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Porvoo, A Finnish Experience

Article #:	26961	Print version	Save this Article
Section:	LIFE - TRAVEL	File Size:	1,104 words
Issue Date:	11 / 2009	Start Page:	
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In September, Finns say, the weather is driven by nine horses: One minute the sun is shining, the next threatens rain. But in southern Finland that changeability offers the best of both worlds. Summer still lingers in forests carpeted with fruit-laden blueberry and lingonberry bushes. Fall's promise is evidenced by the bounty of mushrooms -- chanterelles, black trumpets, and ceps -- and the beginning of ruska -- the Finnish term for fall foliage -- seen in the verdant mosses turning red and yellow, birches changing to gold, and old apple trees heavy with fruit.



Shore houses, seen from the west bank of Porvoo River, were built in the 13th century as warehouses for the exotic fruits, wines, and spices that once entered the country at this port city.

Judith Turner-Yamamoto [Click image to enlarge.](#)

There is no better place to experience firsthand Finland's abiding relationship with nature and the outdoors than in Porvoo, located 45 minutes from Helsinki. Weekends, Helsinkians regularly escape to its nearby charms by boat -- bringing their bicycles with them -- to enjoy the remaining warm days of the season. Bicycle and pedestrian routes extend throughout the city along all its roadways and beyond to an extensive network of nature trails through the surrounding wetlands and forests.

Established in 1346, Porvoo is Finland's second oldest city. Silver willows and gnarled linden trees line the banks of the river from the Jokiranta district, with its guest marina and newly renovated waterfront esplanade featuring fountains, landscaped perennial gardens, and cafes, to the Old Bridge, part of the King's Road, the oldest highway in Finland leading from Turku to Vyborg.

The buildings in old Porvoo district -- home to some 700 people and covering an area of 18 hectares -- were built according to a medieval town plan. Nestled into a hillside above the river, the area which includes the cathedral, is reached by twisting cobbled paths paved with huge uneven stones. Traditional wood houses in soft pink, deep ocher, green, putty, and blue with black metal roofs line the streets.

An important center of trade since the 13th century, exotic fruits, wines, and

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spices once entered the country through Porvoo. Shore houses, built at the river's edge with docks extending over the water, served as warehouses for these goods and later for coffee and tobacco. Painted red ocher in the 18th century to honor the arrival of Sweden's King Gustav III, they are preserved today as private residences. They can best be viewed from the west bank of the Porvoo River. Here, architect Tuomo Siitonen's plan for revitalization and development of the west bank is in full swing. The complex of individual residences he designed echoes the lines and color of the traditional shore houses.



Shopper checking produce offered in the farmer's market in the village square. Judith Turner-Yamamoto [Click image to enlarge.](#)

The Siikossari nature trail picks up just beyond the shipyard at the river's edge, and winds through the Ruskis Nature Reserve. Located in the delta area of the Porvoo River, the area was designated in 1945 as Finland's first protected wetland.

the surprise of a panoramic view of the entire wetland and, in the distance, of Porvoo and its harbor.

A series of bridges leads to the island. Tall reeds cover the area, the wind setting off a melodious rustling in the shifting reeds rocked by the waves of a passing boat. At an observation tower discovered down a winding forest path, we climbed three stories to enjoy

Heading into the forest on the other side of town, we often hiked the rocky paths to the granite-topped mountain at the heart of Kokonniemi, an outdoor recreation area. The large forested area features a swimming lake -- open year-round for winter swimming in ice-covered water -- an indoor ice skating rink and tennis center, ski slopes, and miles of illuminated gravel walking trails. The paths to the mountain top were lush with ferns, blueberry and lingonberry bushes, and thick moss carpeting the forest floor and stone outcrops. On top of the mountain's rugged face the popular callura, a tough plant with tight purple blooms, bloomed in wild profusion.

The wholesome culinary ingredients found in the Finnish forest and daily farmer's market do not require complicated cooking methods or strong spices. It is at its best prepared simply. With the northernmost agriculture in Europe, Finland's soil freezes everywhere in winter, the earth purifying itself, Finns like to say, and this, they maintain, gives their produce its incredible freshness. In season, berry and mushroom vendors set up shop in front of every grocery store, selling their fresh goods by the liter. Salad and herbs and pea shoots are grown in small pots and are on offer at all grocery stores.

Foraging in the market in the city's square, we came away with the last of the summer's harvest: small strawberries that were bombs of sweetness, delicate green peas, raspberries, lingonberries, cloudberries from Lapland, and mushrooms, golden chanterelles, black trumpet mushrooms. Potatoes, a whole stand devoted to potatoes: Timos, rosamundas, and Pulkulas -- lapland potatoes. Sweet and floury, they can be boiled in water for fifteen minutes and served on their own, without salt or butter, just perhaps a sprinkling of dill. The most commonly used herb -- it owes its distinctive and incredibly strong fragrance to the long summer nights.

Fish from the Baltic Sea and the country's more than 200,000 lakes are popular. We sampled a new smoked fish every few days, discovering an array of Baltic herring and salmon, whitefish, the small vendace -- best dredged in rye

flour and salt and sautéed in butter and enjoyed with beer--rainbow trout, and perch, the most favored fish, found everywhere but the small mountain lakes of Lapland.

Towards the end of our stay in Porvoo, we were invited for an evening at the historic lakeside home of friends. We ate at a square wooden table in the center of the simple upstairs gallery. Pushed to the wall was a suite of pale Scandinavian furniture covered in a blue striped fabric. Over the table hung a candelabra lit with deep blue candles. Candles light the four double windows around the room.

We began with rounds of ruis or rye bread topped with a salmon ceviche made with lime juice. A green salad of fresh pea shoots followed. Pulkula potatoes and grilled salmon served with creamy lobster and coconut sauce, accompanied by roasted turnips, carrots, and parsnips. Dessert was baked whey cheese -- a traditional dessert made with sour milk, milk, and eggs, served with cloudberry coulis and a homemade liqueur from white plums, an ancient fruit no larger than your thumb. As it matures, it takes on the taste of almonds.

After dinner we walked down to the lake in the inked darkness and crisped air. We took their boat out to the middle of lake, admiring the reflection of the stars and the surrounding birch trees turning to gold.

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