

Northern Europe



Northern delights

After a day's dog-sledding, spa indulgences are even more special. Adrienne Pielou looks at how best to combine excitement with exfoliation

Snowy forests, historic old cities, cosy restaurants and invigorating spas, saunas and thermal baths – northern Europe has plenty to offer visitors at this time of year. From dog sledding in northern Finland to basking in the waters of Iceland's Blue Lagoon, here are our suggestions for combining health and beauty treatments with a dash of northern exposure.

Jurmala, Latvia

In midwinter Latvia is often knee-deep in snow. That makes Riga, the capital, look more beautiful than ever, like an illustration from a fairy tale. And after you've spent a day or two sightseeing in the Old Town and among the streets of Art Nouveau buildings, you can dip into a different sort of snowy world, 20 minutes away on the Baltic Sea. Here, on the edge of a pine forest that borders mile after mile of white-sand beach, is the resort town of Jurmala, where the spa hotels have recently been joined by the new, family-run, 21-room Amber Spa Boutique Hotel. The centrepiece of this is a traditional Russian sauna run by the family's

grandmother, with searing hot steam rooms, ice-cold plunge pools and muscly attendants to beat you with birch twigs (which does wonders for the circulation and thus the complexion). The hotel has a comprehensive diagnostic centre – Latvia's first – for treating health problems/hypochondria using six different disciplines, and a team of three doctors to scrutinise the results and advise on (mostly naturopathic) treatment. After that, squeaky-clean and thoroughly vetted, you can stride out along the snowy beach.

• From £70 for a double room (00371 6775 5330; www.amberspahotel.lv). Fly to Riga with Air Baltic (www.airbaltic.com). Baltic Holidays (0845 070 5711; www.balticholidays.com) offers a range of city breaks to Riga.

Stockholm, Sweden

Winter is a good time to visit the Swedish capital. You have to go prepared, of course, but, warmly dressed, you can savour one of the cleanest, best-organised and most aesthetically uplifting cities in the world. Sightseeing ferries depart from outside the Grand Hotel, taking you on a 50-minute trip around the 14 islands over which the city

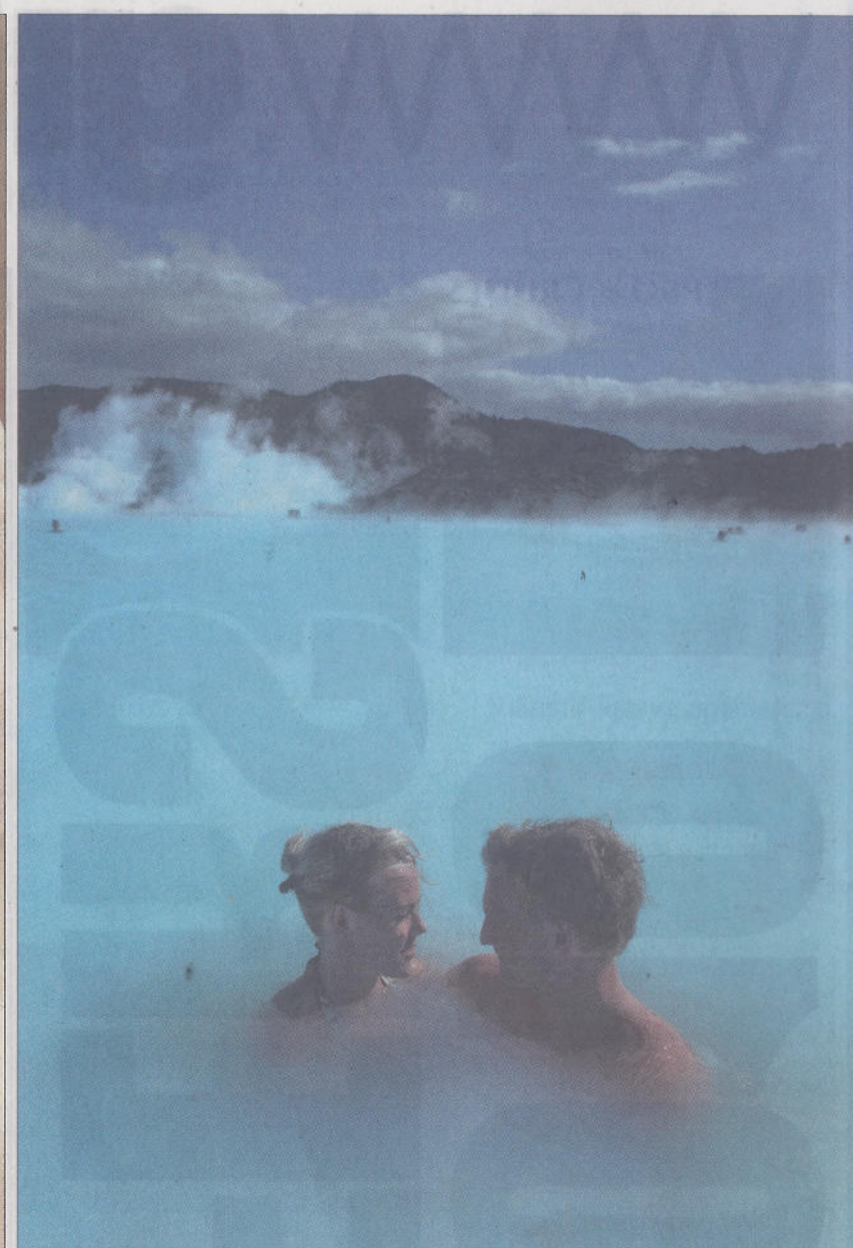
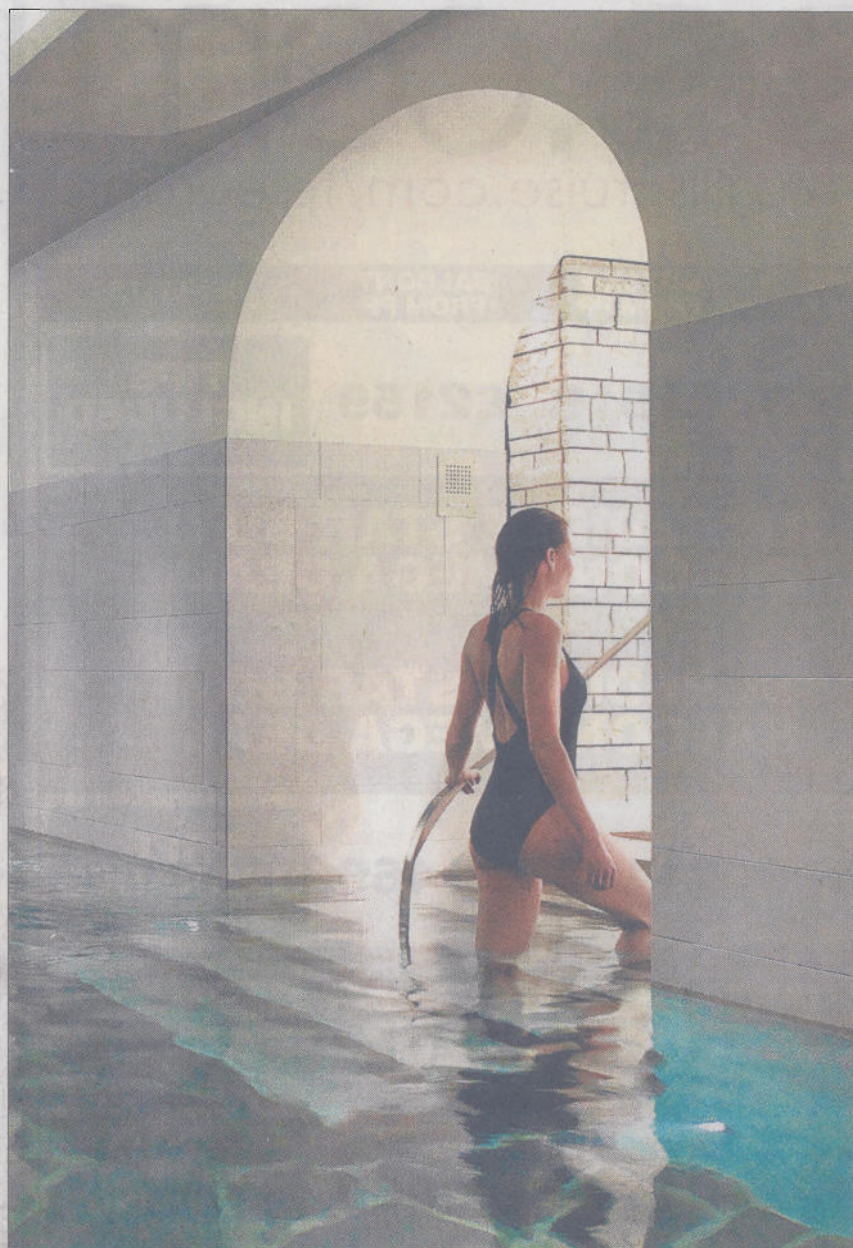
The new five-star Telegraaf Hotel in Tallinn is in the city's Old Town; the Northern Lights are spellbinding, especially if seen from the Blue Lagoon spa in Iceland

spreads. Or take a three-hour trip out to an archipelago of 24,000 impossibly scenic little islands. Sightseeing buses leave from the same spot. Across the bridge from this venerable, solid hotel is the cobbled Old Town, full of cosy cafés. Inside the hotel is the newly opened Raison d'être spa. Not cheap – nothing is in Sweden – but very, very good. A two-hour, £185, Be Balanced session will have you submitting first to an exciting machine that shakes you from the ankles up, realigning your spine, and then to a joint-stretching massage. From there, via a detour in the hotel's waterfront restaurant (semolina and cloudberry preserve followed by herring and mustard sauce, and various breads and pastries made a delicious brunch that lasted me until supper), it is barely 100 metres to glide to the glorious, 19th-century National Museum. Here you leave your snow-flecked coat and umbrella in an unmanned cloakroom at the entrance, and return, hours later, to find them still there! What a city.

• Three-night breaks at The Grand Hotel from Heathrow cost from £477, room only (www.ba.com/citybreaks) with spa packages bookable direct (0046 8679 3560; www.raisondetrespa.se; www.visitsweden.com).

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Northern Finland

When you've spent the day sledding through Finland's extreme north, being pulled across frozen lakes and through forests thick with icicles by a team of Siberian huskies, there is nothing quite as satisfying as getting back to your log cabin in the wilderness and slipping into the communal sauna. Absolute bliss. It's surprisingly tiring, sledding, even if the dogs do all the hard work. You stand at the back of the sled, together with a team-mate, switching over guiding duties after an hour or two, and can expect to cover up to 25 miles each day, passing reindeer, elk and sometimes wolves. The territory is the homeland of the Sami people and on an organised Dogsled Adventure you will start off with a night in a basic lodge in the remote settlement of Ivalo before setting off into the wilderness to spend two nights in an even more basic log cabin. The sauna is a warm haven from the icy conditions and just as relaxing as a spa treatment.

● Three nights' full-board including flights from Heathrow, all meals and all transport costs from £1,121 through Explore (0844 499 0901; www.explore.co.uk).

Skallerup Klit, Denmark

The weather may be bitter, dank and sleety, but the Danish love of cosiness comes into its own when the temperature plummets. The Danes have a word, *hygge*, for their love of cosy tranquillity – being inside, warm and comfortable around a fire. You can find it in abundance at family resorts such as Skallerup Klit in the north of the country. Commandeered in 1945 as an internment camp for German prisoners of war (one cottage has been preserved as it was, complete with inmates' diaries and a chair with a swastika covertly carved on its base), this resort now has 220 modern timber and glass cottages – each with a log-burning stove and sauna – spread over the heathland overlooking the North Sea.

As everywhere in Denmark, an air of sensible, steady calm pervades the place. Families can eat at the resort's restaurant, or shop in the neighbouring on-site supermarket and cook for themselves. In addition to an indoor waterpark, with two large pools, indoor adventure play areas, fitness area and bowling, the centre has a craft workshop for adults and children. But

Raison d'être: the new spa in the Grand Hotel, Stockholm; staff at Skallerup Klit in Denmark give top-quality facials; the Blue Lagoon's rejuvenating geothermal pool

the pièce de résistance is the spa – a copy of the Caracalla Baths in ancient Rome, with bare brick walls deliberately laid to look authentically old. It is ruthlessly clean, well-designed and managed by friendly staff who deliver quality massages and facials. Having a treatment, then relaxing in a window-seat while looking out across a wintry landscape, followed by a blustery walk along the beach and supper in your cottage with the sauna fired up, qualifies as *hygge* of a high order.

● Three nights' rental of a cottage for a family of four costs from £428, excluding travel (0045 9924 8400; www.skallerup.dk).

Tallinn, Estonia

Like Riga, this Baltic capital is no longer cheap for British travellers, but at least that has deterred the stag parties that used to flock here. There is wonderful architecture to enjoy in the medieval Old Town – even more beautiful than Riga's old quarter – as well as excellent food in the city's atmospheric restaurants and bars, and concert seats from about £10. Tallinn's best spa facilities are at the sleek little Elemis spa in the new, five-star Telegraaf Hotel –

a converted 19th-century building in the Old Town. As well as a sauna, this has a Jacuzzi, steam rooms and a little pool under a glass roof. Staff are rather earnest and self-conscious, so I'd say the best way to use the spa here is to skip treatments and enjoy the sauna and steam rooms for an hour or two after a day's sightseeing. Usefully, it's open until 10pm each night. And if you can time your visit so that you are lying on the poolside relaxation beds, looking up at the glass roof in a snowstorm, so much the better.

● Kirker (020 7593 2283; www.kirkerholidays.com) has three-night city breaks in Tallinn from £459 per person b&b, including return flight and private car transfers.

Blue Lagoon, Iceland

While Iceland might not be an obvious choice for a winter weekend, it is actually no colder than Milan in midwinter thanks to the warming Gulf Stream currents. And as a winter spa destination, Iceland has the great advantage of thermal waters. You can luxuriate for hours in the steamy warmth of the country's open-air geothermal pools –

and with luck you might have the bonus of lying back and seeing the Northern Lights flash across the night sky. Sightings of the *aurora borealis* are never guaranteed, but your chances are greater between November and February. You need a clear, cloudless night and no sources of artificial light nearby – which means that by stripping off somewhere such as the Blue Lagoon, 30 minutes outside Reykjavik, you maximise your chances of witnessing this exhilarating sight. Entrance to the milky-blue lagoon, where the mineral-rich seawater remains around 98F (37C), costs about £18 for adults, £5 for those over 67 and is free for under 13s. It is open daily from 10am until 8pm. Health treatments such as craniosacral therapy, especially effective in water, can be had in the nearby spa or in the lagoon itself – where the water is noted for its healing effect on psoriasis and eczema. Massages cost from about £50.

● Discover the World has three-night b&b stays at the nearby Northern Lights Inn, including a visit to the Blue Lagoon, from £399 per person, including flights (01737 218800; www.discover-the-world.co.uk). For massages at Blue Lagoon call 00354 420 8800 or visit www.bluelagoon.com.