of the country, but even there Raateentie (Raate Road) and White Death

(a Finnish sniper with a claimed 542 kills) T-shirts are selling in workaday department stores. Winter War documentaries air on TV. And while I'm in the air heading north, the Prime Minister speaks at a commemorative event near Kuhmo.

After all these years, this still serves as the David and Goliath stuff that every small country needs. These battles clearly occupy a special place in Finland's psyche. And when you come up to this part of the country and soak up the history, it's hard not to get caught up in it.

Early on the morning of 30th November 1939, with the Second World War just a couple of months old, the Soviet Union sent troops pouring across the Finnish border north and east of Kajaani. At the time, Helsinki was a German ally, and Stalin's plan was for these divisions to push through to Finland's western seaboard at Oulu. The country would be severed in half, the Soviets would control a vital port, and celebratory vodka would be flowing on the quay in time for Stalin's birthday on December 18th. >>

“The Finns have something they call sisu. It is a compound of bravado and bravery, of ferocity and tenacity, of the ability to keep fighting after most people would have quit, and to fight with the will to win. The Finns translate sisu as ‘the Finnish spirit’, but it is a much more gutful word than that. Last week the Finns gave the world a good example of sisu by carrying the war into Russian territory on one front while on another they withstood merciless attacks by a reinforced Russian Army. In the wilderness... of the Russo-Finnish frontier... the Finns definitely gained the upper hand.”

When *Time* referenced sisu in this



GO WILD IN WAR COUNTRY

The border region, served by Kajaani Airport, is a hive of sporting and outdoor activity all year round. You can arrange all manner of fun from Suomussalmi or Kuhmo, the two main towns in the historic Winter War area.

These forests are some of the best places in Europe for spotting brown bears, but remember they hibernate in winter. You're also in with a chance of seeing elk, wolves, wolverines or foxes. Sighting an arctic hare is also a treat...they're the largest members of the bunny family!

Summer activities include epic forest hiking in the Hossa National Hiking area, or even the 160km trail along the Russian border. Canoeing is popular, and so is camping, which you can legally do just about anywhere in these parts.

Winter warriors can have the time of their lives in the war lands. Think skiing (mostly cross-country, though there is a slope at Sotkamo), husky safaris, snowmobiling, snowshoe-trekking and ice-fishing.

More surreal experiences include the summer cross-country 'ski tunnel' in Vuokatti, learning to extract tar from wood, and floating down Kuhmo's icy Lentuankoski rapids in a dry suit. Visit Suomussalmi in early September, and you could even enter the world championship of berry-picking! Take your pick of bilberries, cloudberries and lingonberries...

Only it didn't quite work out like that. Yes, the Soviets had all the advantages on paper. Our guide tells us that at the lonely border outpost of Juntusranta, for example, only 44 men were initially present to try and repel 18,000 members of the Red Army's 163rd Division. Unsurprisingly, initial Soviet progress was swift. And yet by January, with temperatures dipping like mad, the tide had turned. The Soviets had gone nowhere.

Yes, the USSR had done better in the south, where Finland ultimately ceded territory in the subsequent March peace treaty, but their mission in this area was an embarrassing and globally-publicised failure. Finland's never forgotten it, and if you visit these parts, you won't either.

You need to travel to the battlegrounds in the winter months. Stand ankle-deep in snow wearing three pairs of socks, cursing the fact

that you didn't don a fourth. Hear your teeth chatter after just a few minutes outside the car, and marvel at how anyone could last a day here, let alone weeks. Only then can you grasp why Finns consider this victory one for the ages. One that epitomises *sisu*.

If this all sounds like slightly-overblown propaganda, then yes, there's definitely a whiff of that when you visit the war sites. Maybe it's justified, maybe not. But not everything written about this war has been penned by Finns. Bring along a copy of *A Frozen Hell* by American historian William Trotter for a transatlantic perspective that, when the air gnaws at your eyeballs, does not appear to have an exaggerated title.

You'll need some advanced Finnish skills and a call ahead to get the most out of the museum on the Raate Road (outside Suomussalmi), but do try and see if they'll fire

up the Soviet T-26 tank outside the entrance – she rumbles and she moves! Inside, the coolest (literally!) exhibit is the pistol they keep in the freezer. Open the door and hold it by the metal handle for a brief, burning taste of how a soldier's hands might have felt all day.

But it's out of doors that you'll really get a sense of what those men faced. Outside the Raate Road Museum you'll find the uniquely-sprawling Winter War Monument. On the roads that take you to Russia, traces of the war can still be seen in the furrowed land or, more starkly, the yellow signs that still warn against unexploded devices. The restored trenches and bunkers, for example at Purasjoki (not far short of the border on Raate Road) or Saunajärvi (on the Saunajärventie battle route outside Kuhmo), do the best job of taking you back in time.

The colder the better, too, because the



winter of 1939-40 was ridiculously frigid at its early January worst. We're talking lows of 40 degrees below zero. Gunfire and blood may be hard to imagine amid today's silent forest and pure-white snow, but the cold bites now as it did then.

The icicles around the bunker windows are probably unchanged, as surely are the enormous snowflakes – so big you can see their pattern. It's merely minus 10 when we visit the Raate Road sites, but that's more than enough of a hint. Rarely in history has war been fought in such conditions.

Memorials and death litter the landscape



in these parts. The Russian Memorial along Raate Road marks the entrance to a morbid boardwalk leading to a mass grave. This is not a place for denial. Nor is the graveyard in the old part of Suomussalmi, where many of the Finnish fallen were buried just yards from their last battle. The tightly-packed crosses tell their own story.

The Finns succeeded not only because Stalin had purged so many of his best military leaders, but because of their superior ski skills, knowledge of the forests and sensible white camouflage that helped them carry out their guerilla operations and motti siege warfare. Against a force as monumentally massive as the Soviet Union, it was a mighty shock. To get a sense of just how mighty, a visit to the modern border is a must.

A guide can take you right into the protected zone. Ours, retired border post commander Pertti Koivisto, has the necessary permissions to bring us to the fence marking the end of Finland. It's impossible to stand here, gazing across the



narrow treeless strip at the identical forests of Mother Russia, and not get a shiver down your spine. To think that this country stretches almost all the way from here to Alaska is enough to make your head spin.

Luckily for the Finnish soldiers of 1939, the sheer size of the mighty land to the east didn't intimidate them. With *sisu* on your side, perhaps anything is possible.



EXPLORING THE WINTER WAR SITES

The tourist offices and, if possible, the Winter War Museums, should be your first ports of call. They're your best bet for maps and guides for exploring the military sites around Suomussalmi and Kuhmo.

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Seasonal opening

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Frozen Hell Winter War Tour (4 days)
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