Imagine a hotel, where the inside temperature is below freezing and everything, from the rooms to the furniture, is made out of snow and ice. A hotel that is rebuilt from scratch every winter and that melts as soon as spring temperatures warm up the air. You don’t think this is possible? An urban myth perhaps?

Then let’s travel north, 200 kilometres inside the Arctic Circle, to the small village of Jukkasjärvi, in northern Lapland, Sweden.

Here, the free flowing Torne River carries water that is among the purest in Europe. Arctic temperatures and gentle movement create crystal clear ice—the building material for the truly unique and magical ICEHOTEL. In November, after the first ice has formed and the first layer of snow has fallen, construction for this year’s ICEHOTEL will begin.

A unique idea

For many years, the tourist operator Jukkas, present day ICEHOTEL, focused on the summer season and the many outdoor activities the region has to offer. In the 1980s the company decided to find a way to also take advantage of the dark and cold winter days. The abundance of ice and snow inspired the idea to invite artists to the area. In spring of 1990 an exhibition was set up in a specially built igloo, named Arctic Hall, to showcase the ephemeral art, which attracted many curious visitors to the area.

The idea of ICEHOTEL was born, after a group of guests, equipped with reindeer hides and sleeping bags, decided to use the igloos as accommodation. Nineteen years later, ICEHOTEL consists of about 90 unique rooms, the famous ABSOLUT IceBar, a cinema with an ice screen, an ice art exhibition hall, an IceChurch and is world famous for its unique concept, its fantastic works of art and its extraordinary experiences.

Building the ICEHOTEL

The building process is complex and long and, naturally, dependent on Mother Nature. Construction usually begins in mid-November when large clouds of snow start to drift along the Torne River. Under the direction of the ICEHOTEL Art & Design Group an international team of architects, builders, artists and designers then starts to create a version of ICEHOTEL that is different each year.

At first, snow is sprayed on large steel forms and allowed to freeze for a couple of days. After the forms have been removed, the maze of free-standing snow corridors is divided with walls in order to create the different size rooms. Under the right conditions, ice can be worked just like any other material. Bulldozers stack the blocks of ice, that are either sawed directly from the Torne River or created by compressing snow into wooden forms, on top of one another—just like one would building a brick wall. One block is supported by another and the weight of the ice blocks ensures structural adhesion. The ice is then shaped with special tools, like chain saws, cutters and drills for the rough work, and special instruments from Japan for the details. At last, fire is used to smooth the ice. The ICEHOTEL covers about 6,000 square metres and is built of approximately 10,000 tons of crystal clear ice and 30,000 tons of snow. The entire structure is naturally cooled by the arctic temperatures and melts back into the river with the onset of spring.

Rooms for rent

The indoor temperature at ICEHOTEL is usually somewhere between -4°C to -9°C, depending on the number of guests and the outdoor temperature, which can be as cold as -40°C. The beds are made of snow and ice, covered with wooden boards, a mattress, reindeer pelts and specially-designed thermal sleeping bags. Just as in any regular hotel, a range of room types, from a basic double room to a deluxe suite, is available. The rooms are decorated with desks, chairs, lamps, sculptures, windows, doors and pillars, created by the ice artists.

Since the temperatures are of course well below freezing, guests of the ICEHOTEL are given a collection of gear including a thermal sleeping bag and a full jumpsuit made of beaver nylon. Most guests usually only spend one night in the actual ICEHOTEL. For longer stays, ordinary heated hotel rooms are available in the nearby Aurora House, which is made from conventional building material.

A bar on the rocks

The ABSOLUT IceBar, just as the rest of the hotel, is different from year to year. Everything, including the glasses, is specially designed and made of ice. Together, ICEHOTEL and ABSOLUT created the world’s first ABSOLUT IceBar in Jukkasjärvi in 1994. ABSOLUT IceBars can also be found in Stockholm, London, Tokyo and Copenhagen, each bar build with the original ice from the Torne River. For a culinary experience you can visit the two restaurants in Jukkasjärvi. The ICEHOTEL Restaurant serves Lappish gourmet food with raw materials on plates made of ice and The Old Homestead Restaurant offers an experience of Torndalen and Sami Culture.

Swedish officials view the ICEHOTEL as a sort of national treasure because it fits into the government’s project of educating people around the world about how clean water is essential for a healthy environment. Replicas of the ICEHOTEL can be found in cold regions around the world, like Finland, Norway, Alaska, Canada and Greenland.

This year, as the hotel will open its doors for the eleventh season, many curious visitors from all over the world are expected to visit this magnificent piece of art. And despite the fact that the experience does not come cheap, the waiting list is several years long. So if staying at the ICEHOTEL sounds like an adventure you are ready to take on, we suggest you plan early, pack right and expect to be enchanted!