

Travel

# Exploring Helsinki, the Nordic capital

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By Lauren Chattman Special to Newsday

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The Marimekko shop outlets on Pohjoisesplanadi sells clothing, home goods and fabrics.  
Photo Credit: Alamy / Fin Pics

If the Marimekko-designed amenity kits on long-haul Finnair flights aren't enough to get you on a plane to Helsinki, there are plenty of other reasons to check out this sparkling Nordic capital. Unusual cuisine, award-winning architecture, natural beauty, excellent shopping — you get it all in a clean, compact and walkable city center, along with 20 hours of daylight in the summertime. (Security at airports and railway stations in Finland has been increased since the Aug. 18 knife attacks in Turku, two hours west of Helsinki.)

### **Discover Finnish design**

Finnish national identity is intertwined with the country's design achievements. To get to know Finland, visit the Design Museum (admission about \$12; [designmuseum.fi](http://designmuseum.fi)), where you can see how Finnish designers, influenced by the arctic environment and international Modernism, forged the influential Finnish modern style. On view are items from Artek, Arabia, Iittala and Fiskars (yes, your favorite scissors are Finnish), many of them still in production and for sale in the museum's well-stocked gift shop.

## **View art and the city**

“Kiasma” means intersection, and the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art (admission about \$17; [kiasma.fi](http://kiasma.fi)) was designed by American architect Steven Holl as a focal point between several important landmarks in Helsinki: Alvar Aalto’s Finlandia Hall, Eliel Saarinen’s Helsinki Station, the Finnish Parliament Building and Toolo Bay. So while you ascend the ramps that connect the museum galleries, you can view the city and surroundings through both large and small windows that punctuate the spaces. Past exhibitions have included works by artists both Finnish (Jussi Kivi, Jani Ruscica) and international (Vito Acconci, Ernesto Neto).

## **Worship in silence**

There is an oasis of calm in one corner of the frenetic Kampii Plaza in central Helsinki. And because the Chapel of Silence ([helsinginkirkot.fi/en/churches/kamppi-chapel-of-silence](https://helsinginkirkot.fi/en/churches/kamppi-chapel-of-silence)) was built as part of the World Design Capital Helsinki program in 2012, it happens to be an architecturally distinguished oasis. The curved shape of the small building is reminiscent of an ark. Light comes indirectly from above, while inner walls lined with alder planks keep out the sights and sounds of the city. Visitors are asked to remain silent upon entering the main chapel. Religious and lay counselors are available in the entrance hall during chapel hours to listen and offer advice.

## **Ferry to the fortress**

Fifteen minutes by water from Helsinki's Market Hall is Suomenlinna (water bus about \$8 round trip; [suomenlinna.fi](http://suomenlinna.fi)), an island fortress in the harbor, built in the mid-1700s to protect Helsinki, then a part of Sweden, from Russian aggressors. It fell into Russian hands after the Russo-Swedish War, and finally was claimed by independent Finland in 1917. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to museums, restaurants, cafes and a visitors center, as well as numerous walkways, period buildings, tunnels and battlements. With plenty of scenic views of the water and the city, it is a popular spot for picnicking (provisions are plentiful at the Market Hall) during the summer months.

## **Shop for books with Alvar Aalto**

The Academic Book Store ([akateeminen.fi](http://akateeminen.fi)), designed by Finnish legend Alvar Aalto and completed in 1969, is a masterpiece of modernist design. Behind a conventional office building facade is a cavernous, marble-clad space. Angular skylights illuminate the bookstore's three stories, lending warmth to an interior that might otherwise seem hard and cold. Adding to the welcoming environment: a cafe and an abundance of English-language books to browse and buy.

## Sample Nordic cuisine

Like their neighbors in Denmark, Finnish chefs have become well-known for their innovative use of local meat, fish and produce, much of which is unfamiliar to U.S. diners. Reindeer, elk, herring and cloudberry are all common on Helsinki menus. For reasonably priced, amazing new Nordic cooking, try Restaurant Jord ([restaurantjord.fi](http://restaurantjord.fi)), overlooking Narinkka Square. The more casual sibling of Michelin-starred Restaurant Ask, Jord serves food that sounds unusual but tastes homey and delicious. Green spelt porridge with fermented carrot is creamy like risotto; spinach-nettle crepes are stuffed with cheese and served with smoked lingonberry jam; desserts include a semifreddo flavored with the tart juice of sea buckthorn berries.

## Warm up in a sauna

In Finland, sauna is a national pastime and a way of life. Most Finns sweat away their worries in their own private saunas (the country has 3.3 million of them, about one per household), but visitors can relieve stress the Finnish way in Helsinki's new public sauna complex. Loyly (about \$22 for two hours; [loylyhelsinki.fi](http://loylyhelsinki.fi)) is a spare, arresting structure, built from recycled wood on the edge of the Baltic. In addition to a regular steam sauna and a traditional smoke sauna, the facility has a bathing platform for dipping into the sea. Saunas are coed and bathing suits are mandatory. After a shower, enjoy a cold beer and a burger or some sushi in the casual but stunning indoor-outdoor restaurant overlooking the water.

## Get some coffee

Finland has the highest per capita consumption of coffee in the world, about 26 pounds per person per year. The focus is on quality as well as quantity, with world-class specialty coffee shops and roasters around every corner. Some of the best places are conveniently located near top tourist attractions. Before visiting the Temppeliaukio Church, enjoy a cup of Kenya Karimikui AA (winner in the “best filter” category at the Helsinki Coffee Festival this year) and a cinnamon bun at Cafetoria ([cafetoria.fi](http://cafetoria.fi)). At La Torrefazione ([latorre.fi](http://latorre.fi)), a stone’s throw from the city’s delightful Esplanade, customers can choose from a menu of fair trade coffees (Rwanda, Tanzania, Colombia, Brazil) they can choose to have brewed in three different French press sizes.



## Shop for Finnish threads

Heritage brand Marimekko ([marimekko.com](http://marimekko.com)) has multiple outposts throughout the city, selling their signature print women's and children's fashions as well as home goods and fabrics. Bargain hunters should check out the Marimekko outlet store (at Kirvesmiehenkatu 7) just a quick tram ride from the center, for discounted goods. And the city's vintage stores (try Frida Marina at Kaarlenkatu 10) are good places to search for pre-owned Marimekko dresses. For current Finnish style, stop in at Ivana Helsinki ([ivanahelsinki.com](http://ivanahelsinki.com)), the only Finnish fashion brand to have shown at both Paris and New York fashion weeks. Designer Paola Suhonen sells the brand's current collection of vintage- and nature-inspired print dresses and accessories in a charming two-story atelier in the Design District.

## Sample local sweets

Black licorice is a national obsession. Go to the food halls of Stockmann's department store ([stockmann.com](https://www.stockmann.com)) for a complete picture of what is available. Salmiakki, a strong, salty type of licorice flavored with ammonium chloride, was originally marketed as a cough medicine. Its astringent flavor is an acquired taste. If it's not for you, there are plenty of sweet choices. The ubiquitous Fazer brand sells individually wrapped tubes of licorice filled with raspberry, lemon, caramel, and vanilla fondant. Finns also love the combination of licorice and chocolate, so you will see chocolate-covered licorice as well as licorice-infused chocolate bars.