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*Ladies

BY JOSH DEAN

ICED OUT

ONE BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT, ON ICE, ACROSS THE VASTNESS OF SWEDEN

At this moment, watching little puffs of breath condense into crystals of ice inches above my nose, I am very much questioning the value of an experience. If you give up halfway through an attempt at something, something that seemed very cool in concept and yet absurdly cold in reality, does it entirely overshadow the effort? Can you still brag about it later? I mean, come on. I've given it two hours. I have pictures. Is that wet reindeer I'm smelling?

Here's your snapshot: I am fully clothed, wearing long johns, jeans, a T-shirt, wool socks, and a silly Nordic hat with strings that dangle over my ears Pippi Longstocking-style. Around me is a sheet cocoon that opens only at one end, and on top of that a cold weather sleeping bag zipped to my chin. Only my face is exposed, staring up at a ceiling made of ice. Around me, walls of ice. Under me, a huge slab of ice covered in reindeer skins that, by their gamey funk, don't seem to have been fumigated.



I am in my \$400 room at Sweden's Icehotel and I am most definitely not sleeping.

I imagine this is what being a corpse would be like, if a corpse were somehow still sentient, and really had to pee. You're in a cold room cast in a creepy blue-ish light, lying on a slab, arms at your side, staring up, unable to move. There you wait until a guy comes in and saws through your breastbone, parting your ribcage to fondle your innards and seek out a cause of death—in this case, overenthusiastic wanderlust, causing delusion and loss of sanity. Clearly I have been watching too much *CSI*.

What makes this all the more insane is that somewhere out there, in the cold and dark Swedish

The funny thing here is that my editor, who has clearly watched too many beer commercials, dispatched me, at least in part, to use the Bentley to attract girls—beautiful blonde girls in fur boots who giggle and then skip naked to the sauna. In reality, you don't see Swedish girls in winter. Or maybe you do, but you can't tell them from the men. Everyone outdoors is en route to the indoors and is covered head to toe in puffy outerwear, hats, and mittens. In this getup, Gisele would look like Roseanne. Maybe even Nathan Lane.

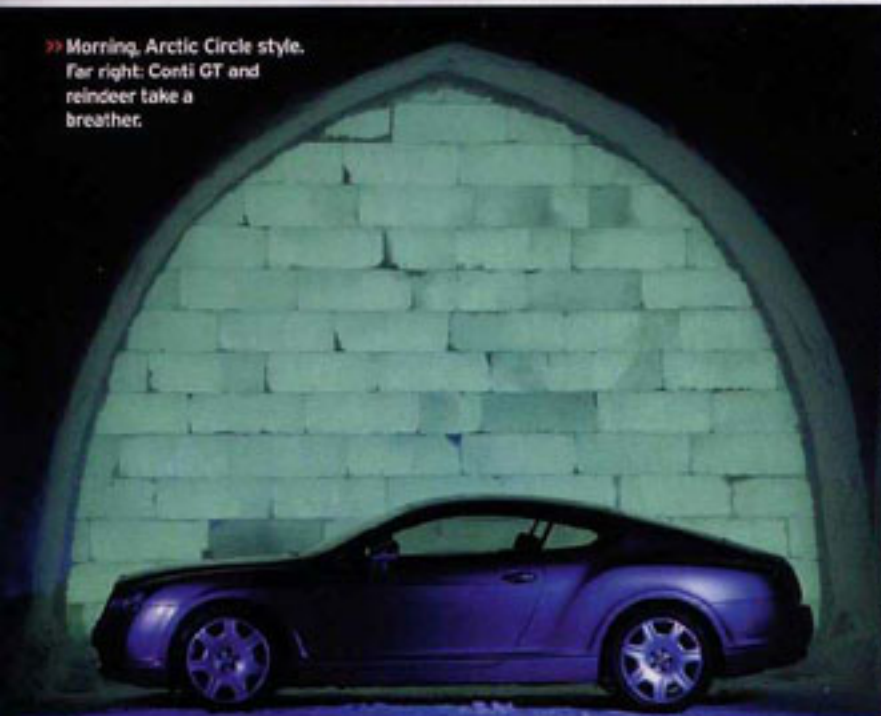
And that's if you could actually see anything. Above the Arctic Circle, there is no light. It's pitch black until 10 a.m. or so, at which time a sort of

And boy is it not. Sure, Nice to St. Tropez may be a nice place to cruise, but northern Sweden and its snowy, pine-lined roads make for a sweeter (or is that Sweder?) driving adventure.

The morning after a mostly sleepless night in the ice hotel, I hopped into my dark green Continental, pushed the start button and sighed as those 12 cylinders and 552 horses roared to life without the slightest cold-weather hangover. Immediately, I forgot about frigid air and wet animal—all was good in the world.

From the ice hotel, it would be a day's drive across the Arctic Circle to Lulea, Sweden's midpoint, and then two shorter days to Stockholm—all the while on the lookout for cops,

» Morning, Arctic Circle style. Far right: Conti GT and reindeer take a breather.



It's pitch black until 10 a.m. or so, at which time a sort of pink-ish, orange-ish dusk

night, is a living room on wheels. Instead of waiting for hypothermia to settle in, driving myself nuts trying to fight off the urge to peel away these complicated layers and melt through the walls with a

stream of urine, I could be swaddled in the softest leather, basking in warm air that streams from portal vents as a back massager embedded in soft heated seats kneads at my back like an overweight cat schooled in the arts of Shiatsu.

That's right, outside is a Bentley Continental GT. Which, unlike my "hotel" room, even has TV (Euro models only).

pink-ish, orange-ish dusk appears on the horizon, sticks around for a few hours and then disappears by 2 in the afternoon. By 3, it's fully dark again—which is bad for depression-prone travelers but good for those who feel guilty drinking while it's still light out.

Not that temperature, or light conditions, have any sort of impact on a Bentley. Inside, it's always high tea.

This Swedish adventure started as a junket for the press. Bentley invited some international media to Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost city, to eat strange meat from plates made of ice, drink high-proof vodka from glasses made of ice, sleep it off on so-called beds made of ice, then drive its \$160,000 cars around on ice to prove that the Continental GT isn't just some South of France cruiser built to expedite Cristal runs to and from P. Diddy's yacht slip.

moose, and beautiful girls, which all seem to share a common disdain for public spaces in winter.

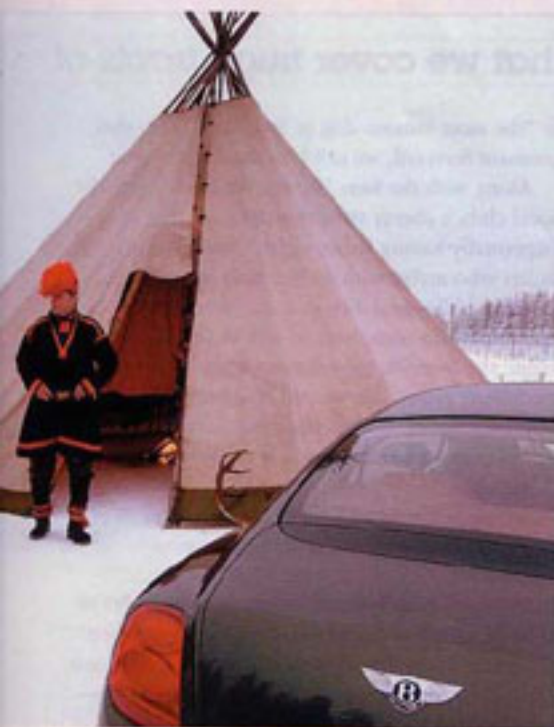
Pushing out from Kiruna, I play with the GT, getting a feel for this powerful steel sled while sliding around turns with some caution. Soon enough, I am bored with caution and my co-driver, an Aussie writer named Jonno, and I are ready to have some fun. We hit 120 on hardpacked snow, skid rally style around curves while doing battle with the GT's twitchy ESP, its orange alert light flicking madly as it admirably fights every slide.

An hour or so into the drive, a flock of birds appears ahead in the road, a dash of pepper on a flat plane of salt. I'm not about to brake now. Surely those stupid birds will lift off. Right about...okay, the birds didn't make it. I guess they learned to gauge approach speeds by studying Volvos. Sorry, guys.



To gain a little perspective and soak in some native culture, we stop at a Saami farm somewhere between Kiruna and Lulea. The Saamis are the long-oppressed native peoples of Lapland, ancient reindeer herders who thrive in the frigid climes of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. They still raise reindeer by the millions, but this farm-owning family makes a few extra bucks hooking up sleds of tourists to ornery reindeers.

A father-son team in traditional garb lashes up a one-antlered reindeer to a wooden sled and hands me the reins. Almost immediately, the animal takes over, yanking the sled around a makeshift track inside the paddock. I can't help



appears on the horizon.

but notice, hanging on to the rope as the deer's hooves kick snow into my face, that I am sitting on a pile of reindeer skins. Is this creature cognizant of the irony? Is he, in a sense, running from his own fate or just taking out some domestic animal aggression, blaming me for his friend's senseless demise? Hold on—how do I stop this thing?

Later, the father regales us with a not-terribly-believable story about traditional Saami medicine men killing bears by hand, drinking the blood from their hearts, and then howling in victory before going to the village mixer to choose a bride. Then a Bentley representative claps his hands and tells us to head back to the cars. "Start your engines," he says.

"Just like Daytona," the Saami kid answers, making me question his whole communing-with-nature schtick.

ICE, ICE BABY

10,000 tons of ice makes for one seriously cool hotel

If, like me, you were raised in a place that had long winters, you probably spent many a day hollowing gigantic piles of snow into cozy-if-chilly backyard hideouts. That's basically the idea with Icehotel (that's right—no "the" required). Every November, as the Torneälven River freezes over, teams of eager Swedes from the town of Jukkasjärvi begin to harvest massive blocks of ice using chainsaws and tractors.

Then, with pointed metal arches acting as frames, they pack the ice into the shape of hotel, fill the gaps with a slushy substance they call Snice, allow it to harden, then remove the arches: Presto—Icehotel!

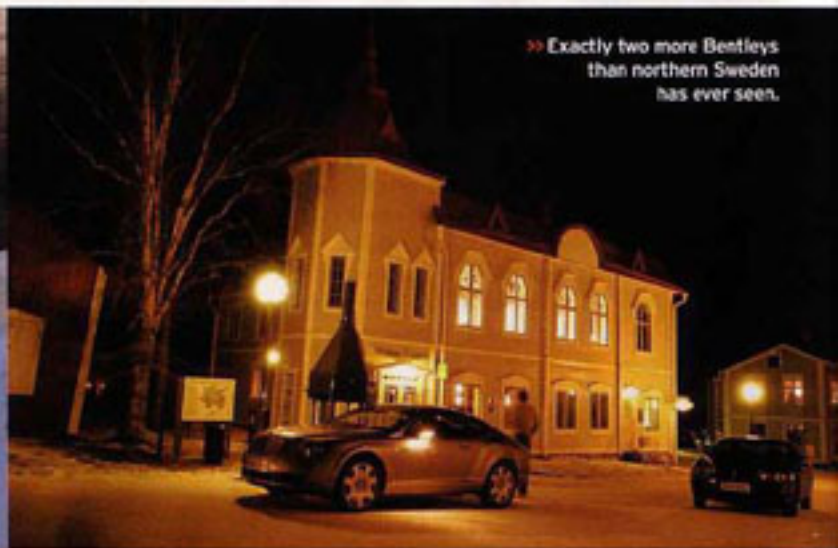
Inside, smaller blocks partition rooms, and huge columns of ice help support the roof. All told 99.8 percent of the hotel is built from frozen river water—in the form of 4,000 tons of ice and 30,000 tons of snow—and by mid-December, Icehotel is open for business. The 2004-05 edition has 85 guest rooms over its 5000 square meters. Must be cheap, right? Ha! Rooms range from \$400 for a double to \$840 for a deluxe suite, customized by a local artist. For that you get a bed of ice covered in reindeer pelts, vodka drinks served in glasses of ice at a very cool bar built of ice, and a glass of warm lingonberry juice at wake-up. By that time, you would probably pay the rack rate again just to get to a warm bed. By April, it is no longer safe to stay at Icehotel, and by June, it goes back into the river. (Locals, in fact, refer to the place as a "loan" from the river.)

Attention Canadians: Icehotel has a sister property in Quebec, now offering frozen beds, plus croissants! Bon voyage! ~JD



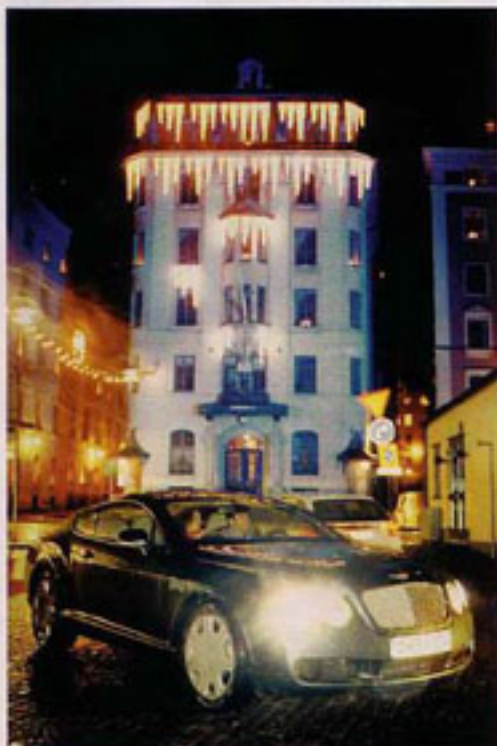
» Icehotel lasts from mid-December until May. No word on whatever becomes of the reindeer pelts.





» Exactly two more Bentleys than northern Sweden has ever seen.

Let loose, the GT swallows the road, biting off miles so fast that we cover huge tracts of



Outside, the GT roars to life again, scaring reindeer and causing the Saami dad to say—unprompted by Bentley PR reps—“It has nice voice. Vroom Vroom.”

Pushing out in a convoy, I find myself struggling to keep the car at a reasonable, law-abiding pace. The gentlest of pushes on the throttle pedal causes an embarrassing lurch—this is not a car meant to go slowly.

“She wants to be shown a good time,” Jonno says.

In Lulea, we turn our cars over to a local Audi dealer for refueling and detailing. Tomorrow, the international press will fly home, and I will push on to Stockholm.

At dinner we meet Tommi, a local guy who takes rich people hunting moose, elk, and bear. Turns out earlier in the year, a man was killed by a bear in the distant woods and the ferocious beast would not relinquish the corpse, no matter how many helicopters came by to buzz the area. So Tommi took his prize hunting dog, a husky, out there and the dog scared off the bear, liberated the body, and became a tabloid star in the process. Several times, people tell me that Tommi’s husky

is “the most famous dog in Sweden.” From that moment forward, we call him the Bear Hunter.

Along with the Bear Hunter, we close down the local club, a cheesy subterranean joint that was supposedly having ladies night. Other than the PR ladies who arrive with us, the club is mostly full of drunk middle-aged men in suits, plus two sort of cute girls who come over to talk to the foreigners while shy Swedish guys dance nervously on our periphery, eyeing the women but never approaching. At 2 a.m., the joint closes and Tommi says our only option is the local Hell’s Angels bar.

Seeing as the Most Famous Dog in Sweden is at home sleeping, bed seems the safer option.

Lulea and points south were in the midst of a heat wave. No one could recall a time when the ground was bereft of snow this late in the year. Driving from here out would be on clean roads—not that that’s a bad thing. A Socialist country, Sweden taxes its citizens at one of the highest rates in the world, and the benefits of that—in addition to free health care, up to one year of maternity



» Northern Lights. And not the kind you find in Amsterdam. Above, left: Stockholm, heavily clothed Babe Central.



and paternity leave, and cheap, abundant public transportation—are excellent roads, free of potholes. Which gives us a great chance to let the Bentley stretch its legs.

Let loose, the GT swallows the road, biting off miles so fast that we cover huge tracts of Sweden without even noticing that time has passed. Needing only a few meters to overtake cars, I make short jogs into the left lane as we turn the countryside into a blur of green and brown—hitting an indicated 260 km/h (160 mph) on some straightaways. Cops are nonexistent here; speed is tracked by cameras on poles that never seem to flash. At one point, giddy to be so easily pushing 160 mph with nary a vibration, I point out my speed to Mats, a photographer who is my new copilot for the jog to Stockholm.

Sweden without even noticing that time has passed.

He laughs nervously. "I would prefer if you kept that sort of thing to yourself."

If I have a complaint about the Bentley, it's that there are only two, inconveniently placed cup holders. If one is to drink coffee at high speeds, one should be able to reach down and grab said coffee without averting gaze from the road. One would hate to T-bone a moose. The GT's cup holders are under the armrest and thus a bit of a hazard to navigate at speed. "Our drivers don't need coffee," is what the Stockholm dealer told me. Apparently most Bentley drivers don't hang around with the Bear Hunter.

Nearing Stockholm, I realized why there are no cops. They're unnecessary. Entering speed zones, Swedes actually slow down. At one point, unable to find a clear spot to pass, I followed a Volvo into a small village. At the village's edge, the Volvo slowed down to exactly 50km/h, a speed he maintained until he reached the town's other edge, at which point he sped back up to 90 but not until he'd passed the new speed limit sign.

Then I passed him. Sucker.

All good things must come to an end. I have reservations at one of Stockholm's swankiest hotels, and I could give a shit. I am ready to move into the Bentley, put my chair back, turn on the massager, and watch some television, beamed straight to the dash, while waiting for the spring thaw and the inevitable return of the naked girls who would flood the streets in celebration of sunlight's return.

Alas, I have only an hour of quality time in Stockholm before the car has to be given back.

Parting is such sweet sorrow. Mats and I hand the keys to the sales manager, a bearded fellow in a natty suit, who we would later learn, is the King's nephew. (Appropriate career choice, I think.)

And then, like everyone else, we decide to have

a drink, followed by another, and another, and then some reindeer steak. Or was it moose? At that point, who cares?

It finally snowed at 1 a.m. that night as we leave Lubelius, a café-cum-bar owned by a friendly

Swede who announces that the joint is closing by singing it in a full-on opera bellow.

Mats, worried that he'd gotten almost no shots of girls around the car, has a moment of drunken clarity. "You know," he says. "I don't think that car is a chick magnet, really. It's too understated."

He's right. This isn't a flashy showcar. It's as if an Arnage got drunk and seduced a Ferrari. Waking up in a fog after the one-night stand, the Arnage is impregnated with the Italian's saucy aggression but has not taken on the embarrassing hairstyle or desire to wear fingerless gloves. Their lovechild is a supercar you can take home to mom. In that way, it's like a Swedish girl, beautiful and polite on the outside, but full of surprises once you get under the hood.

Not that I'd know. *mph*

Call me the Bear Hunter.



CUAL ES MAS MACHO?

Bentley Continental GT vs. Dogsled vs. Reindeer Sleigh

BENTLEY

HORSEPOWER: 552
TOP SPEED: 190 mph
FUEL ECONOMY: 11 city/18 hwy
WINTER PERFORMANCE: Heavy body plus all-wheel drive equals surprisingly stout handling, especially on snow. No car is going to save your ass on glare ice
SPECIAL FEATURES: UHF TV in-dash (not available in the U.S. and not so useful in rural Sweden), massaging seats, in-dash Breitling clock
TEST NOTES: Drives like a Ferrari, feels like a limousine. Would it kill them to put some cup holders on the dash?

DOGSLED

HORSEPOWER: Eight Siberian Huskies (conversion factor unknown)
TOP SPEED: 20 mph
FUEL ECONOMY: Runs all day on two servings of kibble
WINTER PERFORMANCE: Excellent on snow and ice. On day tested, temperature was around 28 degrees F. According to musher, "The dogs and I prefer it a little colder"
SPECIAL FEATURES: Reclining passenger seat, lined with fur. Comes with driver, known as the musher
TEST NOTES: Nimble, though lags a bit on hills. Some rear-end slicing through turns. Needs constant encouragement. Not for the meek-voiced, nor the strep-throated

REINDEER SLEIGH

HORSEPOWER: One, though more technically it's reindeer power (rp)
TOP SPEED: 25 mph, in bursts
FUEL ECONOMY: Excellent. Lives outdoors and eats grass
WINTER PERFORMANCE: Hoofs really dig in snow. Animal, however, a bit stubborn. Stopping greatly enhanced by steering into trees and fences
SPECIAL FEATURES: Lined with skin of friend or ancestor—provides ample incentive for deer to run faster
TEST NOTES: Terrifying. Reindeer takes off as handler releases tether and stops only after running into fence. Seat at hoof level results in heavy snow spray. Suggest future models offer windshield



MAT'S RUDOLPH PHOTOGRAPHY

