



instant escapes

Happy Helsinki

Finns are lookin' up! Want to know why? Read on, and raise your spirits

Woo-hoo! Finland's the happiest nation in the world and a stay in its capital will leave you beaming, too. This pretty city of 330 islands revels in rosy-cheeked outdoor life *and* cosy cafe culture. Forage in its forests, ogle its architecture, gorge on its cheerfully ethical food, then take a shivery Baltic dip or steamy sauna — whichever makes you happy... **By Karyn Noble**



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CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | HAPPY HELSINKI

SEE & DO

● The secret behind that bracing Finnish bonhomie is the Finns' outdoor lifestyle — and there's no reason to let winter get in the way. Warm up at Helsinki's lively Market Square (① on map) with traditional salmon soup at one of the heated stalls, while waiting for a ferry to the Suomenlinna maritime fortress (suomenlinna.fi; free; £4.30 ferry; ②). The 15-minute trip is especially dramatic in winter as the **ferry cracks through ice-covered water and the fortress has a wonderful otherworldly quality**. Take a tour of the island (£9.40, 1hr) then pop into its Brewery (suomenlinnanpanimo.fi; ③) and sup on a hearty Helsinki porter before the return trip.

● Saunas are a feelgood must-do. And in winter, at the architecturally astonishing Löyly, on the seafront, **the brave can also go ice-swimming before thawing out in steamy snugness** (loylyhelsinki.fi; £16 for two hours, including towel; ④). In summer, take the boat from Suomenlinna or Market Square to the tiny island of Lonna (lonna.fi; ⑤) for Helsinki's **newest public sauna and its enchanting lost-isle setting** (£14.50, 2hr; £6 towel hire).

● Gourmet retail therapy will lift any mood. Vanha Kauppahalli (vanha.kauppahalli.fi; ⑥) **caters to locals and visitors alike — expect reindeer chips, bear pâté and Moomin biscuits**. Story (story-restaurants.fi), the restaurant/cafe within, serves food from the

FEELING UP FOR IT?
If you fancy a steamy time in the clouds, one of the SkyWheel's 30 gondolas is a sauna... (from £205 for up to four people; skysauna.fi)

HOT STUFF
For a free public sauna (mixed sex, swimsuit optional) that's open 24/7, try Sompasauna (sompasauna.fi), run by volunteers. You can BYO drinks and sausages to cook on the grill, too

Port of call: the quiet harbourfront in Helsinki's Katajanokka district; below, Suomenlinna Fortress; an icy dip at Löyly

market — eat your lunch at a table overlooking the 40-metre-high SkyWheel (skywheel.fi; £11; ⑦).

● Ready to soar? At Fööni (xn--fni-snaa.fi; ⑧), **you can 'fly' in a vertical wind tunnel, where a 300kph blast keeps you airborne** for two to four minutes (from £50). You'll feel as if you've conquered the world. Or just watch others from its designer-retro Hangaari Bar & Cafe (it's fun!).

● Being around plants reduces stress and, naturally, Helsinki has it covered. The Winter Garden (in fact open year-round) has **200 types of exotic plants in a warm greenhouse** (free; ⑨). It's prettiest in winter (azaleas, amaryllises, hyacinths and lilies of the valley) and at Easter (daffodils and tulips). Twenty minutes' walk away, the Kaisaniemi Botanic Garden (luomus.fi/en/kaisaniemi-botanic-garden; £8.60; ⑩) is **home to the world's biggest seed, and a water lily that survived WWII bombings**.

● Finns skate stress away. Buy a combined ticket (£14.50) to Jääpuisto Ice Park (jaapuisto.fi; winter only; £5 skate rental; ⑪) and Allas Sea Pool (allasseapool.fi; ⑫), where you can **follow up your Torvill & Dean act with a dip in either the heated pool (27C) or the seawater one (9C) — or maybe even try some sauna yoga (£22)**.

● Next, spiritual wellbeing. You can't miss the distinctive green domes and calming Neo-Classical architecture of Helsinki Cathedral (helsingintuomio.kirkko.fi; ⑬), which rises above Senate Square ⑭. Originally constructed as a tribute to Tsar Nicholas I of Russia, in winter **it's a pure white haven of tastefully lit-up serenity**.

● Helsinki Design Museum (design.museum.fi; £10.25; ⑮) is a huge Neo-Gothic building filled with jolly 'I had no idea Finns invented that' surprises: scissors, **a necklace worn by Princess Leia in Star Wars**, the iconic '60s Eero Aarnio ball-shaped chair and the Angry Birds game. These revelations appear in *Utopia Now—The Story of Finnish Design* ('til December 31, 2020), but the whole place is a blast. Especially after a beer or glass of wine in the surprisingly cool cafe. ➤



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EAT

● **Cosy breakfast**

EL FANT COFFEE & WINE BAR

(Mains about £9)

Because: You're after good coffee and healthy (mostly organic) breakfasts with a strong veggie focus. **Travel's tip:** The natural wines are a highlight, so a lunchtime visit is also a good idea (it's closed in the evenings). *Katariinankatu 3; 00 358 442 369953, elfant.info; @.*

● **Creative veggie**

YES YES YES (Mains about £12)

Because: You can watch as they make your flatbreads to eat with creative vegetarian food, such as halloumi fries with pomegranate and coriander. **Travel's tip:** The best way to experience the menu is to share a variety of plates, so go in a group if you can. *Iso Roobertinkatu 1; 00 358 961 285130, yesyesyes.fi; @.*

● **Finnish tapas**

JUURI (Mains about £22)

Because: You'll find clever flavour combinations with top-quality produce at this *sapas* (Finnish tapas) restaurant, favoured by locals. **Travel's tip:** The concept of *sapas* has spread, but this place is still very popular so you'll need to book ahead. *Korkeavuorenkatu 27; 00 358 096 35732, juuri.fi; @.*

● **Zero-waste champions**

NOLLA (Four courses from £41)

Because: It's the first zero-waste restaurant in the Nordic region ('*nolla*' means 'zero'). **Travel's tip:** Like the bathroom soap? It's made from the kitchen's recycled cooking oil by JooSoap — get it online at *joosoup.org*. *Fredrikinkatu 22; 00 358 401639313, restaurantnolla.com; @.*

● **Michelin-starred treat**

GRON (Four courses from £55)

Because: You'll get exemplary food (eg, caramelised silver-onion pie with blackcurrant-leaf vinegar, preserved garlic flowers, ripe and unripe blackcurrants) in a more-relaxed-than-usual atmosphere for a Michelin-starred restaurant. **Travel's tip:** If you're obsessed with the homemade sourdough — and many are — you can get a fix to take away at the restaurant's sibling Way Bakery. *Albertinkatu 36; 00 358 503 289181, restaurantgron.com; @.*

POST-SHOP PICK-ME-UP

Just round the corner — at 2 Kluuvikatu — is restaurant Emo. You can thaw out by its fire for as long as you want with a hot choc (£6; add your favourite liqueur for an extra £3).

BUDGET OPTION

If you want the Juuri organic quality without the multi-course expense, it has a more casual cafe and serve-yourself salad bar (eat-in/takeaway; £8) opposite Oodi Rivoli Jardin.

FAMILY SECRET

Another great (free) place for kids (and adults, let's be honest) is the futuristic Oodi Central Library, with play areas and great views from its third-floor Citizens Terrace.

DRINK & SHOP

● **Distinctly Finnish cocktails**

MARSKI BAR

Because: This bar in the Marski by Scandic hotel is the place for spirits with all kinds of local berries (try blueberry spruce and cloudberry). **Travel's tip:** Cocktails come in a low- or no-alcohol version — just ask. *Mannerheimintie 10; scandichotels.com; @.*

● **Nordic design**

TRE

Because: You love Finnish style. Here you can buy anything from lingonberry powder to sauna scent bags. **Travel's tip:** There's another Tre outlet at the nearby Kämp Galleria — a collaboration between designer Klaus Haapaniemi and indie bookstore Nide. *Mikonkatu 6; worldoftre.com; @.*

● **Coffee ground zero**

GOOD LIFE COFFEE

Because: This is one of Helsinki's best coffee shops. **Travel's tip:** Don't be confused by the '*kahvia*' signage — it means 'coffee' in Finnish. If you spot Avoid Bad Life tote bags and T-shirts, you're in the right place. *Kolmas Linja 17; goodlifecoffee.fi; @.*



ASK THE LOCAL

Varpu Pöyry is the founder of *herfinland.com*, a site offering tips on travelling in Helsinki and Finland.

“Our public transport system is great. Take tram No. 4 to see the city, and No. 3 to go to beautiful southern Helsinki. And get a 24-hour pass: it costs only £7, and covers commuter trains, buses, trams, the Metro and Suomenlinna ferry. Kids under seven travel free. In fact, the city's great for kids: next to the Cathedral @ you'll find the Helsinki City Museum (*helsinginkaupunginmuseo.fi*; free; @) and its brill Children's Town, a permanent fixture and guaranteed hit with youngsters. Like most museums here, it's free for kids. And one more thrift tip: there's no need to buy water as the stuff from the tap is delicious. You can fill your bottle anywhere.



STAY

● **Bargain on nature's doorstep**

MYOHOSTEL (Doubles from £72, B&B)

Because: It's a few kilometres out of town in the Ruskeasu district, but you'll be close to Helsinki's Central Park. There's a definite feelgood vibe, too, as the hostel makes an effort to employ disabled people. Choose from 19 rooms, private or dorm-style. **Travel's tip:** The area is great for food-foraging. Download the Helsinki Harvest Map (*satokartta.weebly.com*) for info. Depending on the season, you could find bilberries, wild strawberries, raspberries and mushrooms. *Tenholantie 10F; myohostel.com; @.*

● **Finnish designs, female focused**

HOTEL HELKA (Doubles from £108, B&B)

Because: Any profit from your stay in this artfully designed '20s building goes to the Finnish women's YWCA to fund support, camps and activities for women in crisis situations. It's also handy for the Helsinki Art Museum. **Travel's tip:** Don't worry about the

nearby karaoke bar, or the Helka's Bar on the ground floor — the rooms are soundproofed. *Pohjoinen Rautatiekatu 23; hotelhelka.com; @.*

● **Perfectly practical**

MARSKI BY SCANDIC (Doubles from £123, B&B)

Because: The service here is excellent (it's the kind of place that notes your birthday from your passport and gives you a gift) and the rooms are both spacious and comforting. **Travel's tip:** You're right on the city's main street and tram route, so ask for a back room to avoid street noise. *Mannerheimintie 10; scandichotels.com; @.*

● **Central station location**

SOKOS HOTEL VAAKUNA (Doubles from £132, B&B)

Because: It's ideal for a short stay as it's close to Helsinki's Central railway station, which is just a 40-minute train ride to the airport. It's also not far from the airport shuttlebus stop. It has 270 soundproof rooms and a slight 'diplomatic convention' feel to it, but



Lap of luxury: clockwise from top left, cosy elegance at Lapland Hotels Bulevardi; *sapas* dish at Juuri; Nordic style at the Hotel St George; designer homeware at Tre; creative veggie dishes at Yes Yes Yes

GOOD FOR GLUTTONS

For once the buffet breakfast is worth the money! At St George, £17 buys all-you-can-eat carefully curated delicacies from the 'Head of Food Experiences'

there are excellent views across Helsinki from the ninth floor. **Travel's tip:** Housekeeping can be a bit hit and miss. The same goes for breakfast, so arrive early at the buffet to avoid disappointment. *Asema-aukio 2; sokoshotels.fi; @.*

● **Reindeer-themed sophistication**

LAPLAND HOTELS BULEVARDI

(Doubles from £170, B&B)

Because: You'll feel as if you're living in deepest, darkest Lapland, but in a luxurious, designer way. **Travel's tip:** Where else could you pay £50 to upgrade to a room with its very own sauna? Go on, you know you want to. *Bulevardi 28; laplandhotels.com; @.*

● **Elegant artistic escape**

HOTEL ST GEORGE (Studio from £179, room only)

Because: You're in an arty part of town, with Ai Weiwei works and an in-house bakery to sate the munchies. **Travel's tip:** The restaurant, Andrea (mains about £25) is one to stay in for: Finnish-Turkish chef Mehmet Gürs

does excellent Anatolian treats such as spicy grilled pumpkin and duck *börek*. *Yrjönkatu 13C; stgeorgehelsinki.com; @.*

GET ME THERE
GO INDEPENDENT

Norwegian flies from Gatwick to Helsinki from £74 return. **Finnair** flies from Heathrow from £55 return, Edinburgh from £177 and Manchester from £149. **BA** flies from Heathrow from £105 return. The bus or train from the airport to the centre takes 30 minutes (£5.30) — see *hsl.fi* for details.

GO PACKAGED

Expedia (*expedia.co.uk*) has two nights at the Marski by Scandic hotel from £202pp, or two at Hotel St George for £283pp, both room only, with Heathrow flights. Or try *lastminute.com*.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See *myhelsinki.fi*. The **Helsinki Card** (*helsinkiocard.com*) offers entry to more than 25 attractions as well as unlimited public transport (one, two or three days; £42, £53 and £61 respectively). ■