



View from the Koli National Park.

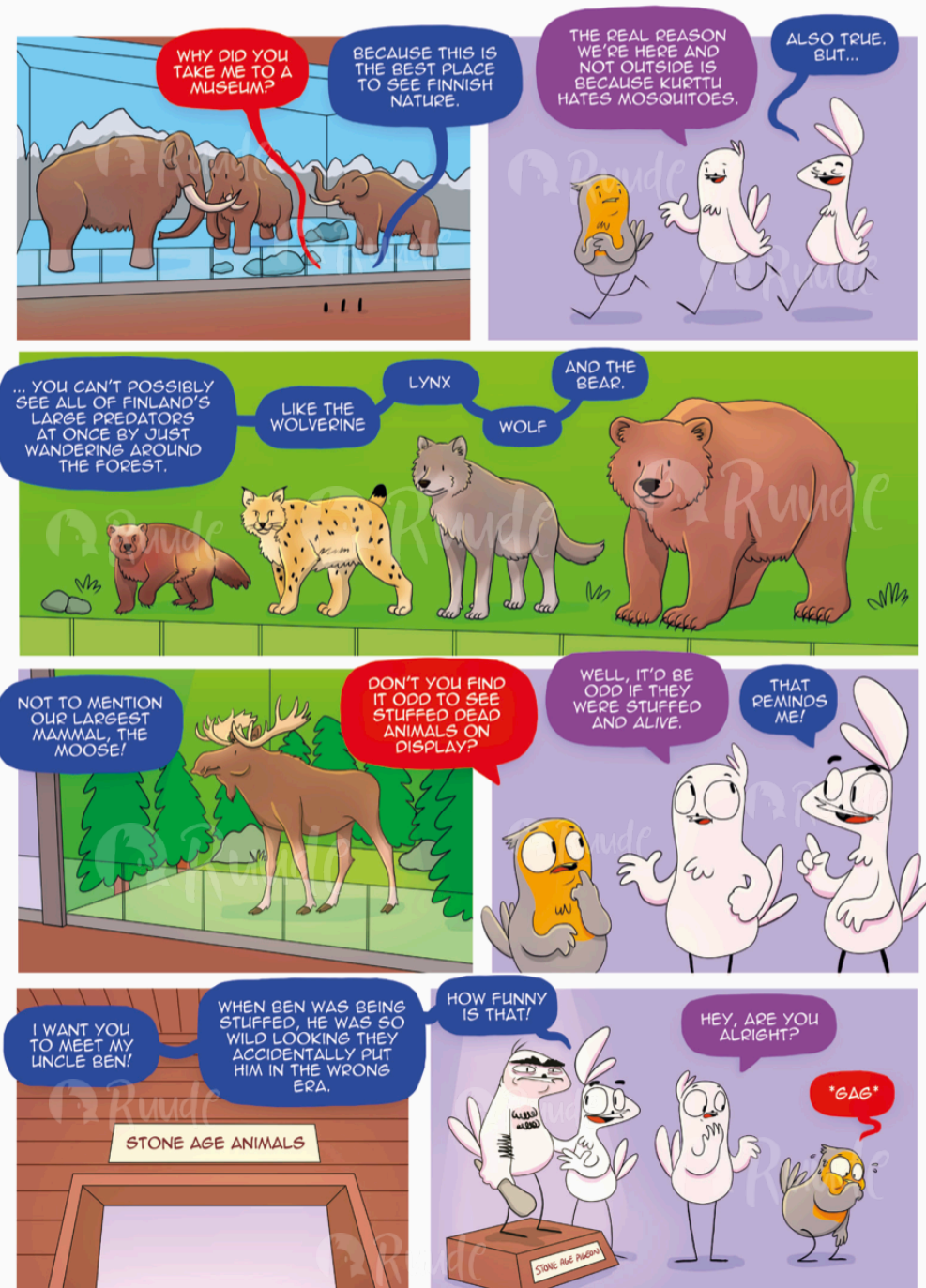
NATURE

Now, Finland doesn't have big mountain ranges, beautiful vineyards, white sandy beaches with turquoise water and dolphins swimming happily... Oh wait, I was going for something positive here. Uh. So, we do not have any of those, but we might have something even better: the absence of people and plenty of trees!

You heard it right! No huge masses of tourists, no fences around forests to keep people from enjoying nature just because someone happens to own the land. No grey clouds caused by pollution or air that you could taste. We have clean nature, green trees and plenty of lakes to swim in, blue skies during the day and stars at night (granted it's not, you know, cloudy and the weather's nice). You can enjoy four different seasons to the fullest, sometimes even during the very same day! You can walk in the

forests, pick berries and mushrooms totally free. Just be very sure to stick with the nonpoisonous ones. Some mushrooms, like the red ones with white dots, might look great but won't make your trip very much fun.

Finland does have mosquitoes and ticks though. But to be fair, you can't really escape those bloodsuckers anywhere. The good news is that Finnish mosquitoes do not carry any diseases like malaria, dengue fever or West Nile virus. And if you really hate insects, you can always travel during the winter when everything is either hibernating or dead --it's great!





SAUNA AND SUMMER COTTAGES

You can take a Finn out of Finland, but you can't take the sauna out of a Finn. This is a well-proven fact. For example, the first thing the Finnish troops sent abroad do, is to build a sauna. They even do that before they set up the main camp. And it doesn't matter where they camp, not even in the desert where the daytime temperature rises more than 40 degrees Celsius. I'm pretty sure if Finns were to camp inside a volcano they'd still build a sauna.

There's more to the Finnish sauna culture than could fit this book, so here's only a very brief overview. In the past, Finns were born, cleansed and got treated for sicknesses in the sauna. Today, the sauna is mainly used for washing yourself and relaxation. There are still some traditions and rituals revolving around the sauna though, including beating others' and your own naked

body with a bunch of birch branches, skinny dipping in a lake or rolling in the snow. Interestingly, it's also said that in every sauna lives a little elf that'll come enjoy the last steam that rises from the sauna stove--and who also punishes those who misbehave in there. So like, no pressure.

Summer cottages and saunas also go hand in hand, especially during the summer solstice. When in many other countries Midsummer is celebrated with grand gestures, the Finns just retreat to their ascetic cottages in the middle of the forest to burn big piles of wood like there's no tomorrow.

