

START TO FINNISH

Soak up food and design across Helsinki, an unsung Nordic hot spot

By MARY HOLLAND

OFTEN overshadowed by fellow Nordic cities like Copenhagen and Stockholm, Helsinki hasn't quite garnered the attention it deserves. Surprising, because Finland's waterfront capital is a compelling city — one of the fastest-growing in Europe — with a deep-rooted design scene and restaurants that rival the likes of Copenhagen's vaunted (and temporarily closed and soon to reopen) Noma.

Visit Helsinki in the winter to see snow-dusted streets and a frozen sea that glistens in the afternoon light, or in the summer to bask in the midnight sun and hunker down at restaurants with seasonal menus that spill out onto the sidewalks. Small and manageable, unlike many capital cities, Helsinki has a towny feel with a small center that can be easily walked or biked. Here, how to pack in the best of Europe's next go-to destination.

Warm up

In Finland, a sauna isn't just a hot, dark room where you sweat out toxins and warm cold, achy bones (but, boy, do those Finns need that heat in the December). More important, it's a gathering place, where — traditionally — meetings were held, babies were born and families would (and still do) congregate.

In Helsinki, many Finns don't have the luxury of their own saunas, but luckily there are communal facilities to take refuge from the cold. A favorite among locals and visitors alike is **Löyly**, a sleek wooden public sauna with both electric and traditional smoke heaters. It also has a chill restaurant and an outdoor lounge where people can sip cocktails in their towels. Located on the Gulf of Finland, an offshoot of the Baltic Sea, Löyly is perfectly positioned so that sauna-goers can also take refreshing dips in the icy waters.

Get the look

Like most Scandinavian countries, Finland has a deep-rooted design heritage. Some of the country's most renowned brands, like **Marimekko**, are also the most celebrated of the 20th century. Full of the brand's signature bold textiles, Marimekko's Mikonkatu flagship store is a great place to shop for souvenirs (US.Marimekko.com).

The country continues to produce exceptional local design, too, which can be shopped in the **Design District** (DesignDistrict.fi) at small-scale, unique stores like **Lokal** (ceramics; LokalHelsinki.com) **Samuji** (fashion; Samuji.com) and **World of Tre** (homewares; WorldOfTre.com). To learn more about Finland's long and loved design history, the **Design Museum** (Design-Museum.fi) showcases regional

favorites — including the playful handmade **Ragamuf chair rug** (top left) — as well as international products.

Get outside

Fun fact: 80 percent of Finland is covered in forest. The tree-filled country is home to 39 national parks, which are utilized year-round. During colder times, they become playgrounds for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing; in warmer climes, they offer hiking trails and canoeing. One of the most accessible green spaces from Helsinki — a 30-minute drive away — is **Nuukio National Park** (NationalParks.fi/en/NuukioNP). The park offers countless outdoor activities from birdwatching to berry-picking and a newly built nature center, which houses a killer restaurant serving hearty farm-to-table food.

Eat up

Honestly, it's baffling that Finnish cuisine hasn't yet become all the rage. Helsinki is home to some of the finest restaurants in the region — none of which have a three-month waiting list or anything of the sort. High-end restaurants like **Finnjäväl** (Finnjavel.fi) and **Spis** (Spis.fi) serve haute Nordic cuisine. Think reindeer with lingonberries and mousse made of pine bark. Markets, including the **Old Market Hall** and **Hakaniemi Market Hall**, sell ready-to-eat slices of rye slathered with salmon and pastries like Runeberg torte, a k a almond and raspberry cake. And hip restaurants such as **The Cock** offer great salads; **The Cock** (TheCock.fi) and **Skiffer** (Skiffer.fi) offer contemporary all-day fare.

Logistics

Bunk at Design Hotels' contemporary **Klaus K**, where some beds are in pods and plush fabrics like velvet

are tastefully deployed
(from \$120; [KlausKHotel.com](#)).
As for getting there, **Finnair**
offers direct flights from
JFK to Helsinki Airport from
about \$600 round-trip in May
([Finnair.com](#)).



K PASA: Mod design is in ample supply at the Klaus K hotel.



SITTING PRETTY:
A perfect day in
Helsinki includes sauna
time at woodsy Löyly
(below) and ogling
playful furniture at
the Design Museum
(left).



GRASS ROOTS:
Fine dining
at Finnjavel.