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BUSINESS TRIP | 09 September 2013

## Business trip: Helsinki

In [Finland](#) [Business](#) By Ramsey Qubein

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Market Square

(Christopher Groenhout/LPI/Getty)



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One of Northern Europe's most important commercial and political centres, business-centric Helsinki is the largest city in an otherwise fairly rural country. According to [Visit Finland](#), an arm of the Finnish tourist board, the Finnish capital logs up to 1.5 million nights a year for business travellers and another two million a year for leisure guests.

From [Helsinki Vantaa International Airport](#) (the 19km taxi ride into town costs about 45 euros), national carrier [Finnair](#) flies travellers nonstop to 13 cities in Asia across the shortest and fastest route available: traversing the top of the globe close to the North Pole, rather than across central Europe and the Middle East. Connection times at Vantaa airport – as short as 35 minutes in some instances – are just as efficient, thanks to the airport's easy-to-navigate size, making it an excellent stopover destination for time-constrained travellers heading to Asia from North America and Europe. No other international airport can match such minimal time between flights.

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Vantaa Airport has experienced a strong passenger boom in recent years, growing from 13 million in 2010 to 15 million in 2012. The airport's growth is proportionate to Finnair's expansion strategy: take advantage of the hub's geographic position and offer a taste of Finnish culture along the way. Unique Finnair amenities include onboard china designed by the globally recognised Finnish brand [Marimekko](#) and a business class lounge with half a dozen Finnish saunas.

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This growth also translates into plentiful business traffic for the city, with 254 international conventions bringing in 40,000 visitors in 2012. Only in 2006, when 39,000 convention guests came for the presidency of the [European Union](#), did Helsinki capture such an auspicious record.

### Hotels

#### Elegant

The 179-room [Hotel Kamp](#), a stylish outpost located along the city's famous Esplanadi Boulevard, has a long history of attracting both diplomatic and celebrity renown. Not only do most heads of state stay here, but Madonna also used the property as her home base when performing in Scandinavia.

Only the suites face Esplanadi Boulevard, where Helsinki's best-known boutiques are located, but many guests appreciate the quiet courtyard vistas of the standard rooms. On Sundays, even non-guests pop into the hotel's street-front [Brasserie Kamp](#) for the famous Champagne brunch.

Clocking in as the other top contender in town is the 77-room [Hotel Haven](#), which offers exceptional views of the city's harbour from many of its high level rooms. Also located on Helsinki's busy Esplanadi, the hotel's rooms are earth-toned and many feature electric fireplaces to ward against the city's stark winters. All rooms feature [Nespresso](#) machines, [Elemis Spa toiletries](#), [Bang & Olufsen](#) electronics and free, high-speed wi-fi. The hotel's guest list has included the Dalai Lama and the Crown Princess of Sweden.

At [Glo Hotel Art](#) in the city's blossoming Design District, the hotel's public areas had a former life as the highly popular Student Union of the Helsinki University of Technology. The Art Nouveau structure, built in 1903, was transformed into a design hotel in 2012, showcasing granite walls lined with contemporary art, and stained glass windows that evoke a Harry Potter-like vibe.

#### Edgy

Ever sleep in a prison? At [Hotel Katajanokka](#) in the Katajanokka neighbourhood, the rooms once housed bunks for imprisoned political figures and local criminals. Closed in 2002 because authorities felt that its facilities no longer met humane requirements, the building was placed under historic register. It opened its doors as a business hotel in 2007, and these days, guests are free to order wine or cocktails to their rooms – unlike the building's previous occupants.

[Glo Hotel Kluuvi](#) (the older sibling of the new [Glo Hotel Art](#)) portrays true contemporary style, with minimalist furnishings and colourful fabrics throughout. The lobby's glass doors swing outward onto the Esplanadi; inside, the restaurant [Glogatan 4](#) serves a breakfast that is so cleverly stylish (served on [Marimekko](#) and [Iittala](#) china) that even locals pop in for a bite of farm-fresh eggs served with quintessential Finnish crisp bread and a cup of piping hot caffeine from the hotel's coffee bar. Guest rooms have been updated with mind-blowingly comfortable [Unikulma mattresses](#) that lull visitors to slumber, and nightstands illuminated from below, making them look like a box of light.

#### Expense account

Everything in [Spis](#), a modest Design District diner, is regional – from the locally grown onion, sorrel, celeriac and elderflower starter to the tempeh and dill main. The diner offers two Nordic tasting menus, both of which change regularly based on what is in season.

[Olo](#), located a few blocks from the Esplanadi, also offers several Nordic tasting menus, serving everything from fresh reindeer to liquorice ice cream. The restaurant's forest-inspired interior matches the menu, which is packed with bucolic ingredients such as lingonberries, bilberries, chanterelle mushrooms, rye flour and pine bark. A prix fixe lunch attracts corporate folk who have meetings in the area; diners can be in and out within an hour after noshing on courses such as Ilomantsi caviar, Pudasjarvi reindeer and Suonenjoki Peltola blue cheese. Make sure you book ahead; people clamour for a hard-to-secure reservation at the intimately sized, Michelin-starred venue.



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Do not leave town without sampling Finland's famous liquorice, which instils its flavour in everything from ice cream to cookies. One of the most flavourful choices is the tasty liquorice ice cream at the [Stockmann's department store](#).

### Off the clock

While Helsinki natives typically have saunas in their own home, many locals still visit public saunas such as [Arla](#), the city's most historic and traditional wood-fired spa. Established in 1929 and located in the bohemian Kallio section of town, the communal courtyard welcomes everyone – but once inside, you will be issued a towel and a thatch of birch branches and directed to either the male or female section. The heat of the sauna will release the stress from your muscles, and the birch branches are dipped in water and then gently brushed against the body to stimulate circulation.

### Like a local

Head for the waterfront Market Square, where local purveyors serve snacks such as *pulla* (a sweet bread akin to a cinnamon roll) and open-face salmon sandwiches from pop up tents, no matter what the weather. The early morning hours are the most popular, with locals sipping coffee while they enjoy the fresh ocean air and the scent of seafood being unloaded from nearby boats.

### Don't do this

If the idea of sitting naked next to a stranger in the sauna seems uncomfortable, imagine sitting next to a business contact. But this is often a norm of doing business in Finland.

Bear in mind, mixed saunas are not typical; only families bathe together. Birch leaves are also best left to personal use. If you are uncomfortable being nude, using a towel to cover up is a commonly accepted practice.

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