

Helsinki, Finland: Travel Feature

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Helsinki isn't an obvious place to visit for a weekend. We quickly discovered that after we booked to spend a couple of nights there and had people constantly wondering which country it is in!

For the record, it's the capital city of Finland, but when you look at the country's history, it's easy to see why people might get confused. In the past, it's been part of Sweden and Russia and only gained independence in 1917.

Bearing that in mind, it was no surprise as we wandered around the city that we could see some striking similarities to the beautiful city of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. For starters, the city is located on the water, with a thriving harbor that's often a stop for cruise liners, and a number of its top attractions are located on the outlying islands.

One of those attractions is the Suomenlinna Fortress, established to guard the entrance into the city. It's a pleasant 15-minute ferry ride away from the mainland and when you arrive, there are many places to visit, including a series of museums, looking at the history of the island, military history and even dolls and toys -- quite a combination. The latter is fascinating and even contains one or two familiar Disney faces! You can experience life below the water on the Submarine Vesikko, the only surviving sub from the Finnish fleet that served in World War II, and there's even a church to explore.

By the early 1800s, this island was home to more than 4,000 people, making it the second biggest city in Finland. As you walk around the place today, it's impossible to imagine that. Even with hundreds of tourists touring the sights, it still seemed deserted and was a wonderful retreat from the hustle of the city.

Back on the mainland, the hustle is never more evident than at Market Square on the harbor front. It is home to a fish market from Monday to Saturday and it's safe to say that we've never seen fish like this before! It's also the place to browse for souvenirs and Finnish handicrafts and gives you a good idea of daily Finnish life. Nearby are some of the city's main civic buildings, with the City Hall, Cathedral, University and the Palace of the Council of State - home to the Prime Minister's office and some of the main government conference rooms - all looking on to the same square. It's quite a sight to see so many major buildings so close together and everywhere you turn in the square is another photo opportunity.

There are more photo opportunities just a few streets away, but you'll have to work for this one. It's a trek up a hill and stairs to reach Uspenski Cathedral, but it's worth it to see the exquisite detail of the building and to take a look inside at the stunning interiors. This is very much a leftover from the days when Helsinki was part of the Russian empire. It was the Russians who decided to build an Orthodox cathedral here and they didn't do the job by halves, as this is now the largest of its kind in the western world, with 13 golden domes. Inside, look up, and you'll see a huge blue dome decorated with golden stars. It's like looking up into the night sky and is exceptionally calming.

Another church in the city is also exceptionally calming, but it's also very unusual. How many churches have you come across that are built completely out of rock, right in the middle of a capital city? Not many, I'll wager, but that's exactly the case with Temppeliaukio. Without seeing it for yourself, it's almost impossible to explain how unique this place is. The granite walls form beautiful colors with clever lighting and the whole effect is rounded off with a rounded copper roof, making for a stunning sight and one at which you just have to marvel.

In a park on the western side of the city is more evidence of the Finn's love of unusual architecture. The Sibelius monument pays tribute to the Finnish composer of the same name. Made up of a statue of the man himself, it originally started as just a set of large metal pipes that play music as the wind catches them. However, a lot of people failed to understand it and the statue had to be added in at a later date.

With its many sights, you're never short of things to see and do in Helsinki and getting between them couldn't be easier. The public transport system is cheap and efficient and the trams are a delight, with one route, the 3T, taking a convenient route around all of the city's main sights. We never had a long wait for a tram during our whole time in the city.

Eating and drinking is a delight in this city and it's something that Helsinki prides itself on, with information about restaurants serving up genuine Finnish cuisine. All the places we sampled served up some excellent, albeit, unusual food. Another pleasure here is shopping, with huge department stores, bookshops and entire malls that seem to go on for blocks. You won't have any problems buying anything in Helsinki -- be it meals or souvenirs -- as English is widely spoken, usually without any hint that it's their second language.

As with the other Scandinavian countries, the summertime is a perfect time to visit Helsinki, with nights that stay light until late in the evening, allowing more time for sightseeing. It's not somewhere that springs to

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most people's minds as a top destination, but venture here and you won't be disappointed with what you find.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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