

## EUROPE

### City Break: Helsinki and St. Petersburg

By Monique Burns

**A**t the Baltic's easternmost reaches, along the deep-blue Gulf of Finland, two cities—Helsinki and St. Petersburg—share a similar heritage and a common sea. But it's their contrasts that fascinate. In St. Petersburg—Russia's second-largest city—grand boulevards and man-made canals, lined with ornate palaces and gilded monuments, recall the Imperial eras of Peter the Great and the Czars. In Helsinki—Finland's capital and World Design Capital 2012—stunning Art Deco and contemporary Functionalist buildings point to the 20th century and beyond. With the new high-speed *Allegro* train linking these two great cities in just 3 ½ hours, Helsinki and St. Petersburg can be easily explored on a single trip.

#### Exploring Helsinki

The country's largest hotel chain, **Sokos Hotels** ([www.sokoshotels.fi](http://www.sokoshotels.fi)) has 47 establishments in Finland, including seven in Helsinki. The landmark 1931 **Sokos Hotel Tornii**, onetime haunt of British spies, has 119 beautifully furnished contemporary rooms and a popular tower bar. A few



St. Peterburg's onion domes

blocks east is the 499-room **Sokos Hotel Presidentti**. Perfect for early train departures, the 229-room **Sokos Hotel Vaakuna** faces the Central Railway Station, a 1919 Eliel Saarinen masterpiece guarded by four massive stone figures.

Tram and bus lines, plus a modern metro, radiate from the city center, but compact Helsinki is made for walking. Most city sights—including the renowned Design District—are just a few blocks from the rail station. A 10-minute walk northwest is marble-sheathed Finlandia Hall, a Functionalist masterpiece by Alvar Aalto. Nearby, the underground Temppeliaukio Church, hewn from solid rock, shows only its massive domed roof.

East of the rail station and steps away from the modern Grand Casino, the 291-room, Art Deco-style **Radisson Blu Plaza** ([www.radissonblu.com](http://www.radissonblu.com)) is a great place to enjoy drinks, or a superb Nordic-influenced meal at Restaurant Pääkonttori. From there, it's a short walk east to Senate Square, dominated by domed Helsinki Cathedral.

Several blocks south of the station, browse through Stockmann department store, whose extensive food hall sells canned herring, reindeer pâté, rye bread and other Finnish specialties. A block farther south is Esplanade Park, four blocks of tree-shaded lawns from which dozens of smiling Finns seem to sprout on sunny days.

On either side of Esplanade Park are Pohjoisesplanadi and Eteläesplanadi, streets lined with Helsinki's most famous designer shops. This is the northeastern edge of the Design District ([www.designdistrict.fi](http://www.designdistrict.fi)), a neighborhood of nearly 200 shops, boutiques, restaurants and hotels. At 33 Pohjoisesplanadi, 60-year-old Marimekko stocks everything from bed linens and dish towels to shirts and dresses in bold stripes, geometric prints and florals. At no. 25, Iittala, the glassworks retailer, sells wavy Aalto vases and other design icons.

Nearby, elegant **Hotel Kämp** ([www.hotelkamp.com](http://www.hotelkamp.com)), Helsinki's only five-star hotel, serves sandwiches, soups and salads in Brasserie Kämp and Japanese specialties at YUME. In the new Restaurant Kämp Signé, Chef Sami Tallberg whips up new Nordic cuisine using organic meats, fish, vegetables and berries. Diners at Salutorget enjoy Scandinavian and continental specialties in a former bank building graced with columns and a huge stained-glass peacock window. Right in Esplanade Park, in a conservatory-like leaded-glass structure, is Kappeli. Established in 1867, and a onetime favorite of noted writers and composers like Jean Sibelius, Kappeli serves up light fare as well as salmon and reindeer. Opposite Kappeli, in the city's main information center at 19 Pohjoisesplanadi, pick up free city maps and brochures, including an excellent Design District map. Or sign up for the free 2 ½-hour Design District tour ([www.helsinkiexpert.fi](http://www.helsinkiexpert.fi)) given weekdays.



June through August. This year's Design Week special events are September 9-18. Helsinki Festival, Finland's largest music festival, will be staged in various venues, August 19-September 4.

At the esplanade's eastern end, overlooking the South Harbor, lively Market Square is filled with flower and food-sellers. Sight-seeing boats cruise the harbor, and ferries visit several ports in Helsinki's 315-island archipelago. The popular trip to 18th-century Suomenlinna Sea Fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, takes 15 minutes aboard JT-Line ([www.jt-line.fi](http://www.jt-line.fi)). Visitors can follow the self-guided Blue Route across the fort's four connected islands. In summer, guided tours in English are given daily. At Panimo Brewery Restaurant, one of the site's dozen restaurants and cafés, sample Nordic specialties like reindeer pâté, bear salami, salmon and Baltic herring.

## Off to St. Petersburg

Blame it on the city's accessible beauty or the Finns' easy-going charm, but leaving Helsinki is tough. Fortunately, the *Allegro* makes the transition painless. In just 3 ½ hours, the high-speed train journeys from Helsinki's Central Railway Station to St. Petersburg's Finland Station, just north of the city center.

Among the city's loveliest and most centrally located establishments is the 331-room **Sokos Hotel Palace Bridge** ([www.sokoshotels.fi](http://www.sokoshotels.fi)), one of the city's three Sokos hotels. In the hotel's red-brick underground vaults is The Cellar pub, with a regulation bowling alley, and the tony Eliseev Wine Cellar. The hotel has three restaurants, and a three-story spa featuring eight different saunas, including the unusual Snow Paradise.

From the hotel, it's a 15-minute walk across one of the city's 342 bridges to the Neva River's left bank and St. Petersburg's most famous attraction, The Hermitage. In four opulent palaces, the museum collections range from 500,000-year-old Paleolithic finds and 12th-century icons to 20th-century paintings by Wassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall.

To the south, St. Petersburg's main boulevard, Nevsky Prospekt, is lined with restaurants, churches and shops. Jewelry made from Baltic amber can be found in various shops, including the gift shop of the Stroganov Palace art museum. Don't forget to stop at Dom Knigi, or House of Books, an enormous bookstore housed in the ornately sculpted 1904 Singer & Company building. Nearby, domed Kazan Cathedral sports a majestic horseshoe-shaped colonnade. East, along Konyushennaya Ulitsa, is The Church of Our Saviour on the Spilt Blood whose fanciful onion-shaped domes, in red, blue and green enamel, recall St. Basil's in Moscow.

On Nevsky Prospekt's west side, along the Neva River, rises the gold-spined Admiralty, founded by Peter the Great in 1704. Just south is St. Isaac's Square where the trendy, glass-walled Mansarda restaurant serves up innovative international cuisine and panoramic views of huge domed and columned St. Isaac's Cathedral. Here, too, is St. Petersburg's landmark 210-room **Astoria Hotel** ([www.theastoriahotel.com](http://www.theastoriahotel.com)), built in 1912.

After several blocks' walk, take the wide Blue Bridge over the Moika River to Mariinsky Palace, a yellow-and-white Neoclassical confection built for Czar Nicholas I's daughter. West lies Mariinsky Theatre, an aqua-and-white music hall where the great Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova once performed. A visit here sets the mood for dinner at nearby Sadko, with colorfully painted vaulted ceilings and outsized red Murano-style

chandeliers. Starters include the beet-and-cabbage soup, borscht, pork and beef dumplings called pelmeni, and crepe-like blinis with red caviar and sour cream. Pike, perch and salmon share the eight-page menu with Russian standards like beef Stroganov and chicken Kiev. The food is delectable, but even better are the young waiters who serenade diners with passionate arias and Russian folk songs—a fitting end to a romantic interlude in St. Petersburg.

## For More Information

**Finnair** ([www.finnair.com](http://www.finnair.com)), Finland's national carrier, has direct flights daily from New York's JFK to Helsinki (about 8 hours). In May, daily direct flights began aboard code-share partner **American Airlines** ([www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)) from Chicago's O'Hare Airport to Helsinki (about 10 hours). Connecting flights are available through major U.S. gateways and through Frankfurt, London and Paris.

**Finnish Railways** ([www.vr.fi](http://www.vr.fi)) operates four daily *Allegro* trains to and from Helsinki's Central Railway Station and St. Petersburg's Finland Station. First class costs 134 euros (about \$187), second class costs 84 euros (about \$117). Visas for U.S. citizens are available from the Russian Consulate General in New York ([www.ruscon.com](http://www.ruscon.com)). For reservations, visit [www.vr.fi/allegro](http://www.vr.fi/allegro) or [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com)

For information on Helsinki, log on to [www.visitfinland.com](http://www.visitfinland.com), [www.visithelsinki.fi](http://www.visithelsinki.fi) and [www.wdc2012helsinki.fi](http://www.wdc2012helsinki.fi) For information on St. Petersburg, log on to [www.visitrussia.org.uk](http://www.visitrussia.org.uk) and [www.saint-petersburg.com](http://www.saint-petersburg.com)