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FROZEN ESCAPES



Novelty ice hotels continue to grow in popularity as intrepid tourists search for unusual and innovative holiday destinations.

Reporter Marvin Okoye investigates the trend.


Hotels come in all shapes and sizes, but most offer the same basic conveniences — warm rooms, comfortable beds and the promise of a good night's sleep. Some hotels, though, go the extra mile to give their guests an experience that's truly out of the ordinary: they build their rooms entirely from ice.

Ice, of course, is cold, wet and presumably rather uncomfortable to sleep on. It's also prone to disintegration when the sun makes an appearance or the temperature climbs above zero. However, as tourism expert Johanna Burgess explains, ice hotels are not as impractical as they might first seem. In fact, some of the apparent disadvantages of ice hotels are actually key to their popularity.

"The vast majority of ice hotels are transient structures, built during the winter then allowed to melt away to nothing when the summer sunshine arrives. For those fleeting months in between, guests can experience the thrilling novelty of a sub-zero stay — if they're brave enough!"

Courage appears to be a key requirement for those who stay at ice hotels, where room temperatures have to be kept at a chilly -5°C . All visitors are advised to bring plenty of layers to wear, and thick sleeping bags, blankets and even animal furs are often provided.

Although ice hotels are increasingly popular across the world, they are necessarily limited to places that have

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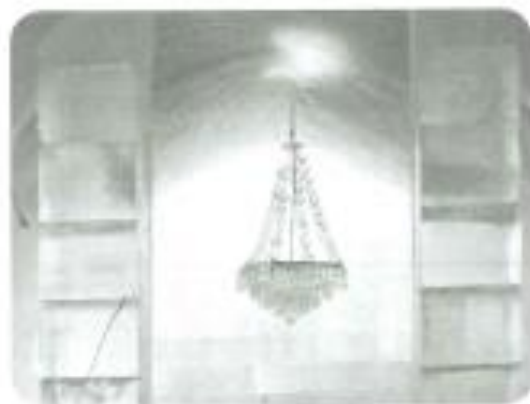
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the right climate, such as Canada, Norway, Sweden and Romania.

In fact, the world's first ice hotel was built 125 miles north of the Arctic Circle, in the Swedish village of Jukkasjärvi on the River Torne. The hotel was built in 1989, and every winter since then people from across the world have gathered in Jukkasjärvi to create a new hotel, each more extraordinary than the one before.

The River Torne is a plentiful source of building materials for the Jukkasjärvi ice hotel, which is constructed from huge blocks of ice from the river, each of which weighs in at a whopping two tonnes. Like most ice hotels, the hotel in Jukkasjärvi also makes use of another natural construction material — 'snice', a snow-ice mixture that acts as a sort of glue.

You might think that all of this would make for a delicate structure, but that's not the case — with their thick walls and careful construction, ice hotels are as strong and reliable as any other building, provided the weather doesn't cause any unexpected upsets.



There's one challenge that looms large during the construction of an ice hotel. Rooms have to be built at top speed in order to make the most of the winter season and enable the hotels to welcome paying guests for as many weeks as possible. However, it's also important that the hotels are safe to stay in, so lots of careful thought has to go into their design and construction. This planning takes time — ice hotels must always tread the line between speed and safety.



On top of the work required to build the structures themselves, it's not unusual for ice hotels to be decorated with carvings and sculptures, which are the product of many hours spent carefully shaping and etching the frosty substance. In Jukkasjärvi, for example, hand-carved works of ice-art are scattered throughout the hotel — previous designs have ranged from frozen dragons and polar bears to a London Underground train carriage. Hundreds of artists apply every year to create these magical masterpieces, but the vast majority are rejected. The ever-changing creative workforce means that each reincarnation of the hotel is completely different, and it's this, in addition to its novelty factor,

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which keeps guests coming back year after year.

Kevin Vernet, a French student who visited his first ice hotel last year, was amazed by the unique environment he discovered there.

“Where else can you relax in a fairy-tale carriage carved entirely from ice, or sleep surrounded by a menagerie of frozen animals?” he points out. “And next year it’ll be something new entirely!”



Essex-born Carrie Tollington, who has spent every Christmas for the last 20 years in an ice hotel, is quick to agree with Kevin’s assessment.

“It’s an experience like no other,” she explains. “You don’t even notice the temperature after a while — I’m usually far too busy to realise how cold it is!”

When it comes to keeping guests occupied, ice hotels have an undeniable advantage. Many offer visitors the opportunity to try out a host of winter pursuits, such as dog sledding, skiing or snowmobiling. Inevitably, lots of ice hotels are located very far north,

which also makes them perfect places to venture out at night and catch a glimpse of the elusive Northern Lights — a spectacular natural light show which consists of ghostly waves of coloured light dancing in darkened skies.



Of course, outdoor pursuits aren’t everyone’s cup of tea, and so some hotels also put on less adventurous activities for which guests don’t have to leave the comfort of the indoors. For example, visitors often have the opportunity to attend ice sculpting workshops, where they can try their hand at creating their very own frozen works of art. What’s more, there’s often the welcome relief of a scorching indoor sauna or hot tub, where guests can steam or soak to their hearts’ content.

Building an entire hotel from ice might seem like an odd concept at first, but don’t let their apparent lack of comfort put you off. As it turns out, ice hotels can be a fantastic escape for anyone, whether you’re seeking a unique adventure or a relaxing winter break. Just don’t forget your coat!

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