

# VILLAGE VIEW

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## LIFE AT THE NORTH POLE

The North Pole's darkest longest night of all comes just at Christmastime. On Christmas Day the sun barely shows over the rim of the earth, a brilliant glowing ball far to the south turning the snow-covered mountains and icy wastes to a glittering rosy land of magic. Nights are very dark, very cold, very snowy and windy, and very long.

The North Pole, of course, is where Santa Claus and his dear little wife live in a snug warm house, together with all the other elves, Santa's helpers. The Claus family and the elves have no neighbors and hardly ever have company, but they're never lonely or blue for they're busy from right after New Year's Day until Christmas Eve, the whole year through, preparing for Santa's journey.

Their house nestles against the southern side of a towering mountain of solid ice; it looks tiny from the outside, but inside, it's surprising how much space there is. In one big room, called the family room, Mrs. Claus cooks and serves the meals. Then, there's a wing with many small rooms, one for each of the elves. Another wing contains the workshops, the busiest part of the house. In the barn under the house, the reindeer live and the sleigh is stored. The snow is so deep and the drifts so high that sometimes only the roof and chimney top are to be seen.

On the second day of January every year, Santa calls everyone into the family room; when all are assembled, plans are laid for the next Christmas. First, a census must be made of all the children to be remembered when Christmastime comes again and, because there are certain to be some newborn children by this time next year, the number of babies to be added must be calculated. Long years of experience have given Santa Claus an almost uncanny ability to estimate how many girls and boys he must plan for.

Next come decisions about toys they'll work on, and gifts they'll make. New boots and shoes, sneakers and slippers, jogging and running gear; scarves, mittens, hats, sweaters, gloves and socks; dolls and doll carriages, miniature trucks and cars, games of Zap, Flat Cat, and Pass the Nuts, roller skates, basketballs, footballs, baseball gloves and bats; fishing rods, sleds, books, Creature Cantinas; model planes and boats; train sets and tennis rackets; shirts and blouses; jackets and ski pants; bracelets, belts, rings, pins, dollhouses, and every other thing, dreamed-of and as-yet-to-be-dreamed-of by children the world around.

And once the plans are made, work commences. Everyone falls to with a will and through all the remaining months of the year, work continues.

In January and February Santa's helpers work a full day except when the sun shines. Sunny winter days are holidays for elves; Santa and Mrs. Claus and all the other elves bundle up in their warmest clothes, take the reindeer out of the barn, and all go outside to enjoy the sun and fresh air. Sometimes, even when it's dark, Santa declares a holiday because the Northern Lights are gleaming and glowing behind their mountain. Everyone enjoys watching the glorious displays and returns to work more industriously than ever, refreshed with recreation and exercise in the cold crisp air.

As Spring comes to the North Pole, the sun creeps higher into the sky, day by day; now the elves struggle eagerly to meet their quotas. Piles of finished toys and gifts mount on the shelves in the workshops. Summer follows Spring and, by mid-June, when the sun hardly sets at all, there are nearly twenty-four hours of daylight. At this time, Santa and his helpers take inventory and, if they're on schedule, everyone gets a two-week vacation.

Some elves leave the North Pole and come down south where we live to check on the estimates of new babies. Some visit family and friends in different parts of the world, and while they're traveling watch to see how children are behaving.

Each elf brings with him a page from Santa's book. When he sees a little girl helping her Mother or a little boy minding his Daddy, he makes an entry on his page. Back again at the North Pole, he puts his page in Santa's book. That's how Santa keeps his list up-to-date.

Because it wouldn't do for everyone to leave the reindeer, different vacation times are assigned to each elf; there's always someone traveling, coming or going, bringing back news of the big world and pages for Santa's book.

The most remarkable thing about elves is their ability to change size. Only when elves are at the North Pole are they very small; while among humans, elves become the same size people are, so no one knows they really are elves. When friends or relatives visit you, they might actually be part of Santa's crew; no one is ever sure.

Even Santa changes size; that's why we see him in so many different shapes. People can't do this; only elves. Children grow larger, year by year, of course, but they never grow smaller.

After Summer turns to Fall, all the elves regroup at the North Pole, and there's the final rush to complete everything so no child will be forgotten or without a gift on Christmas.

By December 23rd, the workshops are filled with presents. Benches and shelves are loaded, the floor is piled high, corners spill over with packages. Even the reindeer's barn is crowded. Santa's sleigh has had its yearly coat of paint and is waxed and polished til you can see your reflection in its surface. The runners are sharp and gleaming. Santa's lap robe has been filled with fresh penguin down to keep him warm as he flies through the cold starry night, carrying his bundles from rooftop to rooftop.

In preparation for his journey, Santa sleeps all night and all day before setting forth. While he sleeps, the other elves pack all the year's hard work into the sleigh. They give the reindeer a big helping of special North Pole moss that has marvelous vitamins and nutrients for extra strength and stamina.

At sunset on Christmas Eve, Mrs. Claus rings a bell and Santa wakes, ready to don his crimson jacket, pull on his jet black boots, buckle his wide belt, comb his beautiful white beard, settle his red stocking cap securely upon his head, wrap his muffler around his neck, plunge his hands into furry mitts, and set out for his Christmas Eve visit to every house where a child sleeps and dreams of Santa Claus.

The sleigh creaks as he climbs in, the reindeer paw and prance. And then, they're off! Santa has great distances to cover and much to do before dawn. The night is dark and long but only if he flies at the speed of light can he complete his journey by sun-up on Christmas Day.

In his absence, Mrs. Claus prepares a feast for his homecoming. It's just like Christmas dinner at your house, except there's reindeer milk to drink and wedges of reindeer cheese served with the apple pie. The elves make the barn ready for the returning reindeer. They give the stalls an extra special cleaning, fill all the water troughs with clear cool water and the bins to overflowing with a rich mixture of oats and reindeer moss.

Just as first light streaks the sky on Christmas morning, the tinkle of sleighbells is heard across the frozen wastes at the North Pole. A tired but happy Santa Claus brings his team of reindeer straight in for a perfect landing. The elves rush to meet the sleigh, taking everything in hand. They unharness the reindeer and lead them into the barn. Each receives a good rub-down, a lump of sugar as a special award for a job well done, and has his antlers polished til they glisten.

As Santa climbs from the sleigh, the elves slide it into the barn, and Mrs. Claus puts Christmas dinner on the table. Soon everyone gathers 'round to hear Santa report all he saw and heard on his long flight. He tells of bitter winds, blowing snow, icy storms; he talks of sleepy little towns and villages where he left gifts at every house; he describes great cities, lit all night through, with skyscrapers so tall the reindeer must navigate between the buildings for they can't lift the sleigh over the tops; he mentions lonely farms surrounded by acres and acres of fields.

From his bundle (which went off in the sleigh overburdened with presents and has come back almost as full) he brings out sack after sack of goodies and snacks left for him on many a hearth. All the elves share the delicious cookies and candy and cakes, topping off their dinner until they can eat no more. With each sack, Santa names the girl or boy who remembered a treat for St. Nicholas.

The feast finally ended, the last cookie crumb gobbled up, Santa rises from the table, stretches and yawns. Now he'll have a good long sleep before calling his helpers together again on the day after New Year's. With a warm and loving smile for each elf, and a kiss for Mrs. Claus, Santa exclaims for the last time this year, "A Merry Christmas to all, and to all, a Good Night."