

MOONWORLD

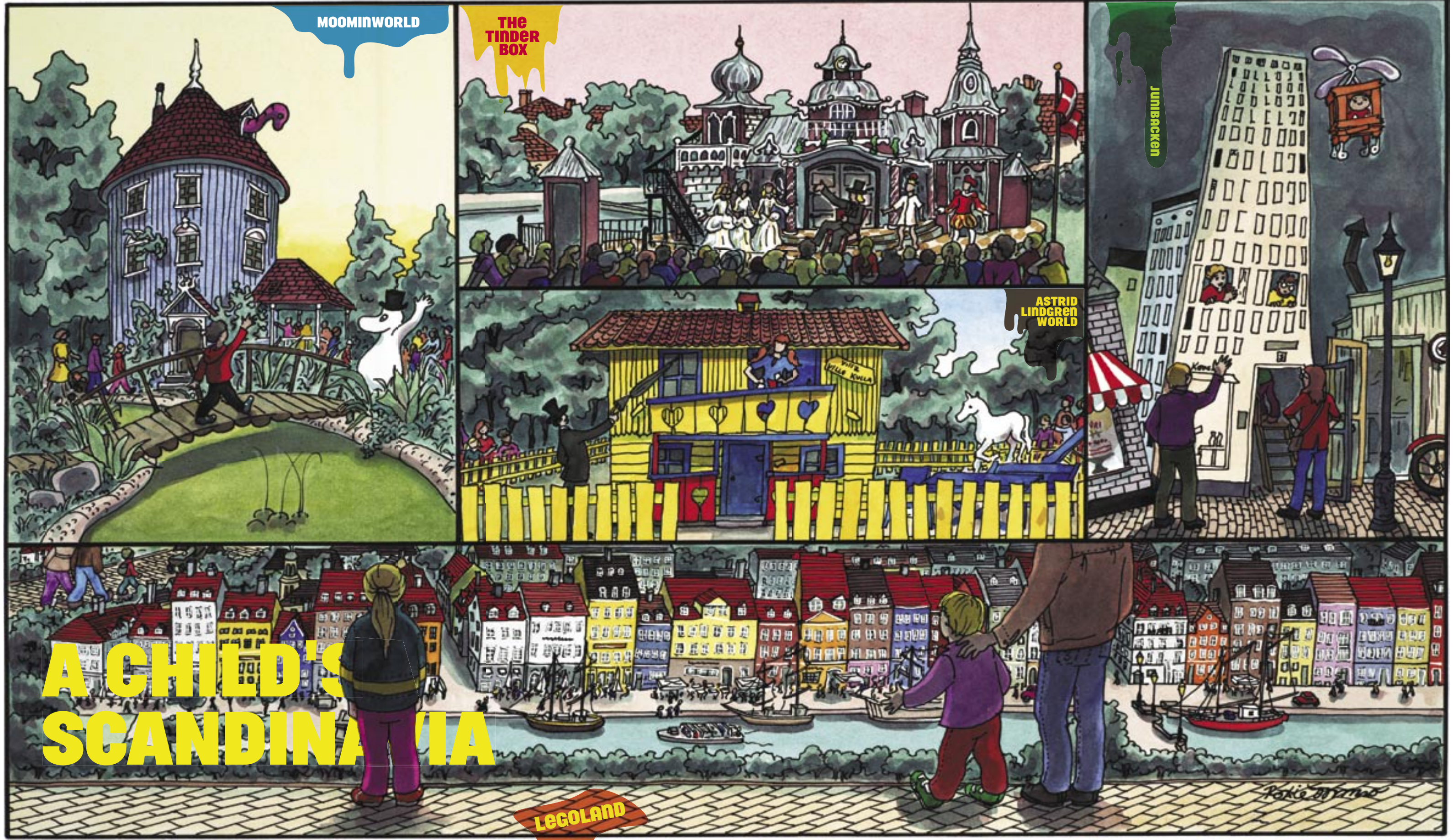
THE TINDER BOX

ASTRID LINDGREN WORLD

JUNIBACKEN

LEGOLAND

A CHILD'S SCANDINAVIA



SHE STOOD ON THE BALCONY, FRECKLE-FACED AND FREE-SPIRITED, ENGAGED IN VERBAL BATTLE WITH A POMPOUS LITTLE MAN WITH A BOWLER HAT AND UMBRELLA.

Ask people who grew up in Finland who Ninni is, and, more likely than not, they will smile knowingly and tell you the story of a little girl who, neglected by her family, became invisible. What helped her become visible again—step by step, beginning with the feet—was the Moomins, a joyful, caring, and purely fictional family, created by Tove Jansson, Finland's premier children's book writer and illustrator.

It would be difficult to find a Ninni in a Scandinavian country, however. If anything, Scandinavians excel in keeping their children visible and well cared for. To provide entertainment and special places for their offspring they will sometimes go to extraordinary lengths, such as installing a playroom next to the Absolut Bar at the Ice Hotel, or, as I once noticed in Skagen, Denmark, build a sandbox beneath the rafters of the local pub. Speaking of the creation of special places, there are now little "Disneylands" all over Scandinavia, where children can enter the worlds of their own favorite fiction.

Thus, in Odense, where my wife and I recently visited, **HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN** is duly honored with not only one of the oldest museums in the world to pay homage to a writer's life and work, but with Fyrtøjet, **THE TINDERBOX**, a Cultural House for Children. Here, before entering, the youngsters are given small suitcases packed with fun items that may come in handy as they proceed to travel through Andersen's classic fairy tales. They're also invited to dress up in costumes and have their faces painted. At the time we were there, several girls turned into credible princesses. Minutes later, a couple of them could be seen on top of an unusually high bed, piled—as in *The Princess and the Pea*—with twenty mattresses. Inside the Fyrtøjet, we also witnessed a story-telling session, conducted in a tiny amphitheater.

But the real action was outside. Here, in front of a colorful stage castle, the so-called "Parade" was in progress, with a score of actors and actresses, many of whom were children, performing sketches from *The Snow Queen*, *The Emperor's New Suit*, *The Red Shoes*, and other favorites. Hans Christian Andersen himself—whose 200th birthday will be celebrated in 2005—was played by an actor named Torben Iversen, who explained the various plots in Danish, Swedish, German, and English. I understand that his linguistic skills are not limited to these languages. On request, he will accommodate with a little Dutch or French.

Hans Christian Andersen, or his ghost, permeates Odense's entire old town. Just walking down the hotel corridor, we found, at regular intervals, framed illustrations and excerpts from some of the more familiar tales. Facing the hotel entrance was yet another reminder of Andersen's work: giant bronze petals, inside of which sat *Little Thumbelina*; and a couple of blocks away, in one of the squares, stood *The Staunch Tin Soldier*, who had only one leg because he was the last to be made and there wasn't enough tin to go around.

For a man who once described his family as "wracked by poverty, fornication, alcoholism, and insanity," Andersen did remarkably well. He was a prolific writer of poems, novels, plays, and several travelogues, but, curiously, never thought of himself as a children's book author. It was a friend of his who, after having read portions of his work, uttered these prophetic words: "If the novels will make you famous, the fairy tales will make you immortal."

In the old museum, built in his honor, we learn about his colorful personality. Considered to be unusually ugly, he was somewhat of a snob who loved to be photographed. Passionate and romantic,

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he repeatedly fell in love with women beyond his reach, including Jenny Lind, “the Swedish Nightingale.” Throughout his life, he suffered from horrifying fantasies. One of his worst fears was to be buried alive. So, as a precautionary measure, he often placed a note beside his bed containing the words: “I only appear to be dead.”

We were as riveted as the preschoolers standing next to us. Having arrived in **LEGOLAND**, we watched with fascination as toy cars and trucks stopped obediently in front of a tiny Amsterdam drawbridge. After opening up to let barges and sight-seeing boats pass through, the bridge closed magically, and cars and trucks resumed progress.

Legoland, located in Billund, Jutland, is a child’s fantasy world which didn’t come out of a writer’s imagination, but from the invention of an ingenious toy manufacturer. It must have taken billions of little LEGO bricks to build this large, extraordinary park, which has a child-friendly luxury hotel attached at one end. In Legoland, walking or taking a small elevated train, you enter one mesmerizing world after the other. Besides Miniland, where the miniature Amsterdam is located, there is Imagination Zone, Duplo Land, Pirate Land, Knight’s Kingdom, Adventure Land, and, giving the old American West its due, Legoredo Land. Other things American: Mount Rushmore, the Statue of Liberty, and a Hollywood street, complete with a teeny-weeny movie set and a film director with a megaphone shouting “cut.” The park started out, we were told, as just a small place next door to the plant, created for interested visitors. As the company grew, becoming a spectacular success—in 1999 the LEGO brick was voted “Toy of the Century” by Fortune Magazine—so did the park.

In Sweden, there are two places honoring **ASTRID LINDGREN**, the creator of Pippi Longstocking. One is the **ASTRID LINDGREN WORLD**, a theme park in Vimmerby, in the province of Småland. The setting is appropriate; this is the rural Sweden of the author’s own childhood, a region she loved and often wrote about.

The park proved delightful. As in Legoland, many things were pint-sized. To peek through the lower windows of some of the wooden houses lining the streets, even a five-year-old had to bend down, and you had to be a child to enter them. Actors and actresses, representing various characters in Lindgren’s books, mingled with the visitors, singing and reenacting popular episodes. At Villa Villekulla, Pippi’s ramshackle yellow house, a young actress was playing Pippi herself. She stood on the balcony, freckle-faced and free-spirited, engaged in verbal battle with a pompous little man with a bowler hat and umbrella. Her flaming red hair, mismatched stockings and saucy manners were exactly the way I recalled them from boyhood reading, and, as she confounded her visitor with snappy barbs, the youthful audience responded with ripples of laughter. I hoped to see Pippi lift a horse with her bare hands—a habit of hers in the books—but that never happened.

Next to the famous Wasa Museum, on Djurgården in central Stockholm, we found Junibacken, a house full of fairy tales, and yet another center for juvenile adventure. Here too, Astrid Lindgren’s stories are the major attraction, but Junibacken also features the work of other writers. Pippi Longstocking apart, Swedish children have many friends, Krakel Spektakel, Cousin Vitamin, Mama Moo and Mr. Crow, just to mention a few.

The most magical thing about Junibacken was a little indoor train that took you on a narrated tour through the tales of Astrid

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Lindgren. You travel in darkness. Then, as beautifully crafted scenes from her books emerge, one after the other, the train stops momentarily, allowing its passengers a closer look. Along with a large bookstore, I rather enjoyed the restaurant, which offered a fine selection of classic Swedish pastry, and included specialties such as Pippi’s pancakes and Baker Bengtsson’s buns.

Lindgren, who died at age 94 in 2002, was loved and respected not only for her gift of storytelling (she wrote more than 70 books, and is one of the world’s most translated authors), but as a person of unusual integrity and vision. Throughout her long, productive life she sided with the powerless and abused, be they children, grownups, or animals. As she once put it in an open letter to the Swedish Prime Minister, “Every pig is entitled to a happy pig life.” In 1999, she was voted the most popular Swede of the century.

If Astrid Lindgren appeals to the little anarchist in every child, **TOVE JANSSON**, her Finnish counterpart, satisfies a need for snuggling up and being comforted. This, at least, seemed indicated at **MOOMINWORLD**, in Naantalin, Finland. Situated a short distance from Turku, Naantalin is a charming old town with ornate wooden houses. Russian tsars used to come here for the waters; now children come all the way from Japan to shake hands with the Moomins.

A narrow causeway leads to the wooded, rocky little island where Moominworld was built in 1993. As we were about to enter, a sightseeing train was just pulling out, bringing visitors back to

town. The last car, loaded to the hilt with stacked-up baby carriages, gave an inkling of things to come. An overwhelming sense of friendliness permeated Moominworld. Familiar figures from Jansson's books, including Little My—the trickster girl—and the furry little animal Stinky, mingled freely with the visitors. An inordinate amount of hugging took place. From toddlers up, everyone insisted on touching Moominmama, Moominpapa, and other chubby and lovable troll characters. An open-air theater continually put on shows, and, in the Moomin House, a blue, five-story tower, everyone could wander freely, check out Moominpapa's adventure ship, sample jams with Moominmama herself in her well-stocked cellar, and generally feel part of one big family. Characteristic of the Moomins is that they accept everyone as they are.

Interestingly, Tove Jansson, who created this utterly social and welcoming world, became herself something of a recluse. Involved with the park at the beginning, she felt uncomfortable appearing in public, and spent the rest of her life in the Helsinki archipelago, where she lived with a woman friend.

Finally, an incident that took place about twenty years ago: I was sitting at "Bakfickan," the small trendy counter restaurant behind Operakällaren in central Stockholm. Next to me at the bar sat a pleasant-looking older woman. She seemed friendly and also vaguely familiar. Her eyes were extraordinary, so bright and curious that one felt that nothing ever escaped them. Having just read an amusing story by E. B. White about a mouse that grew up in New York City and whose name was Stuart Little, I pushed the book in her direction and said, "Why doesn't anyone in this country write wonderful children's stories like this one?"

She smiled and said something agreeable, and for the next few minutes we carried on a delightful conversation, mostly about E. B. White. Three days later, seeing the woman's picture in a newspaper, I realized with a shock that I had met with no other than Astrid Lindgren, one of the world's most famous and influential authors of children's literature. ■

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RESOURCES:

www.scandinavian.net – for travel, our choice for round trip tickets was Scandinavian Airlines, SAS. (June, 2004: 2 adults, New York-Copenhagen, Copenhagen-Turku, Turku-Stockholm, Stockholm-New York \$2,397.00)

www.radissonsas.com – hotels in all of Scandinavia, our choice in Odense, Denmark (June, 2005: DKK 750-DKK 1,625, approx. \$130.00-\$283.60, when booked over the internet. AAA-discount)

www.hotellegoland.dk – our hotel of choice at Legoland, Denmark (June, 2004: DKK 1,875, approx. \$320.00 / Double room with space for two adults, two children)

www.naantalispafinland.fi/english – our hotel at the Moominworld, Finland (June, 2005: EURO 164 + EURO 27 for each child over 4)

www.turism.vimmerby.se/eng – accommodations at Astrid Lindgren's World, Sweden

www.diplomathotel.com – our hotel of choice in Stockholm, Sweden (June, 2005: SEK 1,895 – SEK 2,895, approx. \$270.00-\$410.00)

Note: Although city hotels may have plenty of rooms and special rates in the summer, this is also the season for travel. Prices for airfare and room nights may vary greatly depending on how and when you book.

GETTING THERE

During the summer season, SAS offers daily direct U.S. flights to Copenhagen from Seattle, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Newark, as well as to Stockholm from Newark and Chicago. Daily connecting flights will take you to Helsinki or Turku in Finland. In the summer, Finnair has daily flights from JFK to Helsinki (with connecting flights to Turku).

WHERE TO STAY

In Legoland we stayed at Hotel Legoland, the luxury hotel attached to the park. Catering to families with children, its doorman made of LEGO bricks greet you at the entrance. Other LEGO figures—many pointing the way to the various facilities of the hotel—were scattered throughout the building. Even the roof of the elevator that took us to the park had its own figure, a LEGO repairman on his lunch break, barely glimpsed as the elevator continue down to a lower level. In a playroom, children could watch cartoons on TV or turn creative with thousands of LEGO bricks.

In Odense, our choice of living quarters was the quite excellent Radisson SAS H. C. Andersen Hotel, located in the Old Town, just minutes away from all things Andersen, including the house where Hans Christian grew up, a cobbler's son in a one-room apartment.

The Naantali Spa Hotel, a ten-minute walk from Moominworld, was quite an experience. It is Finland's largest and most famous conference hotel, so huge, that when it ran out of real estate space, it had a luxury liner (without engines) towed and anchored in the waters next to it. The ship is now part of the hotel, and where we quartered in a comfortable, seasick-proof cabin. Elegant, even glitzy, the Naantali Spa Hotel appeared to be run with exemplary efficiency. So, we were a little surprised when charged twice for a meal, on top of another accounting error.

Visiting the Astrid Lindgren World we didn't stay overnight, but understand that far-away visitors are invited to Stugby, a little village of small cottages next to the park, complete with all basic amenities, including a mini-golf course next door. For more elegant living, there's Fredriksborg Herrgård, a manor turned hotel, located ten kilometers south of Vimmerby.

Finding a good place to stay near Junibacken in Stockholm presented us with an embarrassment of riches. It is walking distance from a number of good hotels, even a vintage tall ship turned youth hostel. We settled on Hotel Diplomat on fashionable Strandvägen. Superbly housed in a well-preserved 1911 art nouveau building, it featured a particularly lively downstairs restaurant and outdoor café, and commanded a superb view of the Nybroviken quay.

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FROM TODDLERS UP, EVERYONE INSISTED ON TOUCHING MOOMINMAMA, MOOMINPAPA, AND OTHER CHUBBY AND LOVABLE TROLL CHARACTERS.

