

A Taste of Finland

Finland is a wonderful mix of European and Russian history, with modernity, nature and design.

-By Aruna Rathod

While most travellers to Finland head to the Lapland to experience the Northern Lights, Santa and winter sports, I decided to explore Helsinki, the capital and Turku, the old capital. Right from the Design District to the waterfronts, Helsinki has a wide range of experiences to offer by way of cuisine, excursions, shopping and the not-to-be-missed sauna experience.

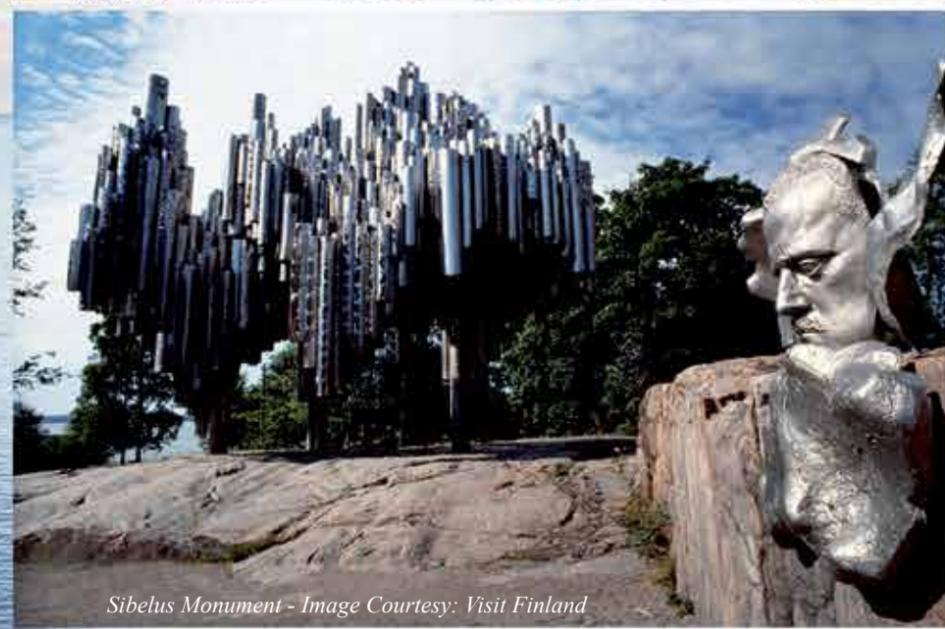
Visit Finland - Image Courtesy: Pete Heck



Silja Tallink - Image Courtesy: Tallink & Silja Line



Marimekko Textiles: Courtesy: Visit Finland



Sibelius Monument - Image Courtesy: Visit Finland

Sauna – A must in Finland

After arriving in Helsinki, it seemed like a good idea to first relax after the long flight, so I headed to the sauna. Loyly is one of the newest attractions for those who love to relax after a sauna, as it has terraces and a fantastic restaurant. The Finns visit the sauna in a matter-of-fact manner, like it's a part of their routine, nothing extraordinary. It is the most indulged activity in Finland, and the country has 3.3 million saunas. Most new apartments have their own sauna rooms. In the Finnish tradition, a sauna is a place where everyone is equal and you "leave your worries with your shoes."

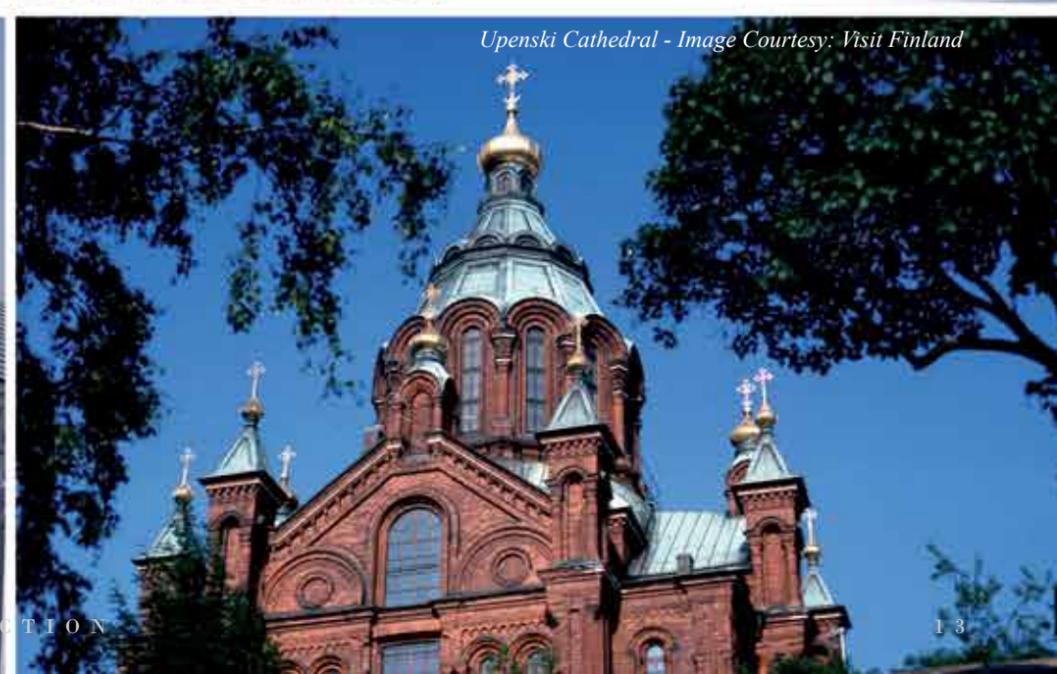
So, I left my shoes and jacket, and ventured into the sauna. After experiencing a temperature of 3 degrees outside, the sauna was more than welcome.

Design milestones of Finland

Next morning, I visited the Design Museum where I learnt that Finland is the birthplace of the famous Fiskars scissors, and of course, Nokia. The Design Museum is compact, but full of absolutely amazing information about the evolution of design in Finland and some parts of Europe. Founded in 1873, it is the oldest Design Museum in the world. Marimekko is also a famous design company known for its flower print, while Moomins, a white hippo-like animals, is an extremely popular Finnish icon, probably after Santa Claus, created by artist Tove Jansson in the 1940s.



Helsinki Cathedral - Image Courtesy: Visit Finland



Uspenski Cathedral - Image Courtesy: Visit Finland

Post lunch, it's a good idea to walk around the market square at the end of Esplanade Park. Away in the horizon, the Helsinki SkyWheel, the Uspenski Cathedral (Russian church) and the sculpture of a naked mermaid added to the beauty of the surrounding.

I decided to explore the open air market that had a few stalls, but really interesting ones. Small make-shift stalls sold woollen caps, gloves and leather goods, and I chanced upon a stall selling reindeer skin, which had brown fur (for 150 euros) and looked warm and inviting. The white fur skin was exclusive and sold at 180 euros. Bright red berries and mushrooms were some of the farm produce on sale. Some stalls had handicrafts, mainly wooden creations and souvenirs. A few metres away, the closed market called the Kauppahalli had eateries, stores selling salmon, wines and fresh produce.

A city tour

The Helsinki Card is a great way of seeing the city. With this card, one gets free public transport, free entries to museums, discounts at some restaurants and complimentary access to the Hop On, Hop Off bus to explore the city. In winter, the bus leaves from Esplanade Park at 11 am and takes a detailed tour of the city for about an hour-and-a-half.

We began with the most famous Helsinki Cathedral – a majestic white building with a huge Russian influence, the City Hall, the University, Parliament buildings, Finlandia Hall, the Olympic Stadium, the Opera House and many more sights. Our stop was at the Temppeliaukio Church (Rock Church), an architectural wonder. The church has a copper dome, exposed rocks and concrete beams. In case the church is closed, the bus halts at the Sibelius Monument, where the world famous composer Jean Sibelius' (1865-1957) monument by Eila Hiltunen is stationed.

Turku – former capital of Finland

So, after enjoying Helsinki, I decided to visit the old capital Turku, two hours away. I boarded a train from the main railway station at Helsinki, chosen as one of the world's most beautiful railway stations by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 2013.

Turku is famous for ship building and the city is marked by the river Aura that runs through the city. I headed to the Turku Castle, which is located on the outskirts, then saw the museum, Forum Marinum, an open air museum with some interesting installations, including a huge daisy with a green stem that is a great photo opportunity. The museum has over 100 boats and is a great spot during summers, as the museum ships are open then.

When in Turku, it is a must to visit the Turku Cathedral, the Mother Church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Across the road, the Aboa Vetus



& Ars Nova, museum of history and contemporary art, is a lively place and it records the history of Turku.

My guide mentioned that Turku is dotted with archipelagos, and one can indulge in boating, camping and cycling here. I also visited the Art Bank to savour a private collection of Salvador Dali's works. If his works appeal to your sensibilities, you can order exclusive furniture and lamps designed by the artist. If you want to add a super exclusive touch to your visit, check about the Dali dinner to indulge.

Day trip to Tallinn, Estonia

Estonia, a northern European country, is situated just two hours away by ship. Tallink offers four voyages a day to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. I decided to do a day trip to a new country. Since it was my first time in Estonia, I decided to have a local guide. Maarja Laiapea and Jüri Pokk of Saku Travel were both waiting for me. What a warm welcome!! Since it was

drizzling, it was great to have a vehicle and warm hosts.

Jüri drove us to Kalamaja district first and it was just five minutes away. Kalamaja is a quiet little neighbourhood just outside the Old Town and is eye-catching for its colourful wooden buildings. During earlier centuries, Kalamaja served as the town's main fishing harbour and was considered as a suburb.



The song festival and its fabulous stage

After a brief glance at the Museum of Modern Art, a truly modern structure, we drove out to the famous Song Festival Grounds at Lauluväljak. The huge stage was designed by Alar Kotli, Henno Sepmann and Uno Tõlpus, and the slope was used wonderfully, where people would be seated. Today, the Song Festival Grounds are a popular venue for events. It is best known as the place where, every 5 years, the Song Festival is held, with nearly 25,000 singers taking part, attracting an audience of nearly 100,000.

On top of the natural limestone slope sits a bronze monument of Gustav Ernesaks, an Estonian composer and one of the father figure's of the Estonian song festival tradition. His statue, which is almost 10 feet in height, is placed as if he is listening to the concert.

It's a great place to click a photo and a memory of Tallinn.

We moved from the famous song grounds stage to St. Bridget's Convent. It is a deserted site with beautiful ruins, a medieval convent destroyed in 1577. Its history goes back to 1407, when it was built as part of a Swedish religious order. It was the largest convent then and today, the modern building of the St. Bridgettine Order makes a stark contrast to the ruins.

The Old Town of Toompea and Steven – the seagull

Driving along the coast, we entered the Old Town in a few minutes. The only way to explore the town is on foot. It's best to wear comfortable walking shoes, as the pavements are made of cobblestone.

Jüri dropped us off at the Toompea castle, from where we proceeded on foot. A short walk down takes one to a huge gallery that looked down at the old town with red roof tops, modern structures on the right and the Baltic Sea in the distance. Known as the Kohtuotsa viewing platform, most tourists love to stand here and relax.

Just below the viewing gallery is the Danish King's Garden. As we walked up, unfortunately for me, St. Mary's cathedral was closed (it is closed on Mondays). A little away is the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, an eye-catching structure, opposite the parliament. No photography is allowed inside, but the structure is so beautiful even from the outside, that I didn't mind.

We walked down to the Great Guild Hall, where a permanent exhibition, entitled 'The Spirit of Survival', covers 11,000 years

of Estonia's history with interactive displays and text in Estonian and English.

After a cup of coffee, I decided it was time to leave Tallinn. On my way back to Helsinki, the icing on the cake was the Business Lounge on the Megastar. A fantastic buffet spread, a range of drinks and desserts, and I could have spent two hours just savouring the meal. Plenty of reading material, newspapers and magazines, and a sunny day – what more could one ask for!

