

# Getting Started

Travel in Finland is a pleasure. Buses and trains run on time, tourist offices are eager to please and full of at-your-fingertips information, and you can get by easily enough without even dipping into a Finnish dictionary. It's not a cheap destination, but neither are prices as elevated as sometimes imagined, and accommodation in particular can be excellent value, with hotels chopping their prices in summer and at weekends.

## WHEN TO GO

The tourist season in southern Finland and the Lakeland is from early June to late August. This is when all attractions and summer accommodation options are open, steamboats and ferries ply the lakes and rivers and festivals are in full swing. Things are at their busiest during Finnish holidays, typically from the summer high season in late June until the end of July. This is the time of long, light nights, when Finland doesn't seem to sleep.

The tourist season in northern Finland, including Lapland, is different. Mosquitoes can be unbearably annoying in July, but September is delightful with its *ruska* (autumn) colours. October and February/March are good times to visit Lapland to view the aurora borealis (northern lights) and enjoy winter activities such as skiing and dog-sledding. The Christmas holiday period is also prime time in Lapland – after all, this is the 'official' home of Santa Claus. Helsinki is popular year-round.

You can find everything about Finland's weather on the **Finnish Meteorological Institute** ([www.fmi.fi](http://www.fmi.fi)) website.

## COSTS & MONEY

Finland is an expensive country, but not quite as much as its reputation would suggest. Summer in particular can offer exceptional value, with hotel prices slashed and seasonal restaurants open. With a bit of planning, you can have a great time here on almost any budget.

A couple using public transport, travelling in summer, staying in good midrange hotels and eating out, will spend €100 to €130 per day per person, a little more if spending a lot of time in Helsinki, which is substantially pricier than the rest of Finland, particularly on the accommodation front. As bus and train travel is expensive, this figure would not be inflated

See Climate Charts (p331) for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

You can buy virtually anything you need in Finland, but be sure to carry these:

- Insect repellent (double the strength and double the quantity)
- A sleeping sheet and a pillowcase for cabins or hostels
- Eye-mask; if daylight at midnight will keep you from sleeping
- Seriously warm clothing for winter or a water- and windproof jacket for summer
- A Russian visa if you'll be tempted across the border
- A swimsuit; even if it's winter, there are great water parks and ice-holes for post-sauna dips in the lakes
- A mobile phone; it's cheap and easy to get a prepaid SIM card and be on the local network

## TOP TENS

### Books & Films

See p35 and p38 for more on Finnish literature and cinema.

- *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot, translation by Keith Bosley, is Finland's epic, compiled from the songs of bards. It tells everything from the history of the world to how to make decent home-brew.
- *Drifting Clouds*, directed by Aki Kaurismäki is a marvellous film about a couple forced to seek new jobs. It's full of awkward, stilted emotions. *Man Without a Past* is another excellent work from the same director.
- *The Year of the Hare* by Arto Paasilinna tells how a Finnish journalist revolutionizes his life and sees things in a new way while travelling around with a hare.
- *The Canine Kalevala* is a take on the Kalevala by Mauri Kunnas, successful and much-loved children's author and illustrator.
- *Popular Music* by Mikael Niemi is not strictly about Finland, but it could well be. A great read.
- *Finn Family Moomintroll* by Tove Jansson is one of the earliest and best of the loveable Moomin books!
- *Seven Brothers* by Aleksis Kivi is a classic novel. Very readable, with some memorable dialogue.
- *Tuntematon Sotilas* (Unknown Soldier), directed by Rauni Mollberg, is a good film about the Continuation war, based on the book by Väinö Linna. *The Winter War* is another good film about the fight against the Russians.
- *A Short History of Finland* by Fred Singleton is a dry but thorough history, written with affection and a leftist slant.
- *Pahat Pojat* (Bad Boys), directed by Aleksis Mäkelä. Finland does a gang film, with this take on four infamous brothers who terrorized the nation robbing petrol stations pumps and worse.

### CDs

What to listen to to get you up to speed on the best recent Finnish music. Download a sample MP3 or two and you'll be able to sing along in bars once you get to Finland! See p39 for more details.

- Ulla Pirttijärvi, *Mättärähku Askái* (In Our Foremothers' Arms) – marvellous Sámi *yoiks* (see p40 for more information on yoiks) with modern synthesizing.
- The Rasmus, *Dead Letters – In the Shadows* was a huge worldwide hit.
- Maija Vilkkumaa, *Ei* – a Finnish Alanis with plenty of attitude.
- Apulanta, *Plastik* – kicking guitar rock.
- Husky Rescue, *Country Falls* – bright, breezy and very likeable up-and-comers.
- Verenisara, *Irtileikattu* – Excellent new hard-rock band.
- Trio Töykeät, *Wake* – new album from this successful jazz outfit.
- Viiddas, self titled – another top Sámi offering.
- Zen Café, *Laiksa, Tyhmä, ja Saamaton* – the thinking Finn's rock band with down-to-earth Finnish lyrics.
- Neljä Ruusua, *Karelia Express* – one of many good albums by this downbeat technopop group.

hugely by hiring a car, particularly if you can nab a decent deal over the Internet.

Two people travelling backpacker-style, using hostels and cabins and mostly self-catering could get by comfortably on €50 each per day, less if sleeping in dorms and not taking too many long trips.

A week in Helsinki for a couple spending €250 or more per day each will see a room in one of the best hotels, memorable meals in Finland's best restaurants, and few expenses spared.

There are numerous ways to reduce the amount you spend on holiday in Finland. Nearly all hotels and hostels will put extra beds in a room for little extra charge – great value for families and groups. There's a discount on buses for groups of four or more booking tickets together, and most attractions offer a good-value family ticket. Camp sites nearly always have some sort of cabin accommodation sleeping four or more. These range from simple huts with bunks to luxurious wooden houses, and are always excellent value.

It's much cheaper to eat in restaurants at lunchtime, when there are daily specials and often a groaning buffet table.

Students with valid ID and seniors can receive substantial discounts on museum admission prices quoted in this book, as well as on transportation.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Michael Palin describes, in characteristically humorous style, his journey from the North to South Poles in *Pole to Pole*. He passes through a good slice of Finland along the way.

Detailing an awesome road trip through Finland, taking an icon of Elvis to the North Pole, is Bill Drummond and Mark Manning's *Bad Wisdom*. If it were a film, it'd cop an X-rating for sexual content, violence and substance abuse.

Philip Ward's *Finnish Cities*, though dated and written in a very dry style, is full of information about Finland's three main cities, as well as Rovaniemi. Strong on architecture.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Finnish Tourist Board** ([www.visitfinland.com](http://www.visitfinland.com)) Official site, and full of excellent information from the practical to the whimsical.

**Forest and Park Service** ([www.outdoors.fi](http://www.outdoors.fi)) An excellent resource, with detailed information on all Finland's national parks and protected areas, as well as activities listings.

**Helsingin Sanomat** ([www.helsinginsanomat.fi/english/](http://www.helsinginsanomat.fi/english/)) International edition of Finland's best daily newspaper.

**LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Check recent postings for the very latest recommendations and tips on travelling in Finland.

**Virtual Finland** ([virtual.finland.fi](http://virtual.finland.fi)) Maintained by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this is an excellent, informative, and entertaining website.

### HOW MUCH?

Bus ride (200km) €28

Sauna free-€10

Bottle of cheap red in a restaurant €25

Day's bike hire €10

Simple log cabin for 2 €30

See also Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### ESSENTIAL SUOMI

#### Helsinki to Rovaniemi/Three weeks

Start in **Helsinki** (p57), a European city *par excellence*. Be sure to see the harbour – get a boat to **Suomenlinna** (p84) or eat at an island restaurant – before heading to **Porvoo** (p88), with its enchanting wooden buildings.

Head inland to **Lappeenranta** (p143) in Karelia and try the local food specialities at a waterfront stall or the beach sauna.

Pretty **Savonlinna** (p115) is next. Its stunning castle is the setting for the famous Savonlinna Opera Festival. Even if your visit doesn't coincide with the festival, it's a memorable town with plenty to do in the area.

Because you are in 'Lakeland', it would be a crime not to jump on a boat. You can take a day cruise to **Kuopio** (p135), where you'll find a tower with superb views, and a convivial smoke sauna. On your way north from here, drop in on **Sonkajärvi** for a spot of wife-carrying (see boxed text p141).

Once you get to **Oulu** (p266), you can really 'feel' the latitude – depending on the time of year, the sun will either barely set or barely rise! It's one of Finland's liveliest towns and has a great summer marketplace.

From Oulu, head to **Kemi** (p273) to see the Snow Castle in winter or, in summer, play midnight golf at **Tornio** (p275). Finally, check out **Rovaniemi** (p296), the Lappish capital and base for any number of activities.

This classic itinerary takes in the capital and a wide selection of Finnish landscapes and towns, from the pretty southern lakelands right up to Lapland's Arctic climes. A journey from south to north of about 1200km.



### LAPP GOLD

#### Rovaniemi Loop/One to two weeks

In Rovaniemi, capital of Lapland, visit the excellent **Arktikum museum** (p298) to learn about these northern latitudes. At **Ranua Zoo** (p302), you can see some of the region's fauna.

Cut eastwards to **Ruka** (p286), a lively ski resort in winter, and a trail-head of the **Karhunkierros** (p288), one of Finland's best trekking routes.

From here, go via **Kemijärvi** (p311) to **Sodankylä** (p312), a village by most standards, but a metropolis in these parts. Don't miss the attractive old wooden church.

Heading northwards, you'll reach **Urho K Kekkonen National Park** (p316), where you can try gold panning before striking out on a trek across the spectacular fells in this vast wilderness. Nearby **Saariselkä** (p314) is a good spot for all manner of summer and winter activities.

One of the most intriguing towns in this region is **Inari** (p320), the main community centre of Finland's Sámi population. It's a handicrafts centre and home to the memorable Siida museum.

Next it's **Lemmenjoki National Park** (p322), yet another place for great trekking. Continue the loop towards northwest Finland, ending up at **Hetta** (p308), a good place to spend a night or two for its Sámi culture and local walks. From here, if you have time, you should head up the 'arm' of Finland to remote **Kilpisjärvi** (p310), overlooked by fearsome Norwegian mountains and the smaller bulk of Saana Fell, which is well worth climbing.

Retrace your steps and head to **Muonio** (p306). In winter you can go husky-sledding, but even in summer it's worth meeting the dogs. From here, return to Rovaniemi, perhaps stopping to ski or rent a summer cottage at busy **Levi** (p305) or peaceful **Pyhä** (p312).



A thorough exploration of the wonders of Lapland and its landscapes, with plenty of opportunity for trekking, skiing or sledding as well as learning about Sámi culture and the Arctic environment. Around 1600km.

## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### THE WEST COAST

Popular with locals, the west coast of Finland doesn't attract many foreign visitors, who prefer the charms of the lakes and reindeer.

After Helsinki, stop at **Lohja** (p93) for its church and mining museum. The industrial theme continues with the pretty **ironworks** at Fagervik (p96) and **Fiskars** (p99) which are near the family-friendly seaside town, **Ekenäs** (p194). Then head southwest to the noble wooden villas of **Hanko** (p100), where St Petersburg society once summered.

**Turku** (p194) has many drawcards, as does the surrounding archipelago (p216) and the picturesque **Naantali** (p212).

**Uusikaupunki** (p218) has a museum that deserves a prize for ironic humour, while **Rauma's Old Town** (p220) features charming wooden buildings. Moving north, busy **Pori** (p224) is home to a pumping jazz festival.

The next bit of coast is known as 'Parallel Sweden' by some: **Kristinestad** (p254) is one of several places with a Swedish-speaking majority. **Kaskinen** (p256) or **Närpes** (p256) are other tranquil stops. **Vaasa** (p249) has an excellent museum, and is popular for its spa complex and adventure park.

**Nykarleby** (p256), famous for waffles and its painted church, is a good stop on the way to **Jakobstad** (p257), whose old town rivals Rauma's for beauty. Meanwhile, at **Kokkola** (p259), with its boat bar and fascinating mineral museum, you'll definitely feel back in Finnish Finland. Beyond here, a stretch of beautiful coastline runs north to **Oulu** (p266), with **Kalajoki** (p261), one of the world's most northerly beach resorts, on the way.

### Helsinki to Oulu/One to two weeks

### BORDERLANDS

### Helsinki to Kuusamo/Two weeks

Russia's presence looms large in Finnish history and consciousness. This trip takes in areas that have been affected by this relationship.

From Helsinki, head first to little **Ruotsinpyhtää** (p106), an attractive village whose river once marked the boundary between the Swedish Empire and Russia. Then move on to **Kotka** (p107), a busy port near one of the tsar's favourite fishing spots. Heading towards the modern-day border, the fortress at **Hamina** (p110) was erected by the Swedes to halt the Russian advance in the early 18th century. This plan singularly failed!

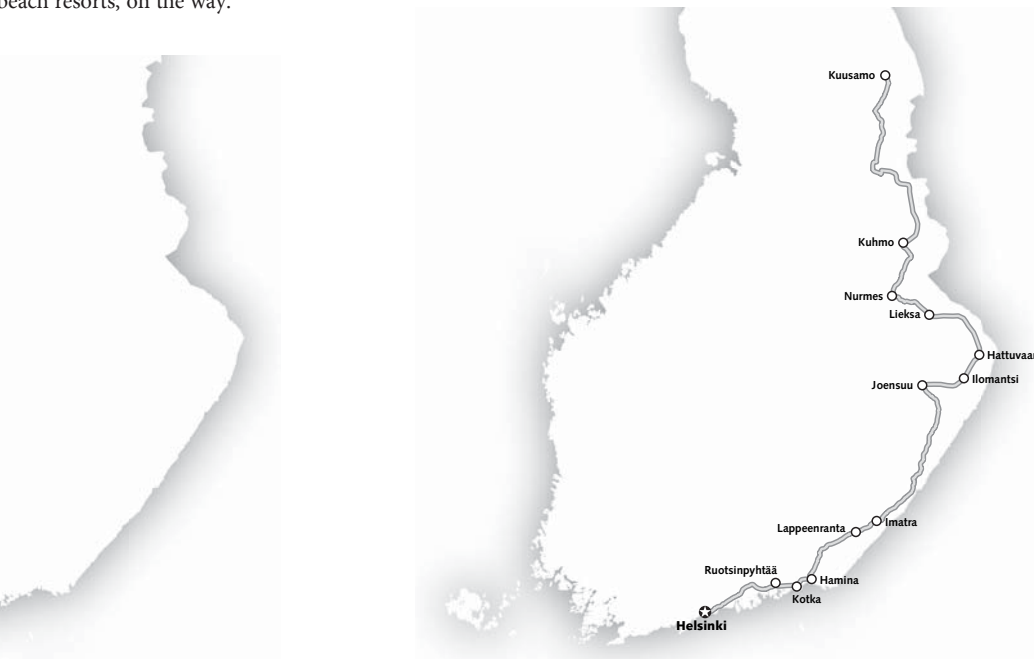
**Lappeenranta** (p143) suffered a similar fate, with the Russians adding the finishing touches to the fortress that had been designed to keep them out. This is the beginning of Karelia, an area where a lot of the bitterest fighting of the Winter War took place; you'll see numerous memorials on this route.

Heading north, you'll pass through cities that were largely destroyed during the war. At **Imatra** (p149), whose 'rapids shows' are something to behold, you can actually see Russia from the top floor of the Imatran Valtionhotelli, while at **Joensuu** (p151), visit Carelicum museum to learn more about the area.

From **Ilomantsi** (p155), in deepest Karelia, head out to **Hattuvaara** (p157), a very Orthodox area. You can drive to the border from here – the easternmost point of the EU!

**Lieksa** (p159) and **Nurmes** (p165) are good bases for exploring the wilderness. Further north, **Kuhmo** (p280) was where artists and writers set out from, seeking inspiration in the deep forest wildernesses further east, which are now part of Russia and much mourned by the Finns. Shadow the border up to **Kuusamo** (p283), from where you can fly back to Helsinki.

This coastal trip is an excellent way to appreciate the differences between the Swedish- and Finnish-speaking communities, not to mention a chance to see picture-perfect wooden towns, sparkling blue water and several more-than-decent beaches. About 1100km.



An exploration of Finland's eastern zone, shadowing the border with Russia, whose influence has always been very important. This heads through the heartland of divided Karelia, a symbol for Finnish independence, wilderness and loss. About 1000km.

## TAILORED TRIPS

### WINTER FINLAND

It's cold – Finnish thermometers have more numbers below the line than above – and it's dark, but a Finnish winter is something quite magical, with snow and ice in abundance and incredible scope for activity.

The capital **Helsinki** (p57) is a memorable sight in winter, with the giant Baltic ferries sailing through channels gouged by the country's impressive icebreakers, and ice-skating in the Kallio district among other places.

But you won't want to linger in the capital's comparatively tropical winter temperatures, for the north calls! On your way there, it's highly recommended to test your mettle at the giant smoke sauna in **Kuopio** (p135). After steaming it up, a jump in the lake is required – don't worry, they've cut a hole in the ice for your convenience! Some Finns, however, prefer to sit by a hole in the ice with a hot drink and a fishing line. There are many good places to try your hand at ice fishing, including **Ruovesi** (p180). If you're good enough, you could enter the Ice-Angling Marathon at **Oulu** (p269).

Karelian forests and lakes are gorgeous when the winter sun bathes the snow in an orange light. **Nurmes** (p165) and **Lieksa** (p159) are popular places to try snowmobiling and other winter activities; you can also try something typically Finnish: taking a short cut by driving across a frozen lake!

Northwest of here, **Kemi** (p273) comes to life during winter with its magnificent Snow Castle (you can sleep inside) and the chance to sail on an icebreaker, a fascinating experience.

Lapland is a fantastic winter destination. The crisp, snowy wilderness and low, distant sun are mesmerising. There are many destinations where you can arrange exciting outdoor pursuits. In **Rovaniemi** (p296) there's the Arktikum museum and the Santa Claus post office, where hundreds of thousands of letters arrive every Christmas from all over the world.

**Muonio** (p306) is one of the best places to arrange husky-sledding. This memorable mode of transport can be experienced on a two-hour jaunt, or a multi-day safari, sleeping in wilderness cabins, all with their own wood sauna, and cooking over campfires.

At **Saariselkä** (p314), you can have a similar experience or choose to be pulled by reindeer, those loveably goofy-looking creatures. This is also a place to do treks on snowmobiles if you've got a valid driving licence.

At **Inari** (p320), the Sámi capital, things get busy with reindeer racing. The reindeer pull standing jockeys on sleds and have their antlers removed to prevent things getting too gladiatorial.

Then there's skiing. While Finland doesn't have huge mountains, there are some excellent resorts, including **Levi** (p305), which has great facilities and accommodation, and **Ruka** (p286), an enduringly popular family centre. At these places, and indeed almost everywhere in Finland, there are marked cross-country skiing trails, many of which are illuminated so the short hours of daylight prove no handicap.

The icing on the cake for lucky visitors is a glimpse of the **northern lights** (see boxed text, p307), an awe-inspiring natural phenomenon best seen in the north of the country. It's a humbling and memorable sight when in full flow.



### NATIONAL PARKS

The word Finland conjures up images of vast expanses of pine forest dotted with hundreds – no, hundreds of thousands – of lakes. In large part, these images are very accurate. The spectacular swathes of forest are home to elk, bears and wolves, and include some of Europe's most remote wildernesses.

Some 9% of Finland is under some kind of nature protection, and there are 35 national parks. Superbly run, with comprehensive visitor information and clearly labelled short- and long-distance paths, they are some of the nation's most attractive destinations.

You can start with a taste of things to come while you are still in Helsinki. In Espoo, a short trip from the capital, is the **Nuukio National Park** (p87), a haven for several rare bird species and a great place to go for a stroll in the woods.

While you are in the south of the country, you should also investigate one of the four maritime parks, such as the **Southwestern Archipelago National Park** (p216). You can visit the archipelago on regular boat trips from Turku or Hanko, but to really explore it you should charter a boat.

The central belt of Finland is dotted with a couple of dozen small parks, often conserving some of the country's typical Lakeland habitat. Motor boats are prohibited on many Finnish lakes, so a great way to explore them is to hire a canoe for a couple of hours, or do a full-blown journey of a week. The adjacent **Kolovesi** (p124) and **Linnansaari National Parks** (p124) are two of the best zones to take to the water in this way. If you are lucky, you may even glimpse the rare Saimaa ringed seal, which adapted to a freshwater environment after being cut off from the sea by the rising land.

The heavyweights of Finland's park system all lie further north. With three parks weighing in at over 1000 sq km each, Lapland is blessed with wide expanses to explore. One of the most important and popular is the **Urho K Kekkonen (UKK) National Park** (p316), an area of classic Lappish fells that is a magnet for trekkers of all abilities. Although the well-known routes get busy in summer, there's some awesome wilderness here where few people venture.

Finland's most popular single trek, the Karhunkierros (Bear's Ring), is located south of here, in the **Oulanka National Park** (p288). While to do it in its entirety will take you up to five days, you can easily shorten it to three days, or just try the Little Bear's Ring day walk.

Within striking distance of Rovaniemi, the newly-enlarged **Pyhä-Luosto National Park** (p313) has good walking over the forested fells that connect two low-key ski resorts. This is a peaceful area to stay with the family in summer too.

In the northwest is the lovely **Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park** (p308), with comparatively easy trekking southwards from the Sámi town of Hetta. You have to be taken by boat to the starting point, so it feels like you're kissing civilization goodbye for good, but the trek ends happily at a very hospitable hotel.

Finland's northernmost park is **Lemmenjoki** (p322), not too far from Inari. This has an excellent network of trails, some decent places to stay, and the chance to make your fortune (or at least dirty your clothes) panning for gold.





## FESTIVALS OF FINLAND

The Finnish love their short summers, and an amazing network of festivals takes place across the country. Some are highbrow, world-famous cultural events drawing international performers, while others are plain daft – mobile phone throwing, anyone? At **Savonlinna** (p115), high-quality **opera performances** are held in its romantically set castle throughout July. A separate **ballet festival** in August adds to the cultural air, but here you'll also see the latest Nokia flying through the air.

**Pori** (p226) has a cracking jazz event, while little **Seinäjoki** (p262) throbs to both rock music and Finnish tango. In **Kaustinen** (p264) you'll hear folk music in the middle of nowhere, while **Kuopio** (p135) has a famous dance festival. **Jyväskylä's** (p129) summer knees-up is a multi-disciplinary arts extravaganza.

Other festivals celebrate cultural differences. The Praasniekka in places like **Ilomantsi** (p155) are traditional Orthodox religious festivals and celebrations of Karelian culture, while on **Åland** (p229), Midsummer revelries (celebrated throughout the country) have a distinctly local character. In the north, **Rovaniemi** (p296) hosts an important Sámi festival.

The realm of the bizarre is vast. Honourable mentions go to Sonkajärvi for **Wife-Carrying** (p141), **Oulu** (p269) for the Air Guitar World Championships, and Naantali for **Sleepyhead Day** (p212), when the laziest citizen gets dragged out of bed and chucked in the sea!



## WRITERS & ARTISTS

The decades leading up to independence were exciting times. A growing sense of Finnishness was explored by writers, artists and composers, many travelling to the wildernesses of Karelia for inspiration.

Start in Helsinki, where the **Ateneum** (p63) will acquaint you with some of these fascinating characters' work. Grab a copy of the *Kalevala* while you're in town, and have a drink at the **Hotel Kämp** (p74), where artists thrashed out the meaning of Finland during epic piss-ups!

**Porvoo** (p88), home to many artists, and Espoo's **Gallen-Kallela Museum** (p87) are musts, as is the journey to **Sibelius' home** (p88) near Järvenpää.

**Sibelius' birthplace** in Hämeenlinna (p183) is now a museum with a resident pianist; on the way (sort of) is **Lohja** (p93), near which is the rustic cottage where Lönnrot, creator of the *Kalevala*, was born.

Beyond Hämeenlinna, you should definitely investigate **Visavuori** (p186) and **Kalela** (p180), studios of sculptor Emil Wickström and painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela respectively.

Then on to Karelia, where all these women and men drew inspiration. From **Nurmes** (p165) you can plan expeditions of your own, exploring the wildernesses by foot, canoe, or husky-drawn sled. Nearby **Koli Hill** (p164) enchanted Sibelius, while further north, **Kuhmo** (p280) is the place to learn more about the *Kalevala* and its massive impact on Finnish history.



# Snapshot

Although most people who aren't avid sports fans would struggle to name more Finns than they have fingers, the country is very much a quiet achiever. It's not a nation to trumpet its success stories – plenty of folk think Nokia is Japanese – and the national tendency towards irony prevents too much bigheadedness anyway.

The fact remains that for a remote, cold, sparsely-populated forest nation, Finland does extremely well. It has a strong economy, great standard of living, and is considered the least corrupt country in the world. Neighbouring Sweden, who has traditionally looked down somewhat on Finland, has been startled to find Finnish companies acquiring stakes in Swedish institutions, and Finland is one of the world's leaders in technological research.

So what are the hot issues being talked about on the streets and in the cafés? Unsurprisingly, one of them is something that's been a constant topic for at least eight centuries: Russia. Finland's entire eastern border abuts the world's largest country, and it's natural that there are a number of positive and negative implications.

Since WWII, Finland has had close relations with Russia, sometimes more by necessity than choice. This experience has seen Finnish companies use their proximity, knowledge, and expertise in dealing with Russia to gain a head start on some of their competitors in the post-Cold War period. Trade is healthy, and many Finnish firms subcontract much of their business to Russia, where wages and overheads are lower.

But there are other sides to the Bear's proximity. The Finland–Russia border has one of the biggest differences in standard of living of any international frontier, and it's no surprise that Russian crime syndicates have seen peaceful Finland as fertile ground for various operations. Finns grumble about this, and also about the fact that Russian customs seem to keep Finnish trucks waiting for a day at the borders, while Russian trucks are waved straight through. The result is that Russian companies control most of the cross-border trade.

Finns, understandably given the difficult century history as backdrop, are still nervous that a radical shift in Russian domestic politics could spell trouble. National service and the army in general are taken seriously, and the soldiers who fought in the Winter and Continuation Wars are still revered as heroes.

Since 2000, Finland's President has been Tarja Halonen of the Social Democratic party. She has proved incredibly popular and is well loved by Finns, who often affectionately refer to her as Moominmamma, the mother Moomin from the Tove Jansson books.

The Finnish parliament is currently governed by a coalition of two of the three major parties, the Centre Party, and the Social Democrats. The conservative National Coalition Party is in opposition along with the Greens, who had quit the previous governing coalition over Finland's continuing policy of nuclear energy. The Prime Minister is Matti Vanhanen, who took over shortly after the election when Anneli Jäätteenmäki was forced to resign over a document scandal. Ongoing parliamentary issues include immigration and refugee policy, and establishment of close relations with the Baltic states, fledgling members of the EU. Estonia in particular, with its proximity and linguistic ties to Finland, often features on the agenda.

## FAST FACTS

Population:	5,236,611
Size:	338,145 sq km
Percentage of water:	10%
GDP per capita:	€28,646
Unemployment rate:	8.8%
Number of mobile phones:	4.9 million
Number of reindeer:	230,000
Number of days of no sun in Nuorgam:	51
Number of days of constant sun in Nuorgam:	72

Another issue in recent times has been in the north. Sámi herders have complained that fences constructed by forestry firms are impeding the moving of reindeer between pasture grounds. The forestry firms claim that an insignificant proportion of the reindeer pasturing area is affected. Legislation will hopefully resolve the issue, but it's a regrettable clash between an important ethnic minority and one of Finland's major industries.

Finland has enthusiastically embraced membership of the EU and, unlike Sweden or Denmark, has taken the euro onboard too. It's been a fairly happy relationship, although people have been surprised by the fairly cut-throat nature of European politics compared to domestic affairs, and by the constant jockeying for position within the EU. When both Silvio Berlusconi and Jacques Chirac unfairly criticized Finnish food as being the worst in the EU on separate occasions recently, some Finns reacted with hurt bemusement – why would their European 'brothers' say such things?

For the truth is that Finns are very interested in what other people think of them. This is a famous national stereotype, and a run-on from this is that Finns are immensely proud of any locals who make an international success of themselves; there's no 'tall poppy' syndrome to be found here. Even elderly jazz fans will brighten up if a visitor tells them they like the heavy, dark music of bands like Nightwish or HIM, two standard-bearers of what has been an incredibly successful period for Finnish music. And any Finnish sporting success is celebrated with gusto. At the rain-plagued 2005 World Athletic Championships in Helsinki, long-jumper Tommi Evilä grabbed bronze, Finland's only medal of the games, and the nation celebrated.

Racism is a more serious issue. There is significant hostility from a small segment of society towards refugee groups, of whom the Somali community is one of the largest. This rarely manifests itself in much more than general unpleasantness, but there have been several high-profile racist attacks in recent years, with Kajaani and Joensuu named the two worst towns for race-related crimes. It's a familiar story: the culprits usually young males, typically unemployed and in a small town. Beer and flawed racist politics are involved, and suddenly irrational hatred overflows into mindless violence. Still, it wouldn't be fair to speak of a significant 'neo-Nazi movement'; violent racism is rare in Finland, but shocking when it occurs, as the country as a whole is extremely peaceful. More common are antiquated attitudes towards non-white faces, typically from the older generation and partly explained by lack of contact with other nationalities until relatively recently.

A perennial stereotype of Finns is that of moody binge-drinkers, depressed by long winters without sunlight. There is a certain amount of truth to the image, although lack of sun is too simplistic an explanation. A notoriously problematic statistic, the Finnish suicide rate is high: double that of Sweden, and around four times that in the UK, for example. The rate in Lithuania, however, is double Finland's and in general eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union feature very highly on this sombre chart.

On alcohol consumption, Finland makes the top 20, but is well behind most EU countries in consumption per capita. The manner of drinking, however, can seem fairly self-destructive at times, with the 'number of people who passed out hammered last Friday night' per capita doubtlessly giving Finland a higher ranking! Some Finns argue that the high taxes on alcohol are responsible, with many people preferring to buy a bottle of cheap vodka to down quickly at home before heading out dancing rather than having a couple of pints at the local pub. Others blame a macho 'binge-drinking' culture. But, as ever, once moralizing enters the debate, any prospect of useful answers or even a decent definition of the problem disappears.



# The Author



## ANDY SYMINGTON

Andy, a professional travel writer, first visited Finland over a decade ago by accident, and it made a deep impression on him. It was winter, and walking on frozen lakes with the midday sun low in the sky seemed very romantic, until the temperature dropped below -30°C! Everyone told him he must see Finland in summer, so he returned a couple of years later, having in the meantime made many Finnish friends. Since then, they haven't been able to keep him away. Fuelled by a love of the *Kalevala*, huskies, saunas, Finnish mustard, moody *Suomi* rock and metal, but above all of Finnish people and their country, he has spent a lot of time in the country and travelled extensively around it.

### MY FAVOURITE TRIP...

Starting off in buzzy Tampere (p169) puts me right in the mood for Finland, with its unusual museums, heartwarming vanilla coffee, and cracker of a brewery-pub. From here it's a boat on the lake or a ride up Route 66 to Ruovesi (p180), where I'll spend a relaxing couple of days in a wooden cottage by a lake, fishing and taking saunas. Then on to Jyväskylä (p129) – I used to sneer at modern architecture but now I'm a big fan – and then Kuopio (p135), where a session in the fantastic communal smoke sauna ends up with a dip in the lake and a slice of *kalakukko* (little lake-fish baked inside a loaf of rye bread). Up to Kuhmo (p280) to renew my love affair with the *Kalevala* and then to Juuma (p291) and the Karhunkierros trek for a dose of Finnish forest. I never miss the Arktikum Museum in Rovaniemi (p296) but prefer smaller places, so (as it's summer) it's up to Pyhä (p312) for a relaxing cottage stay. If it were winter I might have chosen Levi (p295) for its great skiing. On to Muonio (p306) to pat my favourite huskies, and then the peaceful Sámi town of Hetta (p308) – I won't be stopping here though – then on to reach the utter north at Kilpisjärvi (p310) for a hike up Saana Fell.



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