

Posted on Sat, Dec. 20, 2003

## Layoffs hit elves at Arctic SantaPark

By **MATTI HUUHTANEN**  
Associated Press

**HELSINKI, Finland** - Santa's workshop may not be the joyous place it was in years past for the tens of thousands of tourists expected to visit northern Finland this winter. Facing a blizzard of debt, Saint Nick laid off many of the elves who work at the SantaPark attraction near the Arctic Circle.

"I feel really dejected, because being an elf is part of my identity," said Milja Vilmila, who was told her job as an elf helping Santa no longer existed. "Something will definitely be missing this Christmas."

Business is booming in Lapland, a vast area known as the last wilderness in Europe where traditionally nomadic Samis - or Lapps - herd reindeer. But SantaPark, which has accumulated \$550,000 in debt in its five years of operation, has only seen visits decline.

"The work is seasonal so we have to cut costs in all possible ways," said Wille Rajala, managing director of the tourist attraction 520 miles north of Helsinki.

SantaPark is open from November to January, and briefly during summer for visitors who want to see the area when the sun doesn't set for several weeks.

The park is a vast cave which doubles as an air raid shelter, contains a carousel, elves' booths that sell trinkets and souvenirs, and a restaurant. It has yet to post a profit.

Company officials are confident Santa lovers will respond. For now, they have little choice but to tighten Santa's belt.

"We used to have 120 people on a monthly salary, which was ridiculous. Now we are down to three full-timers," Rajala said

Saturday. Just 12 people staff the attraction now.

Finnish children believe Santa hails from a mountain in Lapland. And the Nordic country has cultivated the idea that Santa is Finnish and that he makes toys there.

Last year, more than 600,000 people visited Lapland - three times the number who live there. Santa's post office in Rovaniemi, the capital of Finnish Lapland, received 600,000 letters from around the world.

The number of registered hotel nights spent by foreign visitors in Lapland during December and January has jumped from 76,700 in 1995-1996 to 215,000 last year.

Tourism officials expect a new December record this year of more than 100,000 foreign visitors, with at least 380 chartered flights, mostly from Britain. Last December, 52,000 British tourists spent \$13.6 million in Lapland.

When it was in operation, even the Concorde flew direct from London to Rovaniemi on the Arctic Circle, which has a runway equipped for military aircraft that patrol the 790-mile border Finland shares with Russia.

But that hasn't helped SantaPark, which has been accused of overstaffing and mismanagement. Tourists are checking out Santa's post office, the Arctic museum and reindeer farms instead.

Darren Allsopp paid \$1,240 to bring his wife and two children from Nottingham, England, on a day trip to visit Santa and see Lapland.

"The world has changed quite a bit ... not always for the better," Allsopp said. "The most important thing is to find peace and calm and think about what you can do to help others."

### **On the Web:**

**SantaPark:** [www.santapark.com](http://www.santapark.com)