

**NARROW PASSAGE:** The ferry to Tallinn passing between the islands of Suomenlinna  
PHOTO © RICHARD NEWTON

## Two Hearts in Helsinki

Take time together in one of the world's most romantic cities.

BY RICHARD NEWTON

**“H**ow much?” It’s a question guaranteed to dilute the romance of a romantic night out. We had a milestone to celebrate. We asked the concierge at our Helsinki hotel for a restaurant recommendation.

“It must be the Ravintola Savoy,” she said, picking up the telephone. “Let me make the reservation.”

“We’d like to see the menu first.”

The concierge put down the phone and brought up the Savoy’s menu on her iPad. We scanned the list of enticing offerings, soon fixating more on the prices than on the individual dishes. Starters from \$35. Mains from \$60. Desserts from \$25. Hardly a bottle of wine for under \$100. The after-dinner cheese selection was \$23.

What’s a man to do? Clearly, on a special occasion money should be no object. Yet in tallying the likely total of the meal, I realized that for the same cost we could probably have a weekend in Paris, everything included.

Finland has long had a reputation for being expensive. Certainly, the heady tariffs in the high-end restaurants, not to mention the generally dizzying cost of beer and wine, did not bode well for keeping our trip within a sensible budget. But one smart purchase immediately put us back on track.

For 58 euros (about \$79) each, we invested in a pair of 72-hour Helsinki Cards. With them in hand, we were granted unlimited use of public transport (including buses, trams, trains and ferries) and free or reduced admission to most of the key visitor attractions. This is one way to make sure you can splurge on those romantic, indulgent dinners in Helsinki when bringing your main squeeze along on business.

My work commitments were dealt with on the first morning. By 11 a.m., the day stretched free ahead of us. On the recommendation of one of my local business contacts, my wife and I headed to the fish market plaza (on this bright morning, the market stalls were selling arts and crafts rather than fresh fish), flashed our Helsinki Cards and boarded the ferry for the 15-minute voyage to Suomenlinna.

Ostensibly we were heading to a UNESCO World Heritage site, though the voyage itself provided an extra layer of interest. This was the same journey made by Michael Caine as the bespectacled spy Harry Palmer in the 1967 movie *Billion Dollar Brain*.

Michael Caine looked out on the icy floes of the winter harbor. For us, it was late summer. The receding buildings of Helsinki gleamed in warm sunshine. The dazzling golden

union domes of the Russian Orthodox Uspenski Cathedral testified to Finland's critical place at the crossroads between Eastern and Western Europe. During the Cold War, the city was abuzz with constant intrigue.

Suomenlinna provides additional evidence of Helsinki's strategic position. Sprawling over a cluster of islands at the harbor entrance, it is a formidable fortress, built in the 18th century by the Swedes and bolstered significantly during more than a century of Russian rule. When Finland finally took charge of its own destiny in 1917, Suomenlinna became a potent national symbol.

The ferry docked. With dozens of other passengers, we spilled onto the quay. To call Suomenlinna simply a fortress would be an injustice. Although the heavy battlements reinforced the first impression of a preserved historic site, we soon found ourselves wandering among quaint houses. Alongside military installations and interesting museums, Suomenlinna is a living community of more than 900 people, effectively making this little archipelago a suburb of Helsinki.

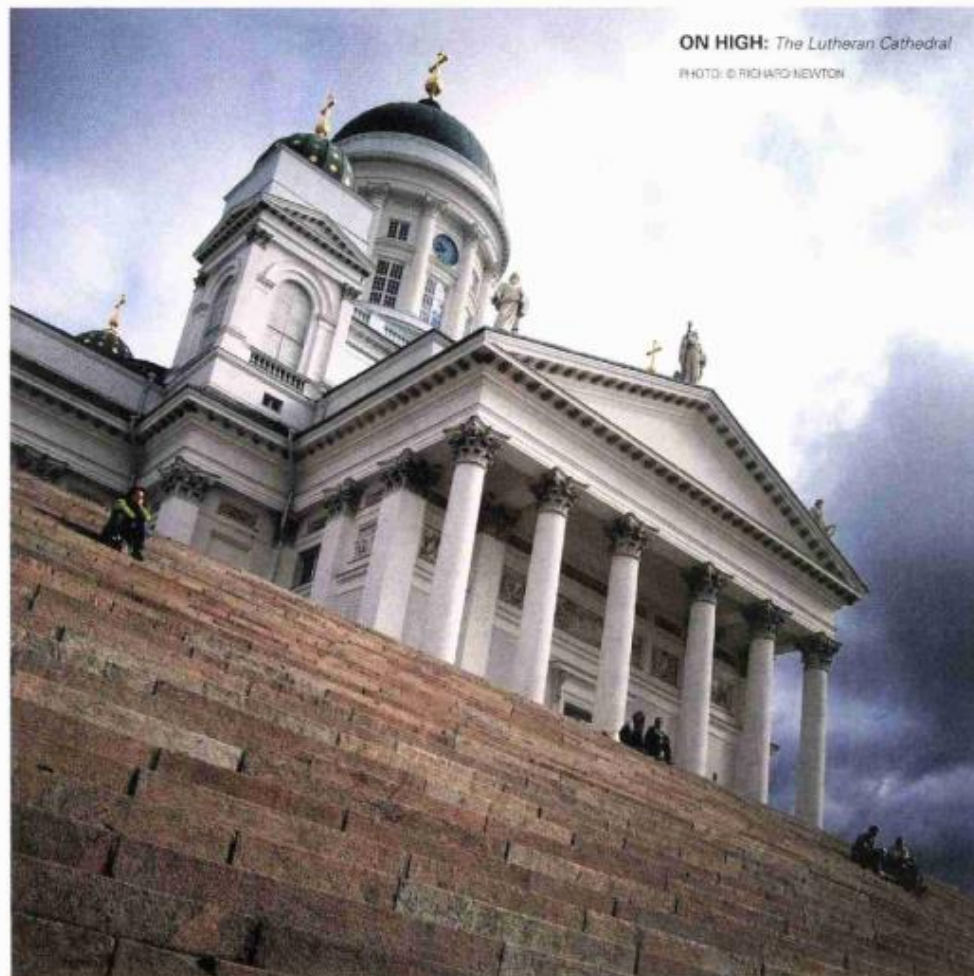
In Suomenlinna's modest supermarket, we bought

all the ingredients for a picnic. We set up on the southern battlements, overlooking a narrow channel. As we finished off our sandwiches, we noticed with alarm a ferry ship departing Helsinki was heading directly toward the channel. Disaster seemed inevitable. Surely the channel was too narrow.

The massive ship continued its approach without any reduction of speed and sailed through with perilously little margin for error. Passengers on the crowded deck waved and shouted greetings to us; we reciprocated.

We just witnessed the customary shortcut taken by ferries plying between Helsinki and Tallinn. A few days later, on board as we made the three-hour crossing to Estonia ourselves, we experienced it again. Passage through the channel was even more alarming from the ship's rails.

After lunch, we returned to the city. Helsinki never gives the impression of being a metropolis. The low-rise skyline is dominated by the green-domed, white-columnaded Lutheran Cathedral, which sits imposingly atop a steep flight of steps at one side of Senate



**ON HIGH:** *The Lutheran Cathedral*  
PHOTO: © RICHARD NEWTON

## LODGING

### GLO HOTEL KLUUVI

With a great location in the old center and a funky design, the recently expanded hotel offers 70 new guestrooms and shares a spa with the next-door Hotel Kämp, owned by the same company. *Kluuvikatu 4 \$\$\$*

### HOTEL KÄMP

Helsinki's top hotel for the past 125 years, with an illustrious list of past guests. If there are any notables in town, they'll be here. The guestrooms are timelessly elegant. *Kluuvikatu 2 \$\$\$\$*

### RADISSON BLU SEASIDE

#### HOTEL HELSINKI

Situated on the scenic Gulf of Finland, the 336 rooms offer the Blu Dreams sleeping experience — and complimentary WiFi, an added bonus for the business traveler. *Ruoholahdenranta 3 \$\$\$*

## DINING

### RAVINTOLA SAVOY

With an interior partly designed by Alvar Aalto, this has long been Helsinki's restaurant for special occasions. *Eteläesplanadi 14 \$\$\$\$*

### RESTAURANT DEMO

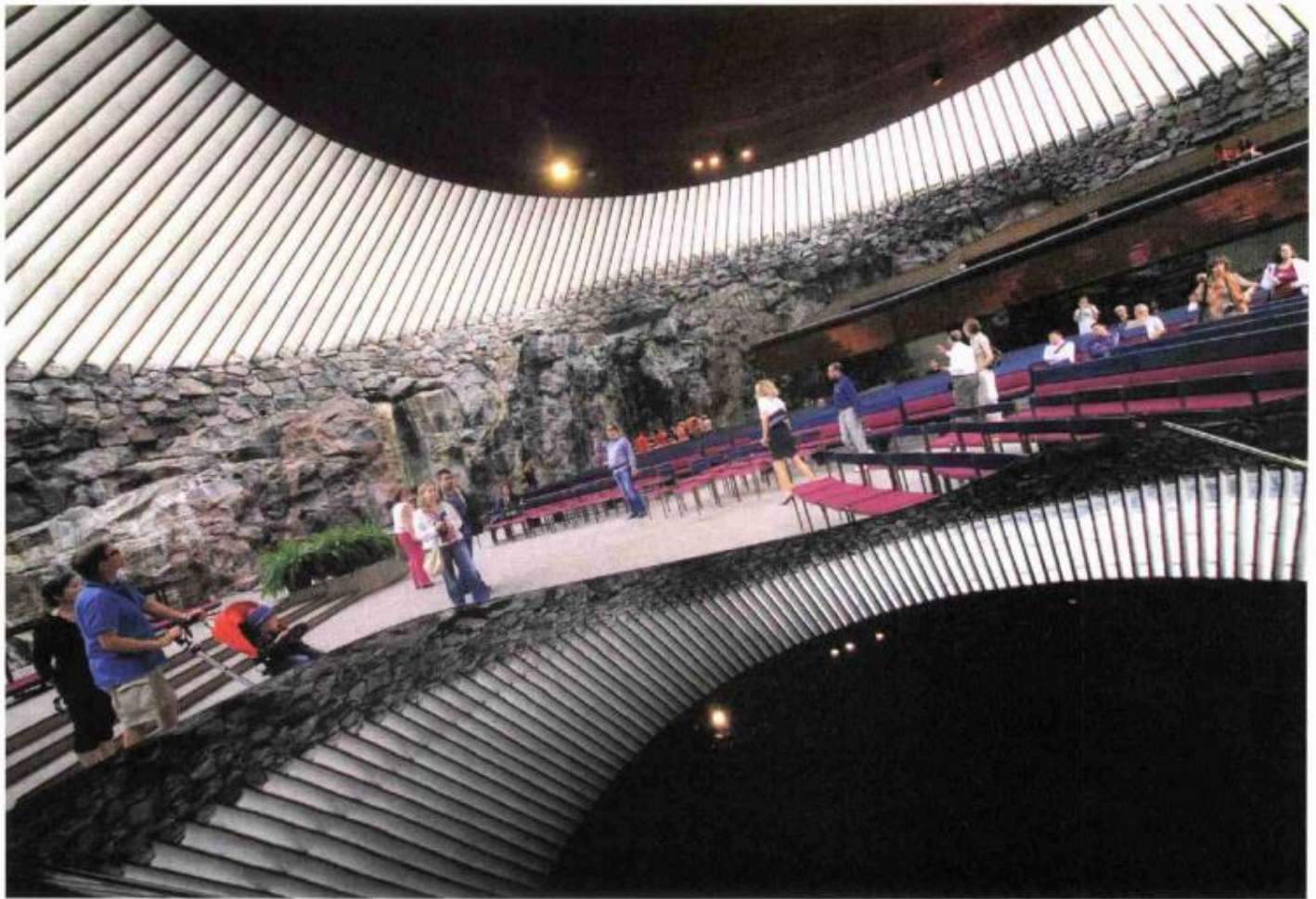
With the motto "Share a laugh in the middle of a culinary experience," Demo has served Michelin-starred cuisine since 2007. Complementing the food is the happy ambience. *Uudenmaankatu 9-11 \$\$\$\$*

### WRONG ASIAN KITCHEN

Wrong is the right choice. Enjoy tasty Asian fare without breaking the bank. *Yliopistankatu 5 \$\$*

## INFO TO GO

International flights arrive at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, 11 miles north of downtown. A rail link to the city is scheduled to open in mid-2015. For now, one of the most convenient options is the [Finnair City Bus](#), which plies the route between the airport and the central railway station every 20 minutes; journey time is 30 minutes. Many of the top hotels are within walking distance of the station. The one-way fare is €6.30 (about \$8.50), or €4 (about \$5.40) with a Helsinki Card. Expect to pay at least six times more to make the same journey by taxi.



**ROCK OF AGES:** *TempPELLIAUKIO Rock Church*

PHOTO: © RICHARD NEWTON

Square, effectively the heart of Helsinki. We returned to the square time and again, often joining the locals sitting on the steps at dusk, watching the world go by.

In June 2014, a new addition to the Helsinki skyline was officially unveiled. The Finnair Skywheel is a 282-foot-tall harborside Ferris wheel that provides a 360-degree panorama of downtown Helsinki. A 12-minute ride costs €10 (about \$14) with a Helsinki Card, or €12 (about \$16) without.

At ground level, we enjoyed exploring the streets, especially within the Design District, where prescribed routes (with maps downloadable from the Visit Helsinki website) take in the architectural highlights or guide you to the best fashion and design shops. There is even a map for a "Manly Shopping Tour," focusing on shops of interest to men.

Amid our exploration, we found time to visit the

Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, with its cutting-edge installations, and the more staid Ateneum, which houses the definitive collection of Finnish art.

The most striking example of the Finnish flair for design was, for us, the TempPELLIAUKIO Rock Church, a breathtaking building excavated directly into the bedrock, with a swirling copper ceiling seemingly floating atop the vertically slatted windows. The place mesmerized us.

Late on our final afternoon, we gravitated to the Esplanadi, the leafy park that leads away from the fish market plaza. On a stage in front of the 19th-century Cafe Kappeli at the harbor end of the park, a big band was playing jazz standards. We joined the audience. Couples stood arm in arm. Some sang along. Some danced. Proof, if it were needed, that there is no price for romance.

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**Ateneum**  
[ateneum.fi](http://ateneum.fi)

**Cafe Kappeli**  
[kappeli.fi](http://kappeli.fi)

**Finnair SkyWheel**  
[finnair-skywheel.com](http://finnair-skywheel.com)

**GLO Hotel Kluuvi Helsinki**  
[glohotels.fi](http://glohotels.fi)

**Helsinki Card**  
[helsinkicard.com](http://helsinkicard.com)

**Hotel Kämp**  
[hotelkamp.com](http://hotelkamp.com)

**Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art**  
[kiasma.fi](http://kiasma.fi)

**Radisson Blu Seaside Hotel Helsinki**  
[radissonblu.com](http://radissonblu.com)

**Ravintola Savoy**  
[ravintolasavoy.fi](http://ravintolasavoy.fi)

**Restaurant Demo**  
[restaurantdemo.fi](http://restaurantdemo.fi)

**Suomenlinna**  
[suomenlinna.fi](http://suomenlinna.fi)

**TempPELLIAUKIO Rock Church**  
[helsinginkirkot.fi](http://helsinginkirkot.fi)

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