

Finland

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Helsinki** National capital, serene harbour city, buzzing nightlife and creative melting pot for the latest in Finnish design (p350).
- **Kuopio** Cruise Lakeland waterways, gorge on tiny fish, or sweat it in the world's largest smoke sauna (p363).
- **Inari** Finland's Sámi capital has a spectacular lake and marvellous resources for learning about Lapland (p367).
- **Savonlinna** Shimmering lakescapes, handsome town and fabulous opera in Finland's most spectacular castle make this a don't miss (p362).

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 338,145 sq km
- **Budget** €70-130 per day
- **Capital** Helsinki
- **Country code** ☎ 358
- **Famous for** saunas, reindeer, racing drivers, heavy metal, Nokia
- **Languages** Finnish, Swedish, Sámi languages
- **Money** euro (€); A\$1 = €0.55; C\$1 = €0.60; ¥100 = €0.78; NZ\$1 = €0.43; UK£1 = €1.12; US\$1 = €0.74
- **Phrases** *kiitos* (thank you), *moi/hei* (hello), *anteeksi* (excuse me), *kippis* (cheers)



- **Population** 5.31 million
- **Visas** not required for most visitors for stays of up to 90 days (see p369)

TRAVEL HINTS

Fill up on inexpensive breakfast and lunchtime buffets. Check the *kauppahalli* (market hall) in every town to see what local foods are on offer. Buy alcohol cheaply at Alko shops, supermarkets or R-kioskis (convenience stores). Internet access is free at libraries.

ROAMING FINLAND

For a quick tour of Finland, spend a day in Helsinki, take a train to Turku or Tampere, track up to Rovaniemi to sample Lapland, then head south to Kuopio's smoke sauna and back to Helsinki.

Remote, forested, cold, sparsely populated Finland has had a hell of a last hundred years. It's propelled itself from agricultural backwater of the Russian Empire to one of the world's most prosperous and forward-looking nations, with a great standard of living and education, and a booming technology industry. Although socially and economically in the vanguard of nations, parts of Finland remain gloriously remote; trendsetting Helsinki is counterbalanced by vast forested wildernesses.

There's something pure in the Finnish air and spirit that's incredibly vital and exciting. It's an invitation to get out and active year-round. A postsauna dip in an ice hole under the majestic aurora borealis, after whooshing across the snow behind a team of huskies, isn't a typical

winter's day just anywhere. And hiking or canoeing under midnight sun through pine forests populated by wolves and bears isn't your typical tanning-oil summer either.

Nordic peace in a lakeside cottage, summer sunshine on convivial beer terraces, avant-garde Helsinki design, dark melodic music, and cafes warm with cinnamon aromas are just the beginning of Suomi seduction. The real bonus? The Finns, who do their own thing and are much the better for it. Independent, loyal, warm and welcoming – a memorable people in an inspirational country.

HISTORY

Finland's story is that of a wrestling mat under two heavyweights, Sweden and Russia, and the nation's eventful emergence from between their grip to become one of the world's most progressive and prosperous nations.

Though evidence of pre-Ice Age habitation exists, it wasn't until around 9000 years ago that settlement re-established after the big chill. The Finns' ancestors moved in to the south and drove the nomadic ancestors of the Sámi north towards Lapland.

The 12th and 13th centuries saw the Swedes Christianising the Finns in the south, and establishing settlements and fortifications. The Russians were never far away, though. There were constant skirmishes with the power of Novgorod, and in the early 18th century Peter the Great attacked and occupied much of Finland. By 1809 Sweden was in no state to resist, and was forced to cede Finland to Russia. It became a duchy of the Russian Empire and the capital was moved to Helsinki, but the Revolution of October 1917 enabled the Finnish senate to declare independence.

Stalin's aggressive territorial demands in 1939 led to the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union, conducted in horribly low temperatures. Little Finland resisted heroically, but was defeated and forced to cede a tenth of its territory. When pressured for more, Finland accepted assistance from Germany. This 'Continuation War' against the Russians cost Finland almost 100,000 lives. Eventually general-turned-president Mannerheim negotiated an armistice with the Russians, ceding more land, and then waged a bitter war in Lapland to oust the Germans. Against the odds, Finland remained independent, but at a heavy price.

Finland managed to take a neutral stance during the Cold War, and once the USSR collapsed, it joined the EU in 1995, and adopted the euro in 2002.

In the new millennium, Finland has boomed, on the back of a strong technology sector, the important forestry industry,

design and manufacturing, and, increasingly, tourism. It's a major success story of the new Europe with strong economy, robust social values, and superlow crime and corruption.

Some of this gloss was tarnished in 2008 however, when, in the second such incident in less than a year, 22-year-old Matti Saari went on a shooting spree in a vocational college, killing 10 before turning the gun on himself. It sent the country into shock and a re-examination of its liberal gun laws.

THE CULTURE

Finland has only 17 people per square kilometre, falling to under one person in parts of Lapland. There are around 300,000 Swedish-speaking Finns on the west and south coasts and the Åland Islands. Finland's immigrant population of some 150,000 is the EU's lowest; Russians are the biggest group.

The indigenous Sámi (Lapp) population of around 7000 in the north consists of three distinct groups, with the majority involved in reindeer husbandry.

A capacity for silence and reflection is the trait that best sums up the Finnish character. The image of a log cabin with a sauna by a lake tells much about Finnish culture: independence, endurance (*sisu*, or 'guts') and a love of space and nature.

ARTS

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) was at the forefront of the Finnish nationalist movement. His stirring *Finlandia* has been raised to the status of national hymn. Sibelius and nationalistic painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela fell under the spell of Karelianism, a movement that drew its inspiration from the folk songs collected in the 1830s by Elias Lönnrot to form the national epic *Kalevala*.

Other famed Finnish writers include Tove Jansson, creator of the Moomintrolls, and novelist Arto Paasilinna. Finland's preeminence in architecture and design owes much to Alvar Aalto, who designed everything from public buildings to furniture and vases.