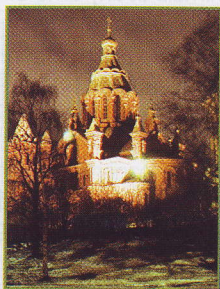


Finland: Not Just in Summer

by Barbara Radcliffe Rogers



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No place does winter better than Finland. Sure, it does summer well, too, with non-stop festivals celebrating everything from opera to samba. But the Finns love winter and are delighted to welcome your clients who share their love – or who are just looking for something different.

In contrast to summer's midnight sun, winter brings daytime crystal skies and night-time northern lights displays to Finland's great Arctic expanses of Lapland. Finns and foreigners mix in a genial blend at Levi and other centers for downhill and cross-country skiing, and explore the white-glazed landscapes by snowmobile, kicksled, dogsled, on snowshoes and even on reindeer sleds.

Winter packages begin in Rovaniemi, on the Arctic Circle (a short flight from Helsinki) with its stunning modern Arktikum, where visitors learn about the Arctic and the Sami, Lapland's semi-nomadic peoples that herd reindeer (right). Your clients can meet them in person at a Sami camp, while learning to drive a reindeer sled, slower and easier to control than a dog team. They are presented with a souvenir "Reindeer Driving License" as they warm up inside a tall tipi-like Sami house, sitting around the campfire in its center on reindeer skins, eating crunchy wheat toast and sizzling cured venison, cooked over the fire.

Other arctic options, offered by **Lapland Connection** (www.laplandconnection.com) are a dogsled or snowmobile safari and a ride on the icebreaker ship Sampo. Ski/spa packages at Levi, in the town of Kittila, include lodgings at the four-star Ylläs Saaga Hotel, with indoor pool, a natural stone cave hot tub, steam saunas and Finnish saunas (www.5stars-of-scandinavia.com). Kemi's downhill ski area is served by two gondola lifts, and is the center of a 100-mile cross-country trail network and 550 miles of snowmobile trails. Clients traveling with children will want to add a stop at Santa Claus's hometown, the lively Santa Land, in Rovaniemi, to meet reindeer, elves and St. Nick himself.

Or book clients at the largest hotel in Lapland, the four-star **Gielas**, scheduled to open in November 2008, in Saariselkä. Each of its 84 rooms and suites has its own sauna, balcony, bathtub and internet connection. (www.tunturihotelli.fi) Ski slopes and trails are nearby, and you can also pre-book a traditional dinner in a Sami hut through the hotel.

For clients who prefer citified pleasures, Helsinki is an exciting city at any time of year. Its compact center, where most attractions are clustered, wraps cozily around the harbor. Above rise the exotic gold onion-shaped domes of Uspensky Russian Orthodox Cathedral (above), and in the other direction stretches the Esplanadi, a wide park bordered by elegant buildings.



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At its far end is one of Helsinki's newest attractions, the Design District, anchored by the classy new **Design Museum**. Advise clients to wander into the shops and showrooms to see cutting edge designs before they hit the shops all over the world. At the Design Forum, they can find top designers' work in all price ranges. Finnish designers are best known for household and practical items - think Marimekko's striking decorator fabrics, Fiskar scissors, Alvar Aalto's furniture and Arabia tableware.

From the harbor they can take a boat (about \$7.50 round trip) to the fortress island of Suomenlinna, a World Heritage Site. The 15-minute mini-cruise offers good city views, and on the island they can explore the fortress, watch the excellent film, visit the museums and craft studios, and eat lunch at a brewery.

Advise those going in the summer to glimpse at Finland as it was a century ago, at the open-air museum of Seurasaari. On another island is the Helsinki Zoo, open year-round and famed for its rare big cats, including Snow leopards and Siberian tigers.

Finnish design shows up everywhere, even in Helsinki's hotels. The recently restored Belle Epoch Hotel Kamp, overlooking the Esplanadi within a few steps of the harbor (www.hotelkamp.fi) is elegant, historic and luxurious, a suggestion your up-market clients will thank you for. The brilliant modern transformation of Lars Sonck's Art Nouveau warehouse as the Scandic Grand Marina, near the Uspensky Cathedral (www.scandic-hotels.com/grandmarina) also overlooks the harbor.

HelsinkiMenu signs indicate seasonal menus featuring local fish from the lakes and rivers, reindeer and elk venison, woodland mushrooms and arctic berries.

Advise clients to look for these when choosing restaurants, and suggest two reliable choices: At **G W Sundmans** (www.royalravintolat.com/sundmans) they can try reindeer or pheasant stuffed with morels, and can sample Russian specialties, from blinis to bear (and Strawberries Romanov) at **Saslik** (www.saslik.com).

Assure clients that FIT travel is easy in friendly Finland, where English is widely spoken. **Finnair** (www.finnair.com) offers several money-saving packages that include direct flights to Helsinki, as well as onward flights into Lapland.

For information, contact the Finish Tourist Board 212-989-2333; www.visitfinland.com

For consolidator airfares and tour packages to Finland see page 69 of the Listings Section