



## Lapland's Airports – Gateways to the Far North

by Chris Kjelgaard on January 6, 2010

Some 20 per cent larger in area than Belgium and the Netherlands combined, but boasting only about two-thirds of one per cent of their total population, Finnish Lapland holds the distinction of being the European Union's largest wilderness.

Current estimates reckon that only 184,000 people live in Finnish Lapland, which was officially one of Finland's six provinces until January 1, 2010. (On this date Finland banished its centrally controlled provincial governments to establish new regions, which correspond to the former provinces but which are governed internally by regional administrative agencies run by the respective regions' municipalities.)

In such a vast area where so few people live and where there are so few roads – most of the region lies above the Arctic Circle more than 400 miles (645 kilometres) north of the country's capital Helsinki – air services form a vital link to the outside world.



In winter, Lapland receives very little daylight. As this Airbus A321 climbs away from Kittilä at about 1:30 p.m. on December 12, 2009, the sun is already setting. Despite the dark and the intense cold, however, Lapland is a popular winter-sports and Santa Claus-visiting destination for tourists from the UK and from western and central Europe

The huge area is served by six airports: Enontekiö, Ivalo, Kemi-Tornio, Kittilä, Kuusamo and Rovaniemi. All are operated by Finavia, Finland's state-owned airport operator and air traffic services provider, which operates 25 (22 commercial and three general aviation or military) of Finland's 27 major airfields.

### **Scheduled air service to Finnish Lapland**

Each of the six Lapland airports is served by Finnair and/or its regional-airline partner Finncomm Airlines – Finncomm serves Enontekiö and Kemi-Tornio for Finnair and also operates services from Tampere and Turku to Kittilä and Kuusamo – as well as by Blue1, the SAS Group subsidiary.

Blue1 serves Ivalo, Kittilä, Kuusamo and Rovaniemi, which is the largest town in Finnish Lapland but is not its most important tourism resort. Since Finnair is a member of the oneworld alliance and Blue1 a member of the Star Alliance, passengers using the Lapland airports have access to the entire networks and resources of two of the world's three major global airline alliances.



On a mid-December day, passengers disembark from a Finnair Airbus A321-200 after its one-and-a-half-hour scheduled flight north from Helsinki

Lapland forms part of the cultural home of the indigenous Sami people – their vast northern homeland is traditionally known as Sápmi – and includes areas of northern Sweden, Norway and Russia.

However, within the overall expanse of Lapland, the six airports of Finnish Lapland provide “the best airport services in the Arctic Circle” and “a tourism-friendly airport network”, says Thomas Kingelin, sales manager for Finavia's Lapland airport network. Accordingly, as a group the six airports provide the main international gateways by which most of Lapland is connected to the world at large.

Even considering the importance of air service as a means of communication between the region's tiny population and the rest of Finland, the success demonstrated by Finnish Lapland's

six airports in recent years is remarkable in terms of their primary role in making Lapland's many tourism charms accessible to the entire world.

Although 2009 saw international traffic at the six airports decline marginally as a result of recession in the key UK and European economies, the airports saw their inbound international passengers climb from 75,000 a year in 1998 to more than 450,000 in 2007 and 2008. During the same period, the six airports' domestic traffic remained flat, at around 700,000 passengers a year.

Finavia operates all six airports under one brand – Lapland Airports – and offers airlines and other customers common pricing at all its airports, to help promote brand awareness. While Finavia relies on its 'Via Helsinki' campaign to promote Helsinki Airport as a major hub for Europe-Asia services as a key piece of its overall marketing strategy to build passenger traffic, it also relies on the Lapland Airports to foster international service growth.

The Lapland Airports brand "creates a unified airport network in Lapland and is Finavia's contribution to Lapland's international marketing," says Kingelin. "It increases brand awareness of Lapland in international markets and among key tourism actors."

What Finavia strives to do, he adds, is to make the six Lapland airports an integral part of each arriving passenger's Lapland experience. "The airport isn't the reason for travel, but it can be part of the travel experience and it can enhance the traveler's experience when [he or she] arrives at the destination."

### **The fastest way to Lapland**

The airports are "the fastest way to Lapland", says Kingelin. "Year-round accessibility is guaranteed" – even though he says temperatures of minus-30 degrees centigrade (minus-22 degrees Fahrenheit, 54 degrees below freezing) are typical in winter – and Finavia has invested heavily in facilities and skilled personnel to make sure it keeps the six Lapland airports open even in times of deep snow.

Key to the success of the Lapland airports in increasing international tourism to the area is the growing reputation of Finnish Lapland as a winter-sports destination and – in the pre-Christmas period – as the home of Santa Claus. (In Europe, the official post office of Santa Claus is near Levi, which is Lapland's busiest winter-sports resort and is also Santa's official winter resort.)



Levi, only a 15-minute bus ride from Kittilä Airport, is the busiest winter-sports resort in Finnish Lapland. The resort is named for the fell on which the resort's 44 ski slopes are located, but the village at the foot of the front slope (shown here) is actually called Sirkka

Transfers from the Lapland airports to the resorts is “fast and convenient”, says Kingelin. “The resorts are always close by, 15 to 30 minutes by bus transfer.”

Kingelin recalls that when Finavia began marketing the Lapland Airports in the 1990s, “We originally thought we couldn’t market winter, because [in Lapland] it is dark and cold. Summer sun was the first program sold – but now it is the opposite. Summer is very quiet.”

### **International traffic growth**

However, inbound winter air travel to Lapland’s airports has boomed in the past decade (although international traffic fell somewhat at all six airports in 2009, as did traffic at many other airports worldwide). There are only about 850 year-round residents in Levi and there would be “no traffic on that basis”. But Levi’s success as a winter-sports resort – it now hosts events in the men’s and women’s Ski World Cup – has made Kittilä Airport (just a 15-minute bus drive from Levi and a 30-minute drive from Ylläs, another large winter-sports resort) the busiest airport in the Lapland Airports group.



Because it serves Levi, the busiest winter-sports resort in Finnish Lapland, Kittilä Airport is the busiest of Lapland's six airports. Finavia, which operates them, has branded all six under the name 'Lapland Airports' to promote awareness of the area and its airports internationally

In 2008 Kittilä saw 483 international charter flights (in addition to its Finnair, Fincomm Airlines and Blue1 schedules) and handled more than 260,000 passengers, says Jussi Turgala, director of Levi Travel, Levi's official tourism agency. Traffic at Kittilä grew more than 10 per cent, making Kittilä Finland's fastest-growing airport.

While 2009 saw "a small decline in international numbers" at Kittilä, according to Turgala, the airport has much reason for optimism in 2010. Kittilä's summer-season international traffic in 2009 grew 3 per cent, whereas it fell at all the other Lapland airports. Additionally, new direct international charter services have begun operating to Kittilä from Paris, Amsterdam, Düsseldorf and Russia for the 2009-2010 winter season, helping offset an estimated 25 per cent drop in 2009 in the big UK market to Lapland.

Despite this sizable decline, the UK winter-charter market remains crucial as a source of international traffic to Kittilä and the other Lapland airports serving winter resorts – mainly Ivalo, Kuusamo and Rovaniemi. In 2008 UK tourists represented 50 per cent of Lapland Airports' international traffic, with some 200,000 UK visitors flying to the airports. The next-biggest group of international visitors was French tourists, with 35,000 visiting; and German tourists represented the third-largest group, with 30,000 visiting.

For 2010, Finavia has dropped by 10 per cent the fees it charges airlines to use its airports. "There is lots of potential to grow air" travel to Finnish Lapland, says Kingelin.



Although most of the international visitors to Finnish Lapland come for the winter-sports season, Lapland can be a paradise in summer too for tourists who love wide-open spaces and outdoor pursuits. This is a view from Termisvaara in Käsivarsi Wilderness Area in the Enontekiö area of Lapland

Next on Lapland's tourism agenda is to build up promotion internationally of summer visits to its vast open spaces – Lapland officially boasts the cleanest air in Europe – and its lakes, forests and mountain fells, already familiar and dear to Finnish holidaymakers. Lapland is ideal for summer outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, canoeing and other adventure sports, and accommodation and tour prices are a fraction of those charged in the peak winter season, says Turgala.

“Lapland won't be a mass market like Tenerife or Bangkok – it will be a niche market,” says Kingelin. “But there is still a lot of potential for growth.” Lapland certainly has the room for more tourists to wander.