

Soaking in the pure beauty of Finland



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Julia Kivelä / Visit Finland

BY

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The week I spent in Finland this summer made me a better person.

Since returning home, I've shaken my decades-long addiction to Diet Coke. I'm eating more fish, drinking more water, buying more berries and I've started hitting the sauna at my health club. Last month, I even bought a bicycle — with a basket.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning.

My adventure began in Helsinki, a charming, highly walkable, low-rise port city of about a half-million residents that blends old and new with ease. Here you'll encounter boulevards of neoclassical buildings plastered in pinks and yellows, similar to those you'd see in Sweden. That's because Finland was part of Sweden until 1809, and the Swedish influence remains so strong that Swedish is still the first language in some parts of the country. So the good news is, if you don't speak a lick of Finnish, you'll be understood if you speak Swedish. (Just kidding — nearly everyone here speaks English, possibly with better diction than you.)

What sets Helsinki apart from Stockholm and other Scandinavian capitals, however, are its onion domes. Yes, Russian onion domes. Finland's last ruler was Russia, and Imperial influences abound, from the golden onion domes on Uspenski Cathedral to a statue of Czar Alexander II in the city's central Senate Square and several "Lenin lived here" plaques across the city. This year, Finland is celebrating 100 years of independence from Russia with festivals and cultural events across the entire country (for more information, visit www.suomifinland100.fi).

Any travel story worth its mileage will mention these architectural landmarks, of course (plus the stupendous Central Railway Station designed by Eliel Saarinen, Eero's father) and the significant cultural and architectural mashup between Sweden and Russia. For an insight into the essence of what it means to be Finnish, however, you must visit Löyly.

This impressive wooden complex, which faces the Gulf of Finland and spans a stretch of the city's southern waterfront, is a public sauna, chic restaurant and bustling rooftop bar. Since opening in 2015, Löyly has topped every must-visit list among Finns and tourists alike, and not just because of the elk meatballs. Saunas are synonymous with Finland. Statistics vary, but a recent *New York Times* story reported that there is roughly one sauna per Finnish household. Apartment buildings have community saunas, companies have staff saunas. Even the Finnish president and prime minister have their own state saunas. In modern Finnish, the word *löyly* refers to the steam that sizzles up from hot sauna rocks when water's splashed on them, but in Old Finnish, *löyly* literally translates as "life."

Archipelago Adventure

After a day exploring Helsinki, I set out for the west coast, considered the sunniest region of Finland. Finns certainly enjoy their summers — this is, after all, a land with almost 190,000 lakes where the sun never really sets during the middle months.

I read a statistic that one in five Finns owns a summer cottage. It's not so much a status thing — these homes, called *mökki*, aren't all grand (although saunas come standard). Rather, having a permanent place to relax and enjoy nature is simply part of the national identity. They call it *mökki elämä*, or “cottage life.” I don't doubt it: Even my cab driver in Helsinki raved about his lake house.

Cottages large and small are scattered throughout the west coast, including the land along the shores of the Kvarken Archipelago in the Gulf of Bothnia, my next stop.

Tens of thousands of years ago, the Kvarken Archipelago existed under a massive glacier. When the glacier melted, the ground, no longer pressed down by weight of the ice, began to rise, and this glacial-isostatic uplift has been going on ever since at a rate that's among the highest in the world. The area also is covered by horizontal rock strips, or moraines. These geological strips, made of gravel, sand and mud, were formed when the glaciers retreated across the land.

This geology is so rare that the area was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A chartered boat ride is a terrific way to see it all, but for an impressive bird's-eye view of the area, be sure to climb the six-story-tall Saltkaret observation tower. (Note that mosquito repellent is a must, and there is no elevator at the tower.)

After hours of boating, exploring and stair climbing, I found the perfect ending to the day at the waterside Cafe Arken. The region around the cafe is popular among fishermen and hunters (there are moose and elk in the surrounding forest and seal further up the coast), and the small port is punctuated by ochre-red wooden boat houses that line up in perfectly symmetrical rows, rooftops forming a zigzag across the horizon.

The cafe, set in a renovated 1940s wooden building that was once a creamery, focuses on Finnish cuisine, which essentially means local food simply but perfectly prepared.

I dined on perch, since that's what had been caught that day, and dessert was an ever-so-slightly sweetened panna cotta topped with a thin layer of tart yellow sauce made from sea buckthorn, a vitamin-C-rich yellow berry that only grows in this area. A final toast: To the glacial-isostatic uplift, on which it's been said that it will be possible to walk to Sweden in a mere 2,500 years.

Wandering Through Wooden Villages

Finland's west coast was once the nation's hub of shipbuilding and seafaring. Towns were well-organized grids of simple, often single-story wooden buildings painted in bright colors and trimmed in white or other complementary colors. For centuries, wood was the primary building material in Finland. Not only was it plentiful, but the Finns believed a wooden house was healthier than a stone one because the wood allowed fresh air to circulate. Apparently, a drafty home wasn't a problem when you could just head to the sauna to get warm!

Over the centuries, many of these wooden villages were destroyed by war, time or, most often, fire. I visited three that remain just as splendid today as in ages past: Kristiinankaupunki, Reposaari and Rauma. Within these villages, wisteria blooms in clusters and little ceramic dogs still sit on nearly every lace-curtained window ledge, a throwback to a bygone day when passersby could tell in an instant whether the sailor of the house was at sea or at home by whether the dog's face faced outside, toward the sea, or inside to the hearth. *Juorupeili*, or "gossip mirrors," are still affixed to many exterior windows, a centuries-old contraption allowing curious residents to keep tabs on any action in the street without having to peep through the window.

While the architecture, traditions and spy-like maneuvers of these towns are similar, each one offers a distinctive glimpse into Finnish history and culture.

Kristiinankaupunki was founded in 1649 on the island of Koppö. The second-smallest town in Finland, it's considered one of the best preserved wooden towns in Scandinavia. Rather than turning into a living museum à la Colonial Williamsburg, this city is still very much inhabited by locals, who drive along its narrow streets and gather for strong coffee and sea buckthorn cake at the Lebell Museum cafe. Kristiinankaupunki proudly identifies as a Cittaslow town, an international network of towns that believes in improving the quality of life by slowing the pace of life. This approach certainly seems to be working here.

The island town of Reposaari is a bit feistier, maybe because it's younger — its oldest building dates only to 1838. After a gut-busting buffet of salmon multiple ways at one of the city's most popular restaurants, Merimesta, I was walking through the town to visit its historic hexagonal wooden church when I passed a group of older women and grandchildren offering free lemonade to anyone buying one of their crafts or T-shirts. I couldn't resist buying one of the shirts because the slogan was just too familiar — loosely translated, it was something akin to "Keep Reposaari Weird."

Rauma, or more precisely the district of wooden buildings known as “Old Rauma,” is perhaps the most well known of these three wooden villages. It’s the oldest of the three — it was founded in 1442 — and also the largest, not only in the region but in any Nordic country, hence its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the 1890s, Rauma was the largest port in the country, and its past wealth is evident. Every inch is picture-perfect to an almost Disney-esque degree, from the charm of the narrow, winding streets to the way colorful flowers cluster around wooden gateposts.

About 700 people still live in the old town, including many artists and artisans — like renowned sculptor Eila Minkkinen — who have set up galleries and studios in the old buildings. Rauma’s unique dialect is still spoken by many residents, and its distinctive style of bobbin lacemaking, a serious point of pride a hundred years ago, is still practiced by some and celebrated by all during Rauma’s annual Lace Week festival. It’s easy to spend the day wandering and exploring Old Rauma, and staying at the smartly renovated Hotel Vanha Rauma puts you smack dab in the center of it all.

Exploring Country Estates

Not every Finn lives in a wooden village, of course. Some live in country manors. OK, maybe only the luckiest of Finns. Many such manors survive and now welcome visitors, including Wiurila Manor and Svartå Manor. Both manors are beautifully preserved and offer unparalleled opportunities to experience very different versions of Finland’s agrarian past.

Just outside the busy city of Salo (home of the Vilpas Vikings professional basketball team) lies Wiurila Manor. The estate’s origins date to the 15th century, and it was passed down from mother to daughter for three centuries until it was acquired in 1787 by Baron and Maj. Gen. Magnus Wilhelm Armfelt. It’s still owned by the family.

The jewel of the property is the actual manor house, a sunshine-yellow neoclassical mansion built in 1811. At one time, it was the center of a self-sufficient estate totaling nearly 120,000 acres and boasting a dedicated sawmill, brick factory, dairy, windmill and shipping fleet to carry its lumber, butter and booze abroad. Wiurila Manor also housed the first known brewery in Finland.

Today, the manor's landholdings are much smaller — about 370 acres — and its commercial focus has shifted considerably. It's now a conference center, and it also hosts the Wiurila Golf and Country Club (with five en-suite double rooms above the clubhouse), Hilda Restaurant, riding stables and two museums, one showcasing centuries of everyday objects and clothing owned by the Armfelt family (“everyday” being a relative term — these were barons and counts, after all) and another for the family's horse-drawn carriages and sleighs, plus a scale model of the estate's smithy and carpentry workshops. In the summer, the manor's agricultural spaces, including the old granary and tar storage area, serve as exhibition space for thought-provoking contemporary Finnish art.

Anna Louise Standertskjöld-Brüninghaus, granddaughter of Count August Armfelt, is a constant presence on the property. She and her family live just beyond the manor house, and she graciously offered to show me around what for her isn't a premier destination property but rather is simply home.

Lunch at the golf club was a multicourse feast featuring wine, filet of reindeer and, for the dessert, the best blueberry tart I've ever eaten in my entire life. I was amazed to learn that Standertskjöld-Brüninghaus herself had baked it earlier in the day. (She was even kind enough to share the recipe — find it online at www.indulgedfw.com.)

In addition to that otherworldly dessert, the meal featured sauces and garnishes made from berries and mushrooms from the estate. This wasn't an attempt for the chef to show off or even to save money. It's just an honest expression of the way Finnish people are used to living and eating.

It all stems from a tenant of Finnish culture called “Everyman’s Right.” This gives every Finn the right to roam — on foot, on skis, by bike — on open land anywhere in the country without permission so long as that land is respected and everything is left as it was found.

Everyman’s Right also means you can partake of any edible plants you find. Berries, mushrooms, flowers and herbs are all an important part of the Finish diet, and kids here grow up collecting and devouring the delights of their forest foraging, which translates into a dedicated and delicious locavore culinary culture. The connection to the land doesn’t just happen at birth; it’s literally considered the birthright of everyone, titled landowner and humble farmer alike.

And what of that other Finnish custom, sauna? Until now, I hadn’t partaken in the steam, but that changed at Svartå Manor.

When Magnus Linder II built Svartå Manor in 1783, he spared no expense to trick out his new home in the Gustavian style of the day. Exquisite parquet floors were inlaid with four different woods. Walls were hand-painted with detailed murals and trompe l’oeil details, and several porcelain tiled stoves were imported from Sweden. As a result of changing fortunes, however, the home was sold and fell into disrepair; In the 1980s, Magnus Linder IV was able to buy back the property, and he spent years working with the National Board of Antiquities to bring it back to near-authentic condition.

Today, the actual manor house is a museum, but there’s far more to the property now, including a conference center, a restaurant and a hotel complex of five buildings ranging from the romantic and secluded “Merlin’s Tower,” a two-story suite, to a nine-room grand mansion that was built as an annex to the manor house.

There’s also the Orangery, a conservatory that contains two saunas — men’s and women’s, with requisite changing and shower areas — along with a common room fully stocked with gratis beer, soda and salty snacks. This is where I headed after dinner, determined to experience arguably the most integral element of Finnish culture before I headed home to Fort Worth.

But first, some notes on how to sauna like a Finn. You must learn to pronounce it correctly: It's "sow-nah," and it's both a noun and a verb. Got the pronunciation right? Good. Now, take off your clothes. Real Finns sauna naked (but they do shower first). The key is not to stay inside the sauna forever. I was given the typical tourist instructions: Sit for 10 minute intervals, and in between, take a cold shower. I did that for a while, until I decided it was time to go all in and sauna like a real Finn. I had already fallen for the country, I thought. Time to take the actual plunge.

Here's how it went down: In typical Finnish fashion, the Svartå Manor sauna sits next to a lake. You see, Finns don't take sauna breaks in the shower, they prefer to dunk themselves in a lake.

So, lake it was. I slowly emerged from the 170-something-degree sauna. It was midnight, and my skin glowed a freakish white under the moonlight. The air was bracing and sharp as I dashed down the dock, slid down the algaed metal steps and pushed off into the black water. It was so cold my breath caught in my throat for a moment. But then something extraordinary happened. I felt every pore in my body wake up. My mind cleared, and I experienced a state of hyper-focus. I could feel my heart beating in my chest, and I could hear the water rippling and gently lapping against the beams of the dock. I wasn't cold anymore. I had to laugh out loud. Here I was, in the middle of the night, naked, alone and wildly alive in a nameless lake somewhere on the west coast of Finland. I felt happy and alive, and I couldn't wait to get back to the sauna and do it all over again.

Which is how I feel about Finland. Until I can get there again, however, you'll find me foraging for blueberries at Central Market, lost in thought as I enjoy and appreciate my own natural surroundings.

GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights to Finland from DFW, but there are several major carriers that connect to Finnair flights, including American Airlines.

Tours

Wild Nordic Nature leads custom adventure excursions in English all year long, from birdwatching in the Kokemäenjoki river delta and kayaking the Baltic Sea National Park to swim and sauna tours. For more information, visit <http://wildnordicnature.com>.

Where to go

Löyly, Hernesaarenranta 4, 00150 Helsinki, info@loyly

helsinki.fi. **Eila Minkkinen Studio**, Vanhankirkonkatu 20, 26100 Rauma, www.dlc.fi/~eilamink.

Where to Eat

Cafe Arken, Byhamnvägen 194, Kvarken Archipelago, Finland, www.cafearken.fi. **Lebell Merchant House Museum and Cafe**, Strandgatan 53, Kristiinankaupunki, http://edu.krs.fi/museo/suomi/lebell/lebell_ta

pahtuma.html. **Merimesta**, Satamapolku, 28900 Pori Reposari, www.kalapaik

kamerimesta.fi.

Where to Stay

Hotel Vanha Rauma, Vanhankirkonkatu 26, 26100 Rauma, www.hotelvanharauma.fi/en/. **Wiurila Manor**, Viurilantie 126, 24910 Halikko, www.wiuri

lankartano.fi. **Svartå Manor**, Hållsnäsintie 89, 10360 Mustio, www.mustionlinna.fi.

FINNISH FAVORITES

Make room in your suitcase for these top three souvenirs:

Craft Gin: Finland is experiencing a distilling boom at the moment, and the awards, both at home and abroad, are streaming in. The Helsinki Distilling Company's Helsinki Dry Gin snagged a European "Spirit of the Year" award in 2016 thanks to a blend that includes native lingonberries, Balkan juniper and a pinch of rose petals. (To book facility tours and tastings, go to www.hdco.fi.) Another standout spirit brand is Kyrö Distillery, a small but modern facility housed in a renovated dairy dating back to 1908. Among its award-winning blends is Napue, flavored by Finnish sea buckthorn berries and birch leaves. Fun fact: The distillery founders got their business idea while brainstorming together in a sauna! (To book a tour, tasting and a meal, go to www.kyrodistillery.com.)

Marimekko: Marimekko is synonymous with Finnish design. The Helsinki-based company's vivid, vibrant patterns can be found in every corner of the country, from curtains to culottes. There are several Marimekko boutiques throughout central Helsinki where you can purchase the latest clothing, bags, shoes, jewelry and home goods like linens for tables and beds, glassware and dishes and even fabric by the yard. Debuting this month is a new print created to celebrate the country's centennial called Veljekset (meaning "brothers") that's available by the yard and as a tote bag or chair cushion. www.marimekko.com.

Black licorice: This may be an acquired taste, but it's one that's typically Finnish, and licorice flavors everything from candy to vodka to ice cream. The sweet kind is delightful — Fazer is a common brand to look out for — but more adventurous palates should try the super-salty version called Salmiakki. Don't say you weren't warned!

WIURILA MANOR BLUEBERRY TART

Courtesy of Anna Louise Standertskjöld-Brüninghaus and Wiurila Manor

- 2/3 cup butter
- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- 1 egg
- 2 cup flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 cup cream
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 cup blueberries

1. Heat the oven to 350 degrees.

2. Beat butter and brown sugar until fluffy, then add egg and beat until mixed well. In a separate bowl, combine flour, baking powder and cinnamon. Add the dry mix to the butter mixture a tablespoon at a time. Add cream at the end and beat until well combined.

3. Spread the dough evenly in a buttered pie dish. Sprinkle blueberries on top, leaving a little space around the edges. Sprinkle with sugar and bake until browned and set, about 40 minutes.