

After four visits to Helsinki, this must be love

Sunday, Jul. 05, 2009 By Patti Nickell - Contributing Travel Writer

HELSINKI, Finland — During my life, I've had mad love affairs with cities — London, Paris, Buenos Aires, Sydney, Hong Kong. The symptoms are the usual ones associated with a romance — palpitations at the thought of seeing it again, perfect bliss in its company and pangs of sorrow at having to leave it.

Then there are the places that might not inspire instant passion, but the longer you are around them, you begin to see qualities that might not have been immediately obvious. Almost without being aware of it, you begin to develop deep feelings. Helsinki is such a city for me.

It might not have the sophistication of Paris, the glamor and vitality of London or the timeless splendor of Rome (Helsinki, in fact, is one of Europe's youngest cities, having been founded in 1550 by Swedish King Gustav Vasa), but the more time you spend here (this was my fourth visit), the more this city and its quiet charm work their way into your heart.



After a sauna near downtown Helsinki, a group of women cooled off in the sea. Finns love the sauna. The Finnish Sauna Society estimates there is a sauna for every three people.

A good place to start your exploration is at Market Square, which, along with Esplanade Park, is the heart of Helsinki. Sandwiched between the sea and a row of historic buildings housing the Presidential Palace, City Hall and the Swedish embassy, Market Square is at its bustling best in the early morning, when vendors set up food stalls, attracting throngs of hungry humans and seagulls. The heady mix of aromas — brewing coffee, frying food,

the sweetness of flowers and the salt of the sea air — is tantalizing; this is local color at its best.

Fellow Scandinavian city Copenhagen has *The Little Mermaid* statue, but Helsinki has its own guardian sea nymph. The lovely *Havis Amanda* statue separates Market Square from Esplanade Park, a leafy enclave lined on both sides by chic restaurants and high-end stores (think Marimekko). You definitely should plan to grab a table on the outside terrace of Kappeli Restaurant; order a coffee, beer or a glass of the wonderful cloudberry liqueur; and watch a passing parade of Finns walking their dogs. If you're lucky, an orchestra, in full formal dress, will be tuning up in the bandstand across from the Kappeli for one of the concerts that continue throughout the day. I was so entranced by the music (and cloudberry liqueur) that I sat through two concerts — a fiery tango performance that would have made Carlos Gardel proud (the Finns are passionate devotees of tango) and a tribute to a native son, composer Jean Sibelius, that included his epic *Finlandia* and *The Swan of Tuonela*.

If you are a fan of Sibelius, you might be able to catch a concert of his music at Finlandia Hall, but even if he is not on the hall's concert schedule during your visit, you can pay your respects at one of the city's most unusual monuments. The Sibelius Monument, in Sibelius Park, is a sculpture resembling organ pipes. It is 600 hollow, steel pipes welded together in a wavelike pattern.

Helsinki is composed of a number of bays, peninsulas and islands on the Gulf of Finland and near the Baltic Sea. A pleasant way to spend a summer afternoon is to take a cruise through its winding canals — like Stockholm, Helsinki is often referred to as "the Venice of the North." On the islands that dot the canals and waterways are summer cottages, nearly all of them with a separate building given over to the Finnish national obsession, the sauna.

Another popular cruise will take you to Suomenlinna, once the greatest sea fortress in the Baltic and often referred to as northern Europe's Rock of Gibraltar. It was built by the Swedes in the mid-18th century to protect the city from raiding corsairs and invading Russians (for centuries Finland had been a pawn in the war games of its two powerful neighbors, Sweden and Russia). It proved successful in withstanding the corsairs but was no match for the Russians, who seized it in 1808. Today, Suomenlinna is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a living-history museum, with the remains of fortifications and catacombs from its more tempestuous days. It also has parks, six museums and the homes of about 1,000 people. The island also is a popular place to enjoy a summer picnic while watching the ferries making their way to Tallinn, Estonia, or St. Petersburg, Russia.

If the gulf islands are the lungs of Helsinki, and Market Square and Esplanade Park its heart, Helsinki Cathedral is its most visible symbol. The Lutheran cathedral, neo-classical in design, sits atop a hill overlooking Senate Square and resembles Paris' Sacre Coeur. Helsinki Cathedral's large green onion dome and four smaller domes and the 12 apostles on the roof can be seen from many vantage points throughout the city. The square itself is worth a look, especially for the statue that dominates it. With the always testy and often

turbulent relationship between Finland and Russia, one would not expect to see a statue of a Russian czar given such prominence. Czar Alexander II, however, as grand duke of Finland in the 19th century, encouraged Finnish self-rule, and the Finns acknowledged him with this monument.

The Finns might view Helsinki Cathedral as their spiritual beacon, but tourists flock to another church: Temppeliaukio Kirkko, or the Rock Church. Blasted out of solid granite, this underground church, which doubles as a venue for classical music concerts, is a marvel of modern architecture, with its circular dome of copper sheeting and an interior lit by natural light from 180 window panes fanning out from the dome.

Finally, you can't come to Finland without trying a sauna. In contrast to the country's Lapland region, where men and women (and children) take their saunas together sans clothing — they view it as a communal activity and bonding experience — Helsinki's saunas are more conservative. You can find clothing-optional coed saunas, but there are a number reserved exclusively for men or women. Your hotel concierge can direct you to whichever type you prefer.

In retrospect, how can you not love a city that erects monuments to its oppressors, has concerts in its churches, holds happy hours in saunas as often as in bars or pubs, and whose residents are so quiet that it is joked that they invented text messaging just so they wouldn't have to talk to one another?

- If You Go - Helsinki

Getting there: FinnAir has daily flights from New York's JFK airport to Helsinki. Go to www.finnair.com for schedules and fares.

Where to stay: Hotel Haven is a new boutique

- Where to eat:
 - Kappeli, 1 Esplanade. This lovely café in Esplanade Park was the gathering place for many of Finland's most respected artists, including composer Jean Sibelius. Today, it is frequented by patrons looking for traditional Finnish fare, from salmon to reindeer. Its sauces are frequently made from beer brewed in its own brewery, and its desserts are delicious (but pricey). There is also a cellar restaurant, a stylish bar and a terrace that's packed in the summer. www.kappeli.fi.
 - Olo, 44 Kasarmikatu. I had one of the best meals of my life in this charming brasserie, recently voted Finland's best restaurant. It has an a la carte menu, but you might want to choose one of the chef's tasting menus, which feature "the clean flavors of land and sea." The saddle of lamb with forest mushrooms and Madeira sauce was particularly delicious. www.olo-restaurant.com.

Learn more: www.gofinland.org.

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