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A SHORT BREAK IN HELSINKI

Story and photos by Helen Hewetson

I was recently invited to Helsinki, Finland for a short but delightful stay. Over the course of three days, we explored the city by foot, bus, tram, and even took a boat tour of the harbour and a ferry to a nearby island fortress. We found Helsinki a lovely combination of familiar and foreign – the language is a little intimidating (with local street names like “Pohjoisesplanadi” or “Pohjoinen Rautatiekatu”) in both Finnish and Swedish – but almost everyone speaks perfect English. It was a fantastic trip, and I’d highly recommend it to anyone looking for somewhere different within easy reach of many European hubs.

I must point out that the journey was even more special because we experienced business class on Finnair – it was an excellent way to start and end our journey, especially since it was so short. The service on Finnair was, as you’d expect, impeccable. It was super to stretch out entirely and snuggle under a comforter. And I almost asked for a couple of the recipes – and I’m sad that our local liquor store does not carry the wine I enjoyed on board!



We stayed at the Klaus K Hotel in downtown Helsinki. One of Helsinki’s few special “Design hotels”, it was in a great location, within a short walking distance of the harbour and the downtown shopping district. The rooms weren’t huge but were more than adequate for our needs. They were well-appointed and I was sad the toiletries weren’t offered in small bottles I could take with me (though also pleased because large bottles are much better for the environment). The breakfast was simply outstanding – homemade breads, jams, juices, cakes, pastries, and cereals plus organic teas and coffees, several types of smoked fish and cheeses, fruit, veg, eggs, sausage, bacon... and that’s just what I remember off the top of my head!



After checking in, a few of us hopped on the ultra-efficient tram system to get to a traditional Finnish sauna. This is one tradition I can really get behind. The whole experience was lots of fun: when we finally found the place, there was a group of friendly locals outside the sauna, draped in towels, drinking beer in as civilized a way as one can manage whilst sweating and draped in only a towel and sandals. They welcomed us towards the attendant, who charged us €12 each for as long as we wanted in the women’s sauna and the common areas. We also opted for the traditional birch branch swatch (called a vihta) to hit ourselves and exfoliate our skin. You’ll just have to trust me: it’s more fun than it sounds! We stayed for about an hour, which was plenty of steaming for us.

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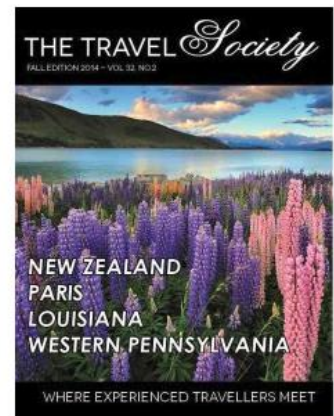
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There were heaps of other excellent things to do in Helsinki – an attractive monument to Jean Sibelius, the stunning “Rock Church” and some incredible museums. I loved Kauppatori (the

Market Hall), where all kinds of local delicacies are on sale, from bear meat to arctic bramble jam, from smoked trout to light, fluffy meringues and plump cream puffs. Exceptional espresso and gorgeous paninis, all lined up for your drooling pleasure. It was a perfect environment for it, too: the massive windows let light filter through, lighting up the dark old wood of the hall, making its way through the steam from the espresso machines, everyone walking at a slow pace as they try to decide what to eat. Bliss.

Another highlight was the market on the harbour – this small collection of stalls had a wonderful selection of locally produced goods, from reindeer-horn knife handles to carefully wrought silver rings, home made jams, stunning watercolours and all manner of other things like wooden toys and felted wool hats, all of a really nice quality and at entirely reasonable prices. It was a nice place to meander for a little while, and eat local treats from one of many food stands or fruit markets.

Our stop at the island fortress of Suomenlinna was a great way to get a sense of Helsinki’s history – and to see the enormous dry-dock on site, which is quite vast and a sight to behold. Most visitors go on a short tour of the island and I’d highly recommend it. Our guide was very knowledgeable about the area and was able to answer any of our questions about the slightly confusing history of the fort. Many of the locals took their picnic baskets and swimsuits along and took advantage of a pretty, sheltered sandy cove. With many interesting historical stops, charming gardens and some delightful restaurants on the island it would be easy to spend the day there.



The Sibelius monument

Even though we did see and do a lot – thanks to an excellent city guide – it was very sad that we didn’t have more time to spend in the city, just wandering around. There were dozens of design shops I would have liked to go into, if not to buy at least to look. Design and Helsinki are sort of synonymous – it seems that everyone is stylish and has an interesting look, and most shops have a variety of classic Finnish designs (i.e., Marimekko or Artek or Iittala). We loved our time there and will definitely go back at the first opportunity.

If you go:

Visit Helsinki: <http://www.visithelsinki.fi/en>

Klaus K Design Hotel: <http://www.klauskhotel.com/en/>

Finnair: www.finnair.com



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... Pause and smell the roses, not the fumes Article and Photos by John and Doreen Berg Are you heading south on Interstate 5 and wishing there was an alternate to an overnight stay in chain motel/hotel, having an evening dinner and rising to an early alarm to hit the pavement for another tedious day of driving? We had been considering venturing off the beaten path, thus making our drive more of an exploratory trip - but our selections usually involved considerable detours to and from I-5. [1028 more words.]

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