

## **Father Christmas: Planner of the 'Pole**

**Marc Lohez**

*Since the 1960s, the legend of Father Christmas has been a driving force for Lapland's territorial development. The image of the jolly man in red, used initially to promote tourism in this remote region, has become an argument for the construction of technology parks. As the festive season approaches, Marc Lohez considers the effects and the sustainability of the territorial marketing of Christmas.*

In true Dickens style, the spirit of Christmas seems to have changed the destiny of Rovaniemi, the capital of Finnish Lapland. In 1944, the German army left the city in ruins; some 50 years earlier, Lapland had been struck by one of the worst famines in Europe, forcing thousands of Finns to emigrate to the United States – a country which, in return, would provide one of the key players in Rovaniemi's future success: Father Christmas.

### **Adopting Saint Nick**

American illustrators gave a physical form to this character, whose origins lie in a poem written in New York in 1822, attributed to theologian Clement Clark Moore. They then gave him a home – the North Pole – sometime in the 1880s. Early on, the Finnish adopted the image of American Father Christmas as the embodiment of their gift-bringer, *Joulupukki*. And later, as the children of the post-war boom decades started sending letters to Santa Claus, thousands of festive missives from all over the world began arriving in Finland. In 1976, the Finnish government decided to move the postal service responsible for Christmas mail to Rovaniemi – despite the fact that Finnish radio presenter Markus Rautio had been telling young Finns for years that Father Christmas lived with his elves and reindeer on the Lappish mountain of Korvatunturi, adjacent to the Russian border; the Finnish authorities had placed Santa's office several hundred kilometres from his home.

### **The land of Christmas...**

The idea of transforming Lapland into the Land of Father Christmas (*Joulupukin Maa*) also dates back to the 1960s – and corresponds to a desire to develop tourism in a region whose traditional industries of forestry and mining were struggling to provide sufficient jobs and retain its inhabitants – and, in particular, a project to create a theme park in Rovaniemi. The establishment of the Christmas postal service in Rovaniemi was the first step. The Lappish capital was not just chosen for its administrative role: the city was also home to a long-haul airport, and so controlled the main route to the north of Lapland and the North Cape. As the last major settlement before the quasi-desert of the Finnish Arctic, it had for a long time been a mere transit point for tourists, before its proximity to the Arctic Circle became an asset in the 1950s. A few kilometres north of the city centre, the point where the main road northwards enters the Arctic Circle – signposted, of course –

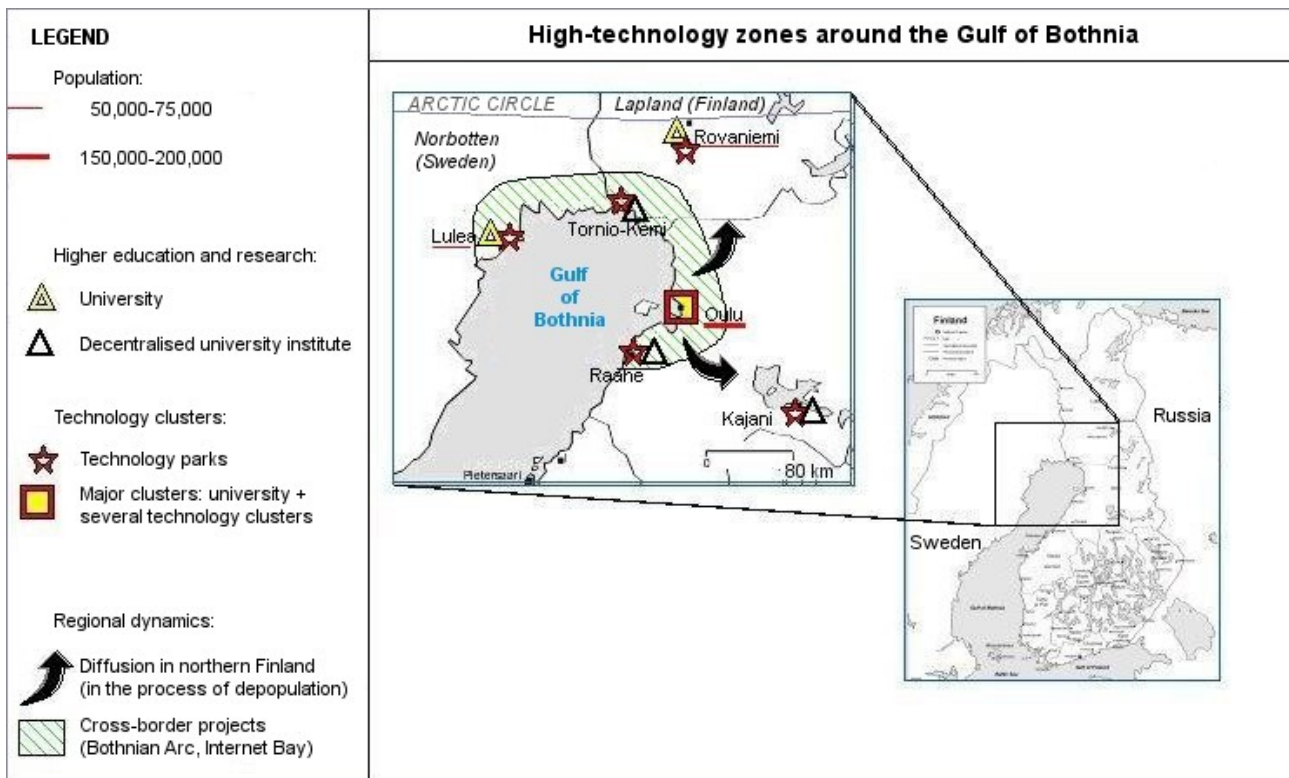
has become the backdrop for photos of Arctic explorers and the place where the city's most prestigious guests have been welcomed since Eleanor Roosevelt's visit in 1950 (Pretes 1995).

This location on the edge of the Arctic Circle and the wholesale adoption of the American Father Christmas are what have made Rovaniemi and Lapland the definitive Land of Christmas. In 1985, Santa Claus Village was inaugurated in the Arctic Circle. Although it opened a year after its Swedish counterpart, Rovaniemi rapidly defeated its Nordic competitors and now dominates the world of Yuletide tourism. A quarter of a century on, the results are impressive. Just inside the Arctic Circle, between the city and the airport, the area's two major attractions can be found: Santa Claus Village and Santa Park, an underground theme park offering a host of activities associated with visiting Father Christmas.

However, the theme park, located in a former civil-defence shelter, has experienced a number of economic setbacks since its launch in 1998. It is open only at the height of the winter and summer seasons. By contrast, Santa Claus Village, just two kilometres away, is open all year round and includes Father Christmas's post office and a forest-themed shopping centre (built as a "village" surrounded by pine trees, with log-cabin interiors, etc.). A more recent construction is *Joulukka*, a wooden chalet deep in the forest dedicated to the traditions and magic of Christmas. Here, children can meet Santa Claus in person following a ride in a reindeer-drawn sleigh or on a snowmobile. This initiative shows how Christmas tourism has evolved by taking account of the natural opportunities on offer in the European Far North. These opportunities are increasingly combined with themed mini-breaks, which are particularly popular with British tourists – indeed, a number of direct flights link airports in the British Isles with cities in Lapland. Rovaniemi has also reproduced the recipe for visits to Father Christmas further north, and has even exported it further afield with the creation of a theme park modelled on Santa Claus Village in Heilongjiang in northern China, close to the border with Russia.

### **A touristic and economic cluster for Europe**

As a result of the know-how cultivated in Rovaniemi over the last 25 years, the city can now position itself as a cluster of excellence in the "experience industry", a domain that combines tourism with other leisure and cultural activities and which allow visitors to enjoy a specific experience, notably through multimedia creations. The local university includes a tourism research centre called LEO (Lapland Centre of Expertise for the Experience Industry), which is run by the Finnish economy ministry and promotes innovation in these fields. In addition to this state support, Rovaniemi also benefits from efforts made by Oulu, the largest city in northern Finland, to redirect some of its dynamism (resulting from new technologies) northwards to Lapland, whose population is decreasing: for example, Oulu's technology park, Technopolis, has set up a network of small, specialised technology clusters known as Multipolis.



In Rovaniemi, the Aurora Borealis Technology Centre is specialised in information technology, especially in the field of tourism. It is here that Santa's Technology Park was inaugurated in November 2004. It is located in a zone on the outskirts of Rovaniemi that is structured entirely around the image of Santa Claus, known as the "Christmas Triangle", whose three corners are the airport, Santa Park and Santa Claus Village. The companies that have set up here are involved in applied research and the production of electronic media on the theme of Santa Claus (3D animation, websites, products for mobile phones, etc.), as well as online services such as sending – for a fee – "authentic" personalised letters from Father Christmas. More recently, a mineral extraction and prospecting company moved into premises left by one of the pioneers of this technology cluster, Joulupukki.tv, which produced videos and websites linked to Christmas and tourism.

### The magic of Christmas vs the Lappish desert

Is the departure of this company for a city-centre location a sign that the creation of a territory dedicated to Father Christmas has its limits? Efforts to merge the Lappish capital's image with that of its most famous resident have already been pushed considerably as it is (Hall 2009). The local council has even registered the city's sobriquet ("The Official Hometown of Santa Claus<sup>®</sup>") as a trademark, with the aim of Rovaniemi's Father Christmas being recognised as the "official" Father Christmas of the EU. It is no doubt this kind of territorial marketing that enabled the city of Rovaniemi to merge with the surrounding rural municipality (Rovaniemen maalaiskunta), thereby doubling its population and boosting its economic empowerment. But enthusiasm for all things Christmas may be waning. Were the gloomy forecasts in 2011 (30,000 fewer visitors were expected in Rovaniemi, according to the estimates of certain tourist firm managers<sup>1</sup>) due only to the difficult economic climate, or do they herald the end of the magic of Christmas and a certain disenchantment with Lapland? Declining volumes of snow, owing to global warming, may also have negative effects on Christmas tourism. Consequently, for a number of years now, Rovaniemi has been

<sup>1</sup> See also: <http://www.hs.fi/english/article/Concerns+over+economy+dampen+Christmas+sales/1135269994322>.

seeking to diversify its role as an EU outpost in the Far North, in particular by trying to obtain funding for an EU Arctic information centre, which would be run by the city's university.

However, the city authorities' dynamism and pioneering spirit – which have enabled the local population to grow by attracting young workers and new retirees – are not enough to reverse the demographic decline of Lapland as a whole. The region has been losing tens of thousands of inhabitants since the 1960s and, despite the discovery of numerous deposits of gold and other metals, which have been mined for over five years now, this trend is not set to change direction. The immense municipality of Rovaniemi (8,000 km<sup>2</sup>, or twice the size of Rhode Island) is now home to a third of the 180,000 Finnish Laplanders, but runs the risk of becoming increasingly isolated in Santa's kingdom...

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