

welcome to **Finland**



Call of the Wild

The Finland you encounter will depend on the season of your visit, but whatever the month, the call of the wilderness is a siren song not to be resisted. There's something pure in the Finnish air and spirit that's really vital and exciting; it's an invitation to get out and active year-round. With vast tracts of forest, speckled by picture-perfect lakes as if an artist had flicked a blue paintbrush at the map, Suomi offers some of Europe's best hiking, kayaking and canoeing. A fabulous network of national parks has well-marked routes and regularly spaced huts for overnighting. There are bears deep in the eastern forests, where you can watch them on nature-watching trips.

SummerDays

Finland's short but reliable sunny season sees the country burst into life. Finns seem to want to suck every last golden drop out of the summer in the hope that it will last them through the long dark winter months, and there's an explosion of good cheer and optimism. It's a time for music festivals, art exhibitions, lake cruises, mid-night sunshine on convivial beer terraces, lazy days at remote waterside cottages and mouth-watering market produce.

After the Snowfall

Winter, too, has a special charm. The best way to banish those frosty subzero temperatures is to get out and active. For start-



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Finland is the deep north, with forests and lakes as far as the eye can see, and revitalising crisp air. Choose between summer's endless light or winter's eerie frozen magic.

(left) Paddle the calming, reflective waters of the Lakeland region (p161)
(below) Admire striking art-nouveau architecture in central Helsinki (p45)



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ers, there's great skiing until May. But how about chartering a team of dogs, a posse of reindeer, or a snowmobile for a trek across the snowy wastes, lit by a beautiful, pale winter sun? Catch the aurora borealis (Northern Lights) after your wood-fired sauna and you'll feel blessed by the universe. Need to cool down? A night in an ice hotel or an ice-breaker cruise should do the trick.

CityLights

Don't get the idea that the country's just a backwoods emptiness, though. Vibrant cities stock the southern parts, headed by the capital, Helsinki, a cutting-edge urban space with world-famous design and mu-

sic scenes. Embraced by the Baltic, it's an enticing ensemble of modern and stately architecture, island restaurants, and stylish and quirky bars. And complaints about Finnish food are so last-century: the 'new Suomi' restaurant scene is kicking.

Finns

The real bonus? The Finns, who tend to do their own thing and are much the better for it. Independent, loyal, warm and welcoming – a memorable people in an inspirational country. Make it your business to get to know some.