

The Guardians of the North: A Journey into Sámi Culture

Nestled in the breathtaking wilderness of Norway's Arctic Circle lies a rich and enduring culture—one that has thrived for countless generations. The Sámi people, indigenous to the region of Sápmi, have called this rugged landscape home for centuries, their way of life intimately tied to the land, the reindeer, and the changing seasons.

On our journey through the northern reaches of Norway, we had the privilege of visiting a Sámi hut outside of Hammerfest, on the island of Kvaløya in Sørøy Sound. In July, the landscape was a striking blend of rocky terrain and vibrant green expanses—yet, despite the summer sun, the region remained largely devoid of trees or dense shrubbery, a testament to the relentless Arctic winds and long, unforgiving winters.

The Sámi have historically led a nomadic existence, their livelihoods centered around coastal fishing, trapping, and, most iconically, reindeer herding. However, in modern times, many younger Sámi have embraced urban life, pursuing careers in other professions. Still, the echoes of their ancestors' way of life remain woven into Sámi identity, preserved by those who continue the traditions.

A Meeting with Mikkell, the Reindeer Herder

On Kvaløya, we met Mikkell, a Sámi elder and one of the last in his family to maintain the time-honored practice of reindeer herding. He welcomed us into his earth house for tea, later inviting us to his ceremonial teepee where he shared stories and songs passed down through generations.

Mikkell spoke of the Sámi's unique cultural identity—one that transcends national borders, connecting communities across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia's Kola Peninsula. Traditionally, extended families of 50 to 200 people would migrate together, following the reindeer herds through the seasons. When asked how many reindeer he owned, Mikkell responded with a knowing smile, while our guide gently reminded us that asking such a question was akin to inquiring about the balance of one's bank account—a deeply personal matter in Sámi culture.

The Shaman's Wisdom and the Songs of the Ancestors

Mikkell also shared stories of the Sámi spiritual leaders—the Shamans—who served as the guiding force for their people. When a family faced hardships, whether illness or misfortune, they turned to the Shaman, who would enter a trance through drumming and song, seeking wisdom from Mother Earth and Father Sun. The messages received could bring comfort or forewarning, but they were always revered as sacred.

Then, Mikkell sang. His voice carried the weight of history, the melodies imbued with deep connection to the land. He sang three types of songs: one honoring a beloved place, another telling of the wolves that hunted the reindeer, and finally, the song of the ancestors.

Among the most moving moments was when Mikkel sang his grandfather's song—a melody passed down to him through his father. Traditionally, each Sami person is given a unique song as a way to honor their essence. Though Mikkel had never met his grandfather, the song kept their bond alive, a thread of continuity linking past to present. When asked who would sing Mikkel's song when he was gone, his reply was haunting: "There is only me."

The Language of Snow and the Weather Within

One of the most fascinating aspects of Sámi culture is their unparalleled understanding of snow. The Sámi have hundreds of words to describe it—an essential knowledge for survival in the Arctic. The texture and composition of snow dictate everything from reindeer grazing conditions to the ease of hunting and travel. For reindeer grazing, the snow should not be too deep. For hunting, snow should melt in the sun and freeze at night for safe and easy passage.

Mikkel also spoke of an inner philosophy: that just as the weather constantly changes, so do our emotions. "Sometimes, it is sunny; sometimes, it is stormy—but it always shifts," he mused. This deep connection between nature and human existence is at the heart of Sámi wisdom.

A Call to the Arctic

For those who venture to the Arctic Circle, an encounter with the Sámi offers more than just a glimpse into a way of life—it is an immersion into a confluence of traditions, history, and nature. We left Kvaløya with a renewed appreciation for the resilience and wisdom of the Sámi people, their songs still echoing. When you find yourself in Norway's far north, take the time to sit by the fire, sip tea, and listen to their stories. For in those moments, you may hear not only the voice of an elder but whispers of generations past, carried on the Arctic winds.

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2/10/2025