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THE ACTRESS-TURNED-ENTREPRENEUR
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Wanderlust

LAST WORDS ON WHERE WE TRAVEL AND WHY



THE REINDEER GOD

PHOTO AND TEXT BY LOLA AKINMADE ÅKERSTRÖM

“We don’t herd reindeer,” Sami elder Anders Kärrstedt explained to me during a visit to the Nutti Sámi Siida Reindeer Lodge in Swedish Lapland. “They herd us.”

It was in that moment I fully understood the depth of the connection between the Sami, nature and their reindeer.

I remembered my first time visiting their domain, during the winter market in Jokkmokk. Fifteen degrees below zero found me rigorously rubbing my hands to keep warm. It was early February, and I was inside the Arctic Circle at this border village—population roughly 3,000—where the world’s largest indigenous Sami festival and market has been held continuously for more than 400 years.

The Sami are an indigenous people of about 70,000 living in the Arctic and subarctic parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia’s Kola Peninsula, a region collectively known as Sapmi. For centuries, the market served as a trading outpost for exchanging reindeer, skins, fur, crafts and medicinal herbs. Thousands still gather today to witness the market’s reindeer caravan led by Sami elder Per Kuhmunen.

I heard the clanking of bells first; then, against the stark

white landscape, flashes of red and blue emerged. Members of Kuhmunen’s family unit—called a Sami “siida”—were adorned in ceremonial attire called “gakti.” His grandchildren wore embroidered belts, boots and gloves made from reindeer skin and fur.

Pulling the sleds were rare white reindeer with antlers reaching dramatically toward the sky like tree branches dusted with snow. It is estimated that only one to two in every 100 reindeer is born white.

As the convoy stopped to collect itself, I inched closer to the lead white reindeer, careful not to startle him. He stood motionless, only his eyes trailing me as I moved closer. He wasn’t afraid—it seemed he had never been.

That encounter remained with me and fueled my interest in the Sami. Two years later, Anders would explain to me that they didn’t herd reindeer because they—the reindeer—were in full control.

Another Sami member, Nils Nutti, told me stories of the legend of the reindeer god—the sacred white reindeer his ancestors worshipped. Their forefathers believed the white reindeer had created the world. The beauty of the procession, the reverence, my own fear and awe: It all made sense now. **M**