

Darkness begone! Lights ward off Nordic winter blues

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Each year, Old Man Winter drops his curtain of darkness over the Nordic countries, not lifting it again until April when spring bathes the region in sunlight and nature comes back to life.

At this time of year, when night falls as early as 2:00 pm (1300 GMT) and lasts until about 9:00 am (0800 GMT) in Oslo, Helsinki and

Stockholm, people ward off the gloom by lighting up their lives as many ways as they can.

Even daytime brings only a slightly lighter shade of grey during the darkest weeks before the winter solstice in December, when skies are often overcast in the three capitals.

Daylight is even more elusive farther north. In the Swedish mining town of Kiruna above the Arctic Circle, the sun never rises around the [winter solstice](#).

"Everything is grey, grey, grey! And so cold!" At 50, Birgitta Ohrling has never gotten used to Stockholm's long dark winters.

Unable to do anything about the weather outside, the bubbly blonde started her own Nirvana wellness centre in the Swedish capital, creating an artificial summer to chase away the winter doldrums.

For 20 euros (\$22) an hour, visitors to the "sunroom" can bask in warming rays from special light therapy lamps, as the mercury hits a balmy 35 degrees C (95 F)—a far cry from the freezing temperatures outside.

The heat is only half of what you'd experience in a hot sauna, but the sunchairs, the wall mural of a sandy beach, and the sound of waves gently lapping the shores help create an aura of warmth and calm, and work wonders at fighting off the blues.

Visitors leaving the centre step outside looking a little dazed, rosy-cheeked as if waking from a long sleep yet invigorated and ready to face more of the dark winter.

The high dosage of lux—a unit for measuring illumination—in the

centre's special lamps help chase away the sleep hormone [melatonin](#), giving people more energy.

Up to 90 percent of Swedes suffer to some degree from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), also known as winter depression. The condition is characterised by sadness, lethargy, and increased alcohol and sweets consumption, according to Baba Pendse, a psychiatrist specialised in the disorder.

City bathed in white lights

Many in the region try to counter the effects of the enveloping darkness with light therapy sessions or by taking cures of extra vitamin D, which is essential for growth and fighting off cardiovascular disease.

In November, Stockholm registered only 46 hours of sunlight, just over half the amount in Paris but still nine times more than the paltry five hours registered in Stockholm in November last year.

But not everyone needs a special cure to combat the darkness: for most people, regular lunchtime strolls or weekend cross-country skiing sessions are enough to get their fill of light.

The Nordic passion for decorative white lights during Advent—the four Sundays leading up to Christmas—also helps most people charge their feel-good batteries.

Starting in late November, stars and special Advent candlesticks glow in almost every window in Stockholm homes, shops and offices, while facades, trees and even tree trunks are swept in strings of white electric lights.

Large moose and reindeer light sculptures illuminate the city's central

squares, as everyone waits for the first real snowfall to amplify the natural winter light.

On December 13, Sweden's love affair with light reaches its pinnacle as the country celebrates Saint Lucia Day.

The festival of light honours an Italian martyr whose name is derived from "Lux", the Latin word for light, and who was meant to chase away the dark spirits on the longest night of the year under the Julian calendar.

To this day, young girls across the country compete for the honour of being a "Lucia".

Joined by their attendants, the Lucias rise early in the morning and, wearing a crown of candles in their hair and long white robes with a red sash, they sing Christmas carols at concerts and processions in churches, schools and public locations around the country.

So it should come as no surprise that hordes of light-deprived Swedes each year choose to celebrate Christmas and New Year's Eve ... in sundrenched spots like Thailand and the Canary Islands.

More than 300,000 Swedes leave the country for the holidays each year.

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