

History

Finnish history is the story of a people who for centuries were a wrestling mat between two heavyweights on either side: Sweden and Russia. The unfortunate thing about this history is that the earliest chronicles were written by Swedes, and much of ethnic Finnish culture and events before and well after the Swedish crusades has escaped written record altogether.

PREHISTORY

Little is known of the earliest human settlement in Finland. As the glaciers receded at the end of the last Ice Age, the first permanent inhabitants of what is now Finland probably began arriving around 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Around this time the Baltic Sea formed, flooding what was a large freshwater lake. To this day, it's one of the least saline of the major seas.

But Finland was almost certainly inhabited long before this period. Recent finds of worked flint tools in a cave at Kristinestad suggest sporadic human presence as far back as 100,000 years ago, between Ice Ages.

The first settlers in Finland came from Russia and present-day Estonia. These people hunted elk and beaver using stone tools and weapons and gradually spread out into the whole of the region. Sites have been found in southern Finland dating from around the eighth millennium BC.

Pottery appears in archaeological records in the late sixth millennium BC, marking the beginning of the Late Stone Age, or Neolithic period. The discovery of ceramics makes it easier to identify broad groups of people, and it is clear that a new group arrived in southern Finland in 3000 BC or thereabouts. From this point on, we can see the development of definable Finno-Ugrian cultures. The central/northern culture, who had least cultural contact with the newcomers, have been labelled as proto-Sámi.

The Bronze Age, from around 1700 BC to 600 BC, is characterised by strong trade contacts between southern Finland and other groups around the Baltic Sea, and the use of stone cairns for burials.

WHY FINLAND?

The Finns call their country *Suomi* (*swom-ee*), so why is it generally known as Finland?

French may provide a clue. *Fin* means 'end', and *fin de lande* could easily be, if not 'the end of the world', the northern end of the European land mass.

The early Romans called this land Fennia. In English the word *fen* describes a swampy land, and is mostly used to refer to the low, flat water-logged land in eastern England. But Romans went to England too, and Finland is exactly such a swampy land, and swamp in Finnish is *suo*. A Finn in Finnish is *suomalainen*, whereas *suomaalainen* (with double a) means an inhabitant of a swampy land.

The resemblance of the word *suo* to *Suomi* is too close to be ignored, but the derivation of the name of the long-time inhabitants of Lapland, the Sámi, offers another explanation. Finland is called *Somija* in Latvian, *Suomija* in Lithuanian and *Soome* in Estonian.

Unimpressed by all these references to inferior interior swampy ground, many Finns would like their country to be called *Finlandia* or *Fennia* (in Latin) because it sounds more respectable.

Of course, Swedish-speaking Finns have always called Finland, Finland.

TIMELINE 100,000 BC

Sporadic human presence between Ice Ages in what is now Finland

AD 100

Tacitus refers to the 'Fenni', perhaps the Sámi, in the first known historical record of the area

EARLY FINNISH SOCIETY

In the first century AD, the Roman historian Tacitus mentioned a tribe called the Fenni, whom he basically described as wild savages who had neither homes nor horses. He might have been referring to the Sámi or their forebears, whose nomadic existence better fits the description than the agricultural peoples of the south. Nomadic cultures leave little archaeological evidence, but proto-Sámi sites do occur from roughly this period on, and it seems the Sámi migrated gradually northwards, probably displaced by the southerners. Verses of the *Kalevala* (see boxed text on p36), derived from ancient oral tradition, seem to refer to this conflictual relationship.

In the south, the two main Finnish tribes, Hämenites (Swedish: Tavastians) and Karelians, lived separately, in the west and the east respectively, but were constantly at war with each other.

There were trading contacts with Estonians and Swedish Vikings and there were trading posts in present-day Hämeenlinna, Turku and Halikko. Many burial grounds and hill defences remain. It is probable that there was friendly contact between fortresses, despite each having its own social system. A common law and judicial system existed in each region.

The Åland Islands and coastal regions southeast of Turku were frequented by Viking sailors. Six hill fortresses on Åland date back to the Viking era and indicate the former importance of these islands.

SWEDISH RULE

To the Swedes, Finland was a natural direction of expansion, on a promising eastern route towards Russia and the Black Sea. The Swedish chapter of Finland's history starts in 1155, when Bishop Henry, an Englishman, arrived in Kalanti under orders of the Swedish king. An aggressive period of colonisation and enforced baptism ensued, and Bishop Henry was infamously murdered by a disgruntled local peasant, Lalli. At the time of the Swedish arrival, the population of Finland has been estimated at 50,000.

Swedish crusaders manned Finnish fortresses to repel Russian attacks and protect its Christianisation efforts from Orthodox influence. Swedish settlement began in earnest in 1249 when Birger Jarl established fortifications in Tavastia and on the northern coast of the Gulf of Finland.

It took more than 200 years to define the border between Sweden and Novgorod (Russia). In 1323 the first such border was drawn in a conference at Nöteborg (Finnish: Pähkinäsaari) on Lake Ladoga. Sweden gained control of southwest Finland, much of the northwest coast and, in the east, the strategic town of Vyborg (Finnish: Viipuri), with its magnificent castle. Suzerainty was established over Karelia by Novgorod, and it was controlled from a castle at Käkisalme (Russian: Priozorski) that was founded in the 13th century. Novgorod spread the Russian Orthodox faith in the Karelia region, which became influenced by Byzantine culture.

To attract Swedish settlers to the unknown land, a number of incentives were created such as giving away large tracts of land and tax concessions. These privileges were given to many soldiers of the Royal Swedish Army.

In 1527 King Gustav Vasa of Sweden adopted the Lutheran faith and confiscated much of the property of the Catholic Church. Finland had its own supporters of the Reformation: Mikael Agricola, born in Pernå (Finnish: Pernaaja) in 1510, studied with Martin Luther in Germany, and returned

to Finland in 1539 to translate parts of the Bible into Finnish. He was also the first person to properly record the traditions and animist religious rites of ethnic Finns. A hardliner, Agricola ushered in the Finnish Reformation. Most of the frescoes in medieval churches were whitewashed (only to be rediscovered some 400 years later in relatively good condition).

Sweden was not satisfied with its share of power in the east. In 1546 King Gustav Vasa founded Ekenäs (Finnish: Tammissaari) and in 1550, Helsinki. Using his Finnish subjects as agents of expansion, Gustav Vasa told them to 'sweat and suffer' as pioneers in Savo and Kainuu, territories well beyond those set down in treaties with Russia. Alarmed, the Russians attempted to throw the intruders out. The bloody Kainuu War raged on and off between 1574 and 1584, and most new settlements were destroyed by fire.

GOLDEN AGE OF SWEDEN

The golden age of Sweden was the 17th century, and during this period it controlled Finland, Estonia and parts of present-day Latvia, Denmark, Germany and Russia.

Finally, after 65 years of Lutheranism, the Catholic Sigismund (grandson of King Gustav Vasa) succeeded to the Swedish throne. Karl IX, Sigismund's uncle, was given control over Finland. Karl IX didn't care much for the family business. He encouraged peasants in western Finland to mutiny in 1596, and they attacked Turku Castle in 1597 and defeated Sigismund in 1598 to bring all of Finland under his reign.

While Gustav II Adolf (son of Karl IX and king from 1611 to 1632) was busily involved in the Thirty Year's War in Europe, political power in Finland was exercised by General Governor Count Per Brahe, who resided at the Castle of Turku, capital of Finland. Count Per Brahe, a legendary figure of the local Swedish administration, travelled around the country at this time and founded many towns. He cut quite a figure; as well as being the biggest landowner in Sweden, he was a gourmet and wrote his own cookbook, which he used to take with him and insist it was followed to the letter! Once censured for having illegally bagged an elk, he responded curtly that it had been on its last legs and he had killed it out of mercy!

After Gustav II Adolf, Sweden was ruled from 1644 to 1654 by the eccentric Queen Kristina, namesake for such Finnish towns as Kristinestad and Ristiina. The Queen's conversion to Catholicism and subsequent move to Rome marked the end of the Swedish Vasa dynasty.

The German royal family of Pfalz-Zweibrücken ruled Sweden (including Finland) after the Vasa family folded. By Swedish decree, Finland grew. A chain of castle defences was built to protect against Russian attacks and new factory areas were founded. The *bruk* (early ironworks precinct) was often a self-contained society which harvested the power of water, built ironworks and transport systems for firewood. Social institutions, such as schools and churches, were also established.

Ethnic Finns didn't fare particularly well during this time. The burgher class was dominated by Swedish settlers, as very few Finns engaged in industrial enterprises. Some of the successful industrialists were central Europeans, who settled in Finland via Sweden. Furthermore the Swedish 'caste system', the House of Four Estates, was firmly established in Finland. The Swedish and Finnish nobility maintained their status in the

'Count Per Brahe...once censured for having illegally bagged an elk, responded curtly that it had been on its last legs and he had killed it out of mercy!'

For more details, <http://virtual.finland.fi> has excellent essays on Finnish history written by experts.

1155

First crusade launched from Sweden against pagan Finns

1323

Finland is divided up between Sweden and Novgorod at the Treaty of Pähkinäsaari

1527

The Finnish Reformation gets underway

1637

Per Brahe becomes Governor of Finland and founds many towns; Finnish cavalry earn a fearsome reputation in the Thirty Years' War

Swedish Riksdagen until 1866 and in the Finnish parliament until 1906. Although Finland never experienced feudal serfdom to the extent seen in Russia, ethnic Finns were largely peasant farmers who were forced to lease land from Swedish landlords.

In 1697 the Swede Karl XII ascended the throne. Within three years he was drawn into the Great Northern War (1700–21), which marked the beginning of the end of the Swedish Empire.

THE TURBULENT 18TH CENTURY

While King Karl XII was busy fighting for his empire elsewhere, the Russians under Peter the Great seized the moment. The Great Northern War resulted in Vyborg being defeated in 1710 and much of Finland conquered, including the Swedish-dominated west coast.

From 1714 to 1721 Russia occupied Finland, a time still referred to as the Great Wrath. The Russians destroyed almost everything they could, particularly in Åland and western Finland. The 1721 Treaty of Usikaupunki (Swedish: Nystad) brought peace at a cost – Sweden lost south Karelia to Russia. To regain its lost territories, Sweden attacked Russia in 1741–3, but with little success. Russia again occupied Finland, for a period called the Lesser Wrath, and the border was pushed further west. The Treaty of Turku in 1743 ended the conflict by ceding parts of Savo to Russia.

Only after the 1740s did the Swedish government try to improve Finland's socioeconomic situation. Defences were strengthened by building fortresses off Helsinki's coast (Sveaborg, now Suomenlinna) and at Loviisa, and new towns were founded. Later, Sweden and Russia were to clash repeatedly under King Gustav III, until he was murdered by a group of aristocrats in 1792. Gustav IV Adolf, who reigned from 1796, was drawn into the disastrous Napoleonic Wars and lost his crown in 1809.

RUSSIAN RULE

After the Treaty of Tilsit was signed by Tsar Alexander I and Napoleon, Russia attacked Finland in 1808. Following a bloody war, Sweden ceded Finland to Russia in 1809 as an autonomous grand duchy with its own senate and the Diet of the Four Estates, but all major decisions had to be approved by the tsar. At first, Finland benefited from the annexation and was loyal to the tsar, who encouraged Finns to develop the country in many ways. The Finnish capital was transferred to Helsinki in 1812, as Russians felt that the former capital, Turku, was too close to Sweden.

Early in the 19th century, the first stirring of indigenous Finnish nationalism occurred. One of the first to encourage independence during the 1820s was Al Radisson, who uttered the much-quoted sentence: 'Swedes we are not, Russians we will not become, so let us be Finns'. His views were not widely supported and he was advised to move to Sweden in 1823.

As a Russian annexation, Finland was involved in the Crimean War (1853–6), with British troops destroying fortifications at Loviisa, Helsinki and Bomarsund. Following the Crimean War, the Finnish independence movement gained credibility. While still a part of Russia, Finland issued its first postage stamps in 1856 and its own currency, the markka, in 1860.

In 1905 the Eduskunta, a unicameral parliament, was introduced in Finland with universal and equal suffrage (Finland was the first country

LENIN IN FINLAND

One man who spent plenty of time in Finland was none other than Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, father of the Russian Revolution. Having had a Finn cellmate during his exile in Siberia, he then regularly visited Finland for conferences of the Social Democratic Party. At one of these, in 1905, he met Stalin for the first time. Lenin then lived near Helsinki for a period in 1907 before he was forced to flee the Russian Empire. In a Hollywood-style escape, he jumped off a moving train to avoid tsarist agents, and was then sheltered in Turku, before being moved to the remote island communities of the southwest. Lenin was on Parainen, and, fearing capture, he walked across thin ice with a local guide to Nauvo (there's a famous painting of this in the Hermitage in St Petersburg), from where he finally jumped on a steamer to Stockholm.

Lenin entered Finland again via Tornio in 1917. He returned pretty sharply after the abortive first revolution, living in a tent for a while in Iljitsevo, before going back to Russia and destiny.

Lenin, even before having visited Finland, had always agitated for Finnish independence from Russia, a conviction which he maintained. In December 1917, he signed the declaration of Finnish independence, and, without his support, it is doubtful that the nation would have been born at that time. The Lenin Museum in Tampere (p171) is the place to visit to learn more about Lenin in Finland.

in Europe to grant women full political rights). Despite these many advances, life under Russian rule continued to be harsh. Many artists, notably the composer Jean Sibelius, were inspired by this oppression, which made Finns emotionally ripe for independence.

INDEPENDENCE

The Communist revolution of October 1917 enabled the Finnish senate to declare independence on 6 December 1917. Independent Finland was first recognised by the Soviets one month later. Nevertheless, the Russian-armed Finnish Reds attacked the Finnish civil guards in Vyborg the following year, sparking the Finnish Civil War.

On 28 January 1918, the Civil War flared in two separate locations. The Reds attempted to foment revolution in Helsinki; the Whites (as the government troops were now called), led by CGE Mannerheim, clashed with Russian-backed troops near Vaasa. During the 108 days of heavy fighting in these two locations, approximately 30,000 Finns were killed. The Reds, comprising the rising working class, aspired to a Russian-style socialist revolution while retaining independence. The nationalist Whites dreamed of monarchy and sought to emulate Germany.

The Whites, with Germany's help, eventually gained victory and the war ended in May 1918. Friedrich Karl, Prince of Hessen, was elected king of Finland by the Eduskunta on 9 October 1918, but the German monarchy collapsed one month later, following Germany's defeat in WWI.

BUILDING A NATION

The defeat of imperial Germany made Finland choose a republican state model, and the first president was KJ Ståhlberg. Relations with the Soviets were normalised by the Treaty of Tartu in 1920, which saw Finnish territory grow to its largest ever, including the other 'arm', the Petsamo region in the far northeast. But more trouble awaited.

TK Derry's *The History of Scandinavia* is a good account of Finland's status in the Swedish Empire.

Mannerheim had a fascinating life divided into several distinct phases. Check out www.mannerheim.fi for an online biography.

1640

University of Turku is founded

1809

Finland is occupied by Russia and becomes a grand duchy of the Russian Empire

1905

Finland becomes the first country in Europe to grant women full political rights

1917

Finland declares independence from the Soviet Union

Following WWI, heated exchanges between Finnish and Swedish speakers shook the administration, universities and cultural circles. Civil War skirmishes continued, mostly with illegal massacres of Reds by Whites. Despite its internal troubles, Finland at this time gained fame internationally as a brave new nation, as the only country to pay its debts to the USA, and as a sporting nation. Paavo Nurmi, the most distinguished of Finnish long-distance runners, won nine gold medals in three Olympic Games and became an enduring national hero (see p34). With continuing Finnish success in athletics, Helsinki was chosen to host the 1940 Olympic Games (these were postponed until 1952 due to WWII).

THE WINTER WAR & ITS CONTINUATION

Diplomatic manoeuvrings in Europe in the 1930s meant that Finland had a few difficult choices to make. The security threat posed by the Soviet Union meant that some factions were in favour of developing closer ties with Nazi Germany, while others favoured rapprochement with Moscow. On 23 August 1939, the Soviet and German foreign ministers, Molotov and Ribbentrop, stunned the world by signing a nonaggression pact. A secret protocol stated that they would divide Poland between them in any future rearrangement; Germany would have a free hand in Lithuania, the Soviet Union in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Bessarabia. The Red Army was moving towards the earmarked territories less than three weeks later.

The Soviet Union made more territorial claims, arguing its security required a slice of southeastern Karelia. JK Paasikivi (later to become president) visited Moscow for negotiations on the ceding of the Karelian Isthmus to the Soviet Union. The negotiations failed. On 30 November 1939, the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union began.

This was a harsh winter – temperatures reached -40°C and soldiers died in their thousands. After 100 days of bitter and courageous fighting Finnish forces were defeated. In the Treaty of Moscow (March 1940), Finland ceded part of Karelia and some nearby islands. About 500,000 Karelian refugees flooded across the new border.

In the following months, the Soviet Union pressured Finland for more territory. Isolated from Western allies, Finland turned to Germany for help and allowed the transit of German troops. When hostilities broke out between Germany and the Soviets in June 1941, German troops were already on Finnish soil, and the Continuation War between Finland and the Red Army began. In the fighting that followed, the Finns began to resettle Karelia. When Soviet forces staged a huge comeback in the summer of 1944, President Risto Ryti resigned and Mannerheim took his place. Mannerheim negotiated an armistice with the Russians and ordered the evacuation of German troops. Finland waged a bitter war to oust the Germans from Lapland until the general peace in the spring of 1945. Finland remained independent, but at a price: it was forced to cede territory and (the ultimate irony) pay heavy war reparations to the Soviet Union. The Treaty of Paris (February 1947) dictated that the Karelian Isthmus be ceded to the Soviet Union, together with the eastern Salla and Kuusamo regions, and the 'left arm' of Finland in the Kola Peninsula. Many Finns are still bitter about the loss of these territories. Nevertheless,

the resistance against the might of the Red Army is something that Finns are still justifiably proud of.

THE COLD WAR

Finland's reparations to the Soviets were chiefly paid in machinery and ships. Thus reparations played a central role in laying the foundations for the heavy engineering industry that stabilised the Finnish economy following WWII. Finland had suffered greatly in the late 1940s, with almost everything rationed and poverty widespread. The vast majority of the population was still engaged in agriculture at that time.

Things changed quickly in the following decades, with domestic migration to southern Finland especially strong in the 1960s and 1970s. New suburbs appeared almost overnight around Helsinki. Areas in the north and east lost most of their young people, often half their population.

Urho K Kekkonen, Finnish president from 1956 to 1981, a master of diplomacy and one of the great leaders of his age, was responsible for steering Finland through the Cold War and its relationship with the Soviet Union. Often this meant bowing to the wishes of the USSR who, using veiled threats, influenced Finnish politics. Political nominations were submitted to Moscow for approval within a framework of 'friendly coexistence'.

As recently as the late 1980s, the Soviet Communist Party exercised Cold War tactics by infiltrating Finnish politics, with the aim of reducing US influence in Finland and preventing Finnish membership of the European Community (today's European Union, or EU).

Relations with Scandinavia were also extremely important in the decades following WWII. Finland was a founding member of the Nordic Council (along with the Scandinavian countries), pursuing a similar social welfare programme to Scandinavia and enjoying the benefits of free movement of labour and joint projects with its Western neighbours.

MODERN FINLAND

In the 1990s Finland's overheated economy, like many in the Western world, went through a cooling off period. The bubble economy of the 1980s had burst, the Soviet Union disappeared with debts unpaid, the markka was devalued, unemployment jumped from 3% to 20% and the tax burden grew alarmingly.

Things began to change for the better after a national referendum on 16 October 1994, when 57% of voters gave the go-ahead to join the EU. Since January 1995, Finland has prospered, and was one of the countries to adopt the new euro currency in 2002.

In 2000, Finland elected its first woman president, Tarja Halonen, who has been a popular figure. Briefly in 2003, Finland was the only country in Europe to have a woman as both president and prime minister; Anneli Jäätteenmäki, leader of the Centre Party, won a narrow victory in elections but barely two months later was forced to resign over having lied to parliament. She was replaced by Matti Vanhanen, the current incumbent.

Finland consistently ranks highly in quality of life indexes, and with a strong independent streak, a booming technology sector and a growing tourism industry, it is one of the success stories of the new Europe.

The Winter War directed by Pekka Parikka is a memorable film about the bleak fighting in unspeakably bad conditions.

The website www.winterwar.com has a good overview of the battle-lines and forces deployed in that conflict.

Blood, Sweat and Bears by Lasse Lehtinen is a parody of a war novel, and deals with Finland/Soviet relations.

Did you know that Nokia started out making a whole range of things, including rubber boots and cable insulation, before getting interested in the cables themselves and telecommunications?

1952

Helsinki hosts the summer Olympic Games

1973

The Delegation for Sámi affairs, the beginnings of the Sámi parliament, convenes for the first time

1995

Finland joins the EU

2000

Finland elects Tarja Halonen as its first woman president

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Finnish-speaking Finns do not consider themselves Scandinavian, nor do they see themselves as part of Russia; nevertheless, Finnish tradition owes something to both cultures. The Finns' long struggle for emancipation, together with their ongoing struggle to survive in a harsh environment, has led to an ordered society that solves its problems in its own way. It has also engendered the Finnish trait of *sisu*, often translated as 'guts', or the resilience to survive prolonged hardship. Even if all looks lost, until the final defeat, a Finn with *sisu* will fight – or swim, or run, or work – valiantly. This trait is valued highly, with the country's heroic resistance against the Red Army during WWII usually thought of as the ultimate example.

While the 'silent Finn' stereotype has been exaggerated over the years, it's certainly true that nobody gets nervous if there's a gap in a conversation. Sitting in the sauna for 20 minutes with your best friend, saying nothing, is considered perfectly normal. Finns tend to consider their words, appreciate a well-timed, dry sense of humour, and be attentive listeners.

There's a depressive streak in Finns, more so than in Swedes or Norwegians. Even Finnish summer pop hits can sound like the singer's just backed over their dog or worse, and themes of lost love and general melancholy are favoured. While Finns aren't among Europe's biggest drinkers (take a bow Luxembourg and Dublin!), alcoholism is high. What this doesn't make the Finns is gruff or impolite. They are an exceptionally courteous and welcoming people. It can take a while for politeness to become friendship, but once it does, it is lasting.

The Finnish haven't traditionally been big travellers. Part of the reason for this is that in July Finland is one of the world's most relaxing and joyful places. After struggling through winter, why would they want to miss the best their country has to offer?! Finns head en-masse to their *mökki* (summer cottage; see the boxed text on p41) from Midsummer until the end of the July holidays. There, you'll find even the most urbanised Euro-executives chopping wood, lighting the sauna fire and DIY-ing.

Finns have a deep and abiding love of their forests and lakes. Most could forage in a forest for an hour at the right time of year and emerge with a feast of fresh berries, several types of wild mushroom, and probably a fish or two; city-dwelling Finns are far more knowledgeable and in touch with nature than any of their European counterparts.

LIFESTYLE

Finland is the model of a successful Northern European state and conforms, statistically speaking, to many of the tendencies that one would expect. Average income is good, there is little poverty, and Finland occupies a high position on the UN's Human Development Index. Finns are among the world's most educated people and the least regularly seen at church.

LITTLE SATURDAY

Finns love the weekend, when they can get away to their cottages, play sport and party in the evening. But the working week is also broken up in the middle. On Wednesday nights restaurants are busy, music is playing at all the nightspots, bars are full – Finns are celebrating *pikku lauantai*, or 'little Saturday'.

'Sitting in the sauna for 20 minutes with your best friend, saying nothing, is considered perfectly normal.'

While the economic recession in the 1990s ensured the partial decline of the welfare state, Finns still enjoy a high level of support, getting five weeks' holiday a year, as well as more-or-less free education and childcare, and generous paternity and maternity allowances. The health system, too, is excellent.

Empowerment of women is high, and they are well represented at all levels in all spheres. The divorce rate is also extremely high, with some 53 divorces per 100 marriages, perhaps reflective of the Finns' tendency towards pragmatism rather than dogmatism. The birth rate, as in much of the EU, is low. Gay and lesbian marriages are not permitted, but there is a special status afforded to same-sex relationships that confers similar rights.

POPULATION

Finland is comparatively sparsely populated with some 16 people per square kilometre, which is five times less than Spain, and one-fifteenth that of the UK. By far the majority of Finns live in the south with the Greater Helsinki area, Tampere and Turku accounting for a quarter of

SAUNA – STEAMY BUT NO SEX

The ancient Romans had their steam and hot-air baths, the Turks and Persians had their *hamams*, and the Finns gave the world the sauna (pronounced *sah-oo-nah*, not *saw-nuh*). It's one of the most essential elements of Finnish culture. Finns will prescribe a sauna session to cure all ills, from a head cold to sunburn.

The earliest written description of the Finnish sauna dates from the chronicles of Ukrainian historian Nestor in 1113. There are also numerous references to sauna-going in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. Saunas were traditionally used to smoke meats, and even to give birth.

Today there are 1.6 million saunas in Finland, which means that practically all Finns have access to one. Most are private, situated in Finnish homes. An invitation to bathe in a family's sauna is an honour, just as it is to be invited to a person's home for a meal. The sauna is taken in the nude, a fact that some people find uncomfortable and confronting, but Finns consider perfectly natural. While a Finnish family will often take the sauna together, in mixed gatherings it is usual for the men and women to go separately.

There are also public saunas, usually with separate sections for men and women, and if there is just one sauna, the hours are different for men and women. In unisex saunas you will be given some sort of wrap or covering to wear. Indeed, Finns are strict about the nonsexual character of the sauna and this point should be respected. The sauna was originally a place to bathe and meditate. It's not, as many foreigners would believe, a place for sex.

There are three principal types of sauna around these days. The most common is the electric sauna stove, which produces a fairly dry harsh heat compared with the much-loved chimney sauna, driven by a log fire and the staple of life at Finnish summer cottages. Even rarer is the true *savusauna*, or smoke sauna, without a chimney. The smoke is let out just before entry, and the soot-blackened walls are part of the experience. Although the top of a sauna can get to well over 120°C, many Finns consider the most satisfying temperature for a sauna to be around 80°C.

Proper sauna etiquette dictates that you use a *kauha* (ladle) to throw water on the *kivas* (sauna stove), which then gives off the *löyly* (sauna steam). At this point, at least in summer in the countryside, you might take the *vihta* or *vasta* (a bunch of fresh, leafy birch twigs) and lightly strike yourself. This improves circulation, has cleansing properties and gives your skin a pleasant smell. When you are sufficiently warmed, you'll jump in the sea, a lake, river or pool, then return to the sauna to warm up and repeat the cycle several times. If you're indoors, a cold shower will do. The swim and hot-cold aspect is such an integral part of the sauna experience that in the dead of winter, Finns cut a hole in the ice and jump right in! The final essential ingredient is the sauna beer, which always tastes heavenly.

the population. Generally speaking, the population thins out dramatically inland and further north. In remote municipalities in Lapland, settlement is very sparse indeed.

Apart from the Finnish-speaking Finns, there are three other significant minority groups. Some 5.5% of Finns speak Swedish as their first language. While historically this has caused tensions, these seem to have largely eased into the odd grumble from either side. The main Swedish-speaking areas are in the southwest – where the semi-autonomous Åland islands are almost completely Swedish speaking – and in the Pohjanmaa/Ostrobothen region on the west coast.

The Sámi, who have traditionally lived in the north of the country, are another important minority (see boxed text, p324).

In the east, the Karelians, few of whom speak a Karelian language as their first language, are another distinct ethnolinguistic group, sundered from much of their homeland by the Finland/Russia border. Karelia feels different. It has distinct local character and traditions and a particularly strong Orthodox Church.

SPORT

Ice hockey is Finland's number one national passion. The season starts in late September and finishes in March. The best places to see a quality match in the national league are Tampere (home of the ice-hockey museum), Oulu (home of the current champions) and Helsinki. Turku and Rovaniemi also have major teams. Ticket prices are reasonable (from about €15), and the atmosphere at big games can be electric. The best way to find out when and where games are on is to ask at the tourist office, or contact the national ticketing outlet **Lippupalvelu** (www.ticketservicefinland.fi).

Skiing events don't have the same intensity as team sports, but national (and international) competitions provide a thrill worth experiencing. You can watch flying Finns at the ski-jumping centres in Lahti, Kuopio and Jyväskylä. Even practice sessions can be fascinating and can be seen in summer on the dry slopes at Lahti.

In summer, football (soccer) has a national league, and is widely supported, but not as obsessively as in most European countries. Europe's major leagues are followed with interest, particularly when a successful Finn is playing. The likes of Sami Hyypiä, Mikael Forssell and Antti Niemi have been particularly successful playing in England's Premiership.

DRIVIN' WHEELS

Few nationalities have such an obsession with cars (and motorbikes) as the Finns. It's an interest that goes right down the scale from watching Formula One racing, to changing the oil on the old Datsun parked outside.

You won't be in a Finnish town for long before you'll hear a baritone bellow and see a glint of fins and whitewall tyres as some American classic car rolls by, immaculately polished and tuned. You probably never knew that so many Ford Mustangs, Dodge Chargers or Pontiac Firebirds existed on this side of the Atlantic! Even non-classics that have long since died out elsewhere are kept alive here with loyal home maintenance.

Rally driving sends Finns wild; the exploits of legends like Tommi Mäkinen and Marcus Grönholm are just the latest in a sport in which Finland excels. In Formula One, too, Finland punches well above its weight, with Keke Rosberg and Mika Häkkinen previous world champions, and Kimi Räikkönen sure to follow one day. In small towns, often the only entertainment for the local youths is trying to emulate them by doing blockies around the *kauppatori* (market square).

One of Finland's most famous footballers is Aki Riihilahti, famous not so much for his exploits on the pitch with Crystal Palace as his fabulously offbeat web diaries. Hit the News pages at www.akiriihilahti.com

Outside big cities, Finnish baseball, called *pesäpallo* or simply *pesis*, is the most popular team sport in summer, with men's and women's teams enthusiastically supported. It was brought back and 'improved' from the USA in the 1920s. Check out www.pesis.fi for more details.

Athletics (track and field) is very popular in Finland, as a result of the country's many successful long-distance runners and javelin-throwers. Paavo Nurmi's nine Olympic golds place him at the top of the Finnish pantheon. Helsinki hosted the 2005 World Athletics Championships.

MULTICULTURALISM

Only 2% of all Finnish residents are foreigners – the lowest percentage of any country in Europe – and the majority of these are Russian (almost 23,000), followed by Estonian, Swedish, former Yugoslavian and Somali. Finland is fast becoming more multicultural, as former refugees spread their wings and contract workers are brought in by Finland's booming technology companies. Overt racism is rare, although some disturbing instances have occurred in smaller towns in central Finland (see p23).

MEDIA

Newspapers

Finns are among the world's most voracious readers of broadsheets and tabloids. *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest daily in Finland with a circulation of nearly half a million, is highly regarded, while *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-Lehti* compete with lurid 'pop star in sex and drugs shocker' type headlines. Turku's *Turun Sanomat* and Tampere's *Aamulehti* are other important regional papers. Freedom of the press is sacrosanct.

Radio & TV

There are four national (noncommercial) radio stations. A summary of world news is broadcast in English daily at 10.55pm on the national radio stations YLE 3 and YLE 4. In Helsinki, YLE X plays Finnish and international rock, while Radio Nova is more poppy and Kiss FM fairly cheesy.

There are four free-to-air TV stations: the government-run YLE 1 and YLE 2, and the private MTV 3 and Nelonen 4. Cable and satellite connections are widespread. Foreign programmes are broadcast in the original language with subtitles.

Government radio and TV stations have Swedish-language equivalents.

RELIGION

About 84% of Finns describe themselves as Lutherans, 1.1% are Russian Orthodox and most of the remainder are unaffiliated. Minority churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, make up only about 1%. Only 4% of Finns are weekly churchgoers, one of the lowest rates in the world.

ARTS

Literature

Written Finnish was created by Mikael Agricola (1510–57), who wrote the first Finnish alphabet. Because Finnish remained a spoken more than written language (although it was emerging in schools), the earliest fiction was written in Swedish.

The most famous of all 19th-century writers is Elias Lönnrot, who penned the *Kalevala* (see p36). Other notable 19th-century writers include J.L. Runeberg (*Tales of the Ensign Ståhl*), fairy-tale writer Zacharias Topelius, and Aleksis Kivi, who founded modern Finnish literature with

There's an excellent index of Finnish and other Nordic authors at www.kirjasto.sci.fi

Seven Brothers, a story of brothers who try to escape education and civilisation in the forest.

In the 20th century, Mika Waltari gained fame with *The Egyptian*, and FE Sillanpää received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1939. The national bestseller during the postwar period was *The Unknown Soldier* by Väinö Linna. The seemingly endless series of autobiographical novels by Kalle Päätalo and the witty short stories by Veikko Huovinen are also very popular in Finland. Another internationally famous author is the late Tove Jansson (see boxed text on p214), whose books about the Moomin family captured the hearts and imaginations of Finnish children, and adults.

One of the most popular contemporary Finnish novelists is the prolific, bizarre and whimsical Arto Paasilinna, whose best-known translated book is *The Year of the Hare*.

Architecture

The high standard of Finnish architecture was established by the works of Alvar Aalto (1898–1976) and Eliel Saarinen (1873–1950). People interested in architecture make pilgrimages to Finland to see superb examples of modern building.

Wood has long been the dominant building material in Finland. Some of the best early examples of wooden architecture are churches on Finland's southern and western coasts such as those at Kerimäki, Keuruu and Ruotsinpyhtää.

Eastern influences date back to 1812 when Helsinki was made the new capital under Russian rule. The magnificent city centre was created by CL Engel, a German-born architect, who combined neoclassical and St Petersburg features in designing the cathedral, the university and other buildings around Senate Square. Engel also designed a huge number of churches and town halls throughout Finland. After the 1850s National Romanticism emerged in response to pressure from the Russians.

THE KALEVALA

Elias Lönnrot was an adventurous country doctor who trekked in eastern Finland during the first half of the 19th century in order to collect traditional poems, oral runes, folk stories and legends. Lönnrot undertook 11 long tours, by foot and on reindeer, to complete his research. He compiled the material together with some of his own writing to form the *Kalevala*, which came to be regarded as the national epic of Finland.

The first version of the *Kalevala* appeared in 1833, another version in 1835 and yet another, the final version, *Uusi-Kalevala* (New Kalevala), in 1849. It had a huge influence on generations of Finnish artists, writers and composers, with painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela and composer Jean Sibelius, in particular, basing much work on it. See p22 for some destinations in Finland related to the *Kalevala*.

Kalevala is an epic mythology that includes creation stories and tales of the fight between good and evil. Although there are heroes and villains, there are also more nuanced characters. The main storyline concentrates on events in two imaginary countries, *Kalevala* (southern Finland, often identified as Karelia) and *Pohjola* (the north). Many commentators feel that the epic echoes ancient territorial conflicts between the Finns and the Sámi. Although it is impossible to accurately reproduce the *Kalevala*, the memorable characters are particularly well brought to life in poet Keith Bosley's English translation, which is a fantastic and lyrical read.

Equally important was Lönnrot's work in creating a standard Finnish grammar and vocabulary by adopting words and expressions from various dialects. Finnish has remained very much the same ever since, at least in written form.

One book that is well worth reading is Mikael Niemi's *Popular Music*, set in Niemi's hometown in an area of Swedish Lapland with a very Finnish character and humour!

The Art Nouveau period, which reached its apogee at the turn of the 20th century, combined Karelian ideals with rich ornamentation. Materials used were wood and grey granite. After independence in 1917, rationalism and functionalism emerged, as exemplified by some of Alvar Aalto's work.

Emerging regional schools of architecture include the Oulu School, featuring small towers, porticoes and combinations of various elements, most evident in the region around Oulu. Erkki Helasvuo, who died in 1995, did plenty of work in North Karelia, providing the province with several public buildings which hint at modern Karelianism. The most famous of these is Nurmes Talo, the cultural centre in Nurmes.

Design

The products of some early designers, such as Louis Sparre, Gallen-Kallela and Eliel Saarinen, reflected the ideas of Karelianism, National Romanticism and Art Nouveau. In the 1930s architect Alvar Aalto designed wooden furniture made of bent laminated wood, as well as his famous Savoy vases. Aalto won a prize for his furniture in the Milan Triennale of 1933.

After WWII, the 'Golden Age of Applied Art' began, and in Milan in 1951 Finland received 25 prizes for various designer products. Tapio Wirkkala, Kaj Franck, Timo Sarpaneva, Eero Aarnio and Yrjö Kukkapuro were the most notable designers of the time.

Iittala, Nuutajärvi and Arabia are some of the best brands of Finnish glassware and porcelain, and Pentik is a more recent brand. Aarikka is famous for wooden products, and Kalevala Koru for silver designs. The biggest name in the current Finnish design scene is Stefan Lindfors, whose reptile- and insect-inspired work has been described as a warped updating of Aalto's own nature-influenced work. Helsinki's Museum of Art & Design is a good place to see the latest in Finnish design.

Painting & Sculpture

Of the many prehistoric rock paintings discovered across Finland, those at Hossa (p283) and Ristiina (p127) are the most famous. Medieval churches in Åland, such as Sankt Mikael Church (in Finström), Sankta Maria Church (in Saltvik) and Sankta Birgitta Church (in Lemland), and in Southern Finland have enchanting frescoes. Modern art is alive and well in Finland, with most towns having a gallery showing exhibitions of contemporary work, headed up by Helsinki's Kiasma.

Finnish modern art and sculpture often seems to portray disaffection with the technological society; the number of mistreated Nokias that form part of exhibits around the country is always high. The contrast of this with the output of the designers couldn't be starker; some have seen a reflection in this of the decreasing Finnishness of Helsinki, and a fear of losing some essential characteristic or soul.

GOLDEN AGE

Although contemporary art enjoys a high profile in Finland, it is works by National Romantic painters that have been bestowed with golden age status. The main features of these artworks are virgin forests and pastoral landscapes. The most comprehensive collections are displayed by the Ateneum and National Museum in Helsinki, and the Turku Art Museum. The following list contains some of the most famous names from the Finnish Golden Age.

Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), probably the most famous Finnish painter, had a distinguished and prolific career as creator of *Kalevala*-inspired paintings.

JRR Tolkien based significant parts of his mythos on the Kalevala, and part of the language of Elves on Finnish.

Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), one of the most appreciated of Finnish artists, was educated in Paris, and a number of his paintings date from this period. Many paintings are photo-like depictions of rural life.

The brothers von Wright – Magnus (1805–68), Wilhelm (1810–87) and Ferdinand (1822–1902) – are considered the first Finnish painters of the Golden Age, most famous for their paintings of birds. They worked in their home near Kuopio and in Porvoo.

Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), probably the most famous female painter of her age, is known for her self-portraits, which reflect the situation of Finnish women 100 years ago; Helene didn't live a happy life, but is considered Finland's greatest artist by many contemporary observers. Fanny Churberg (1845–92), another very famous female painter, created landscapes, self-portraits and still lifes.

Hugo Simberg (1873–1917) is famous for his series of watercolours, which draw on folk tales and employ a kind of rustic symbolism.

Juho Rissanen (1873–1950) depicted life among ordinary Finns, and his much-loved paintings are displayed at the Ateneum and Turku Art Museum.

Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937) was a keen visitor to Koli, where he created more than 50 paintings of the 'national landscape'. His sister married Jean Sibelius, the composer. Pekka Halonen (1865–1933) was a popular artist of the National Romantic era. His work, mostly devoted to typical winter scenery, is largely privately owned. Victor Westerholm (1860–1919) most famous for his large Åland landscapes, had his summer studio in Önnungeby (see p238) but there are landscapes from other locations too.

Emil Wickström (1864–1942), was to sculpture what Gallen-Kallela was to painting, and sculpted the memorial to Elias Lönnrot in Helsinki. Many of his works are at his studio in Visavuori.

Theatre & Dance

Dance is nurtured in Finland. The Finnish National Opera has its own ballet school, and there are a handful of small dance groups in Helsinki and other large towns. Attend the annual Kuopio Dance Festival to catch the latest trends.

Few traditional *kansan-tanssit* (folk dances) remain, but they can be seen on ceremonial occasions or at certain festivals. Old-style dancing in general remains very popular, though, with every town having a hall where *humppa* or melancholy Finnish *tango* accompanies twirling couples.

Helsinki is the home of the National Theatre. Finnish theatre is very well attended and heavily subsidised. The most famous dramatist is perhaps Aleksis Kivi, who wrote plays as well as novels.

Cinema

Finnish cinema is alive and well, and several films are produced in Finland annually, although few make it to screens beyond the Nordic countries. Funding is a vexed issue due to the government's reluctant to over-subsidise an industry with, in the majority of cases, a limited domestic audience.

The daddy of Finnish cinema is Aki Kaurismäki, who won the Grand Prix at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival for *The Man Without a Past*, a story about a man who is so badly beaten up he loses his memory and becomes homeless. It confirmed the reputation Kaurismäki established in film noir with his brother Mika with such films as the downbeat but quintessentially Finnish *Drifting Clouds* (1997). They also collaborated with the wacky Leningrad Cowboys on two road movies.

The most successful Finn in Hollywood, Renny Harlin (real name Lauri Harjola), directed the strongly anticommunist action movie *Born American* in the 1980s, portraying an imaginary Soviet prison camp. When the film was banned in Finland and Harlin accused of presenting a 'foreign nation in a hostile manner', the young director found himself directing box-office hits for Hollywood, including *Die Hard II*, *Cliffhanger*, *Deep Blue Sea* and the recent *Exorcist: The Beginning*. A far cry from Kaurismäki.

Music

Music is a big part of Finnish culture, particularly in summer when music festivals are staged all over the country. As well as traditional dance bands, you'll find plenty of rock, jazz, folk, classical and modern electronic music playing in a variety of venues.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Composer Jean Sibelius' (see boxed text, p184) work dominates the musical identity of Finland. His most famous composition, *Finlandia*, became a strong expression of Finnish patriotism. Sibelius can be said to have composed the music for the *Kalevala* saga, while Gallen-Kallela painted it.

Sibelius' inheritance has been taken up over the years by a string of talented musicians. Finnish musical education is perhaps the best in the world, and Finnish conductors, in particular, are in high demand. There are some excellent classical music festivals in Finland. See p334 for some of them.

POPULAR MUSIC

In recent years Finnish bands, mostly from the heavier side of the rock spectrum, have taken the world by storm. Indeed, Finland has one of the liveliest heavy and darkwave scenes around. Catchy light-metal rockers The Rasmus won international recognition with their album *Dead Letters* and have continued to build on that success. Meanwhile, Nightwish, from the little eastern town of Kitee, have risen to stardom on the blend of dark metal music and the soaring vocals of opera singer Tarja Turunen. Perhaps bigger than either are HIM (His Infernal Majesty), whose melodic 'love metal' has propelled them perhaps further than any Finnish band. Blind Guardian, with very heavy metal, much based on Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, are also big, as are Stratovarius. Other bands to look out for in this genre include gothic The 69 Eyes, classical/metal combo Apocalyptica, and the heavy Children of Bodom.

Legendary rock bands Hanoi Rocks, The Hurriganes, and the Leningrad Cowboys continue to be popular, with Hanoi Rocks on a slightly shambolic comeback trail. There are also numerous excellent groups that sing in Finnish only. Check out Zen Café, Don Huonot, Apulanta and Verenisara (in roughly ascending order of heaviness), as well as the well-established melancholic technopop Neljä Ruusua, or Maija Vilkkumaa, often described as a Finnish Alanis. Husky Rescue have already had success in Britain with their happy, breezy approach.

The best rock festivals are Provinssirock at Seinäjoki, Ankkarock at Vantaa, Ruisrock in Turku and Ilosaarirock at Joensuu, while Tavastia is a legendary Helsinki rock club.

Finns are big fans of jazz, as can be seen by the huge jazz festivals at Pori, Espoo and Kajaani and the many jazz clubs in major cities. Notable Finnish jazz musicians include Raoul Björkenheim, and the late Edward Vesala, a visionary of the Finnish free jazz scene. Trio

Jim Jarmusch is a friend of the Finnish film industry and part of his film *Night on Earth* is set in Helsinki.

The Finnish Film Archive has a good overview of Finnish cinema on its website, www.sea.fi.

www.fimic.fi is an excellent resource for finding out about Finnish music, while www.moremusic.fi is a good place to order hard-to-get Finnish CDs online.

Töykeät is an excellent modern jazz ensemble that has had notable worldwide success.

Electronic music is also big business in Finland. Techno and trance artist Darude has had huge successes, and the Bomfunk MCs are big in the hip-hop scene. Other names to look for in the Finnish music business include Pan Sonic, known for abstract, minimalist and experimental electronica; Laika & the Cosmonauts, who built a big reputation as surf instrumentalists (believe it or not) and Jori Hulkkonen, a house producer and DJ.

Several Finnish Sámi groups and artists have created excellent modern music with the traditional *yoik* form. The *yoik* is the basis of most Sámi music and is classically an unaccompanied and complex vocal solo often describing a person, and with immense spiritual importance in Sámi culture. In recent times it has been used with musical accompaniment and in a variety of forms. Wimme is a big name in this sphere, and Angelit produce popular, dancefloor-style Sámi music. One of their former members, Ulla Pirttijärvi, has released a particularly haunting solo album, while Vilddas are on the trancey side of Sámi music, combining it with other influences.

Environment

THE LAND

Finland, measuring in at 338,000 sq km, is the seventh-largest country in Europe, and its southernmost point is equivalent in latitude to Anchorage, Alaska, or southern Greenland.

It's often described as a country of 'forests and lakes', but is this the case? Absolutely! Ten percent of the country's surface area is taken up by its 187,888 lakes, other wetlands and countless other smaller bodies of water, and nearly seventy percent is forested. Finland has almost as many islands as it does lakes; some 180,000 of them, mostly tiny.

Much of the curious geography that we see today is a result of the last Ice Age, and its end around 10,000 years ago. The powerful moving ice masses produced classic glacial features such as *eskers* (sand/gravel ridges), formed by streams of meltwater under the main body of the glacier, and kettle holes, lumps of ice left behind in depressions by the retreating glacier that became lakes. The predominant flow of Finland's waterways is northwest to southeast, mirroring the path of the glaciers' retreat.

Without the massive weight of the ice, the Earth's crust in this area began to slowly spring back, a process that is still continuing at a rate of 6mm per year. The Baltic, which was itself a lake until the saltwater came pouring in via Denmark at about the same period, is decreasing in size as land rises from the sea.

Despite what a Monty Python song claimed, Finland has no 'mountains so lofty'; they were probably thinking of Norway. There are no real mountains; rather, the *eskers* and wooded hills dominate. The highest hills, or *tunturit* (fells) are in Lapland, which borders the mountainous areas of northern Norway and Sweden. Finland's highest point, the Halti, in the northwest corner of the country, rises only 1328m above sea level.

WILDLIFE Animals

There are quite a few mammals in Finnish forests. The largest (and one of the rarest) is the brown bear. Other mammals include elk (moose), foxes, lynx, wolves and wolverines. There are also plenty of small animals such as lemmings, hedgehogs, muskrats, martens, beavers, otters and hares. The *hirvi* (elk) is a solitary, shy animal – to see one is a real treat, unless it's crashing into your car windscreen. There are plenty of elk about, so keep your eyes out, especially in the early morning or evening. There are around 2000 road accidents a year involving elk. *Poro* (reindeer), on

Lemmings are not really suicidal! While they do migrate in large numbers in years of overpopulation, the image of them jumping en masse over a cliff comes from the Disney film *Wild Wilderness*, when the lemmings were sacrificed for better cinema.

SUMMER COTTAGES

About 25% of the population of Finland owns a *kesämökki* or summer cottage, and the majority of Finns at least have access to one. The *mökki* is where Finns retreat to nature and should ideally be on the shores of a lake and surrounded by forest. A genuine *mökki* has only basic amenities – many have no electricity or running water – but always comes equipped with a (wood-burning) sauna and a rowing boat. These days, however, you can rent a *mökki* with a fridge, TV and even a phone. Grilling sausages over the barbecue, swimming and fishing in the lake, playing darts and gathering berries and mushrooms are typical *mökki* activities, not to mention enjoying a post-sauna beer by the lake! Getting invited to a summer cottage is a great honour and an experience not to be missed, perhaps the ultimate in Nordic peace and relaxation.

the other hand, abound in north Finland, with some 230,000 animals. These are all in semidomesticated herds owned by the Sámi. *Ilves* (lynx) used to be very rare but numbers are increasing. There are only 150 or so wolves, but they, too, are on the up. Hatred for, and fear of, the *susi* (wolf) is deep-rooted in eastern Finland, where they traditionally have been hunted and killed. Wolverines, too, have traditionally been hunted, both for their fur, and their depredations on the reindeer population, particularly in winter. Unless you head out with specialist guides or are very lucky, you are unlikely to see bears, wolves, lynx or wolverines on a trip to Finland.

Other interesting mammals include the rare Saimaa ringed seal, a freshwater dweller who lost its saltwater cousins as the land rose, the flying squirrel, a resident of the taiga, and the famous lemming, an Arctic resident.

There are more than 300 bird species in Finland (see p51 for more information). Large species include black grouse, capercaillies, whooper swans and birds of prey such as the osprey. Chaffinches and willow warblers are the two most common forest species, and their songs are almost synonymous with the Finnish summer. Sparrows are quite common in inhabited areas. Crested-tits, black woodpeckers, black-throated divers, ravens and many owls are common throughout the country; the glorious red-throated diver (*kaakkuri*) is also present, as are many other waterbirds. The Siberian jay is a common sight in Lapland because it follows people. There are numerous migrating birds present in spring and summer, including the common crane, a spectacular sight in the fields. Finns who watch migratory birds arrive from the south have a saying for how to determine when summer will come: it is one month from sighting a skylark, half a month from a chaffinch, just a little from a white wagtail and not a single day from a swift. Less popular creatures include the viper (*kyy*), which is the most common poisonous snake.

The brown bear was once so feared in Finland that even mentioning its name (*karhu*) was taboo; numerous synonyms, such as *mesikämmen*, 'honeypaw', exist in Finnish.

REINDEER ROADBLOCKS

For many travellers a highlight of a visit to Finland is the chance to glimpse some Finnish wildlife, such as bear or elk. If you are travelling in the far north you'll definitely see reindeer, and you won't have to go trekking in the wild to find them.

Reindeer are not wild animals. Reindeer herding has been an essential part of the Sámi culture for centuries, and reindeer are semidomesticated but wander freely. With some 230,000 reindeer wandering around Lapland, it's inevitable that some will find their way onto the roads and they are unfortunately very blasé about traffic. Some 3000 to 4500 reindeer die annually on Finnish roads, and trains kill an additional 600.

The worst months for reindeer-related accidents are November and December, when hours of daylight are few and road visibility is extremely poor. Also bad are July and August, when the poor animals run amok trying to escape insects. The roads to take extra precautions on are in the far north – anywhere beyond Oulu basically.

The best way to avoid an accident is to slow down immediately when you spot a reindeer, regardless of its location, direction or speed. Reindeer move slowly and do not respond to car horns. Nor do they seem to feel that vehicles deserve right of way. If a calf is on one side of the road and its mother on the other, it will almost always try and dash across.

Elk are not as common but are much larger animals and tend to dart onto the road if panicked by traffic. There are around 2000 accidents each year involving elk and generally neither the vehicle nor the animal come out of it looking too good. Be particularly vigilant when driving in the morning or evening, particularly in autumn, when elk accidents are a very real and potentially fatal danger. Respect the warning signs!

Plants

Finnish plant life has developed relatively recently, having been wiped out by the last Ice Age, and is specially adapted either to survive the harsh winters, or to take advantage of the short summers.

Although coastal areas support a more diverse tree population, nearly all of Finland's forest cover is made up of pines, spruces and birches. Pine grows generally on dryish ground and sandy soils, conditions which don't foster undergrowth. Spruce forests are dark and dense, while birch is the typical tree in deciduous forests. Most forests in Finland are logged every 80 years or so and forestry management is something of an art form here.

Finnish flora sparkles during the dynamic period between late May and September. Flowers bloom and berries are gathered; you'll see cars all over the place and families filling buckets with blueberries, wild strawberries, crowberries, and in the north, the delicious Arctic cloudberries.

NATIONAL PARKS

While much of Finland's forest covering is private land cultivated by forestry companies, Metsähallitus, the Finnish Forest and Park Service maintains an excellent series of national parks. At last count, there were 35 of them (including Koli, managed by METLA, the independent Finnish Forest Research Institute), with a total area of over 8000 sq km. A similar amount of territory is protected under other categories, while further swathes of land are designated wilderness reserves. In total, over 30,000 sq km, some 9% of the total area, is in some way protected.

Metsähallitus publishes *Finland's National Parks*, a comprehensive booklet listing all national parks, with information on trails and accommodation as well as notes on flora and fauna. This is an extremely helpful resource if you are planning to visit several parks or are particularly interested in the Finnish wilderness. This can be obtained at any Metsähallitus office, including the Helsinki **headquarters** (Map p64; ☎ 09-270 5221, 0203-44122; www.metsa.fi; Eteläesplanadi 20; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat). Most of this information is online at the excellent website www.outdoors.fi, which goes into some

Lappajärvi, northeast of Seinäjoki, is one of Europe's biggest meteorite impact sites. The crater measures 23km in diameter and was created some 70 to 80 million years ago.

NATIONAL PARKS

Great National Parks	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit
Lemmenjoki (p322)	Broad rivers and old-growth forests; golden eagles, reindeer	Trekking, boating, gold-panning	Aug-Sep
Linnansaari & Kolovesi (p124)	Luscious lakes and freshwater seals	Canoeing	May-Sep
Oulanka (p288)	Pine forests and river valleys; elk, white-tailed eagles; calypso flowers	Trekking the Bear's Ring	late Jun-Sep
Urho K Kekkonen (p316)	Fells, mires and old Sámi settlements; reindeer, flying squirrels	Trekking, cross-country skiing, fishing	Jul-Sep & Nov-Apr
Southwestern Archipelago (p99)	Strings of islets and skerries; seals, eider ducks, greylag geese	Boating, fishing	May-Sep
Nuuskio (p87)	Forest within striking distance of Helsinki; woodpeckers, elk, divers	Nature trails	May-Oct
Patvinsuo (p160)	Broad boglands and old forest; bears, beavers, cranes	Hiking	Jun-Oct
Pallas-Yllästunturi (p308)	Undulating fells; bears, snow buntings, ptarmigans	Hiking, trekking, skiing	Jul-Sep, Nov-Apr

detail about each park. Pamphlets describing individual parks are available at the national park information centres throughout the country.

The largest and most pristine national parks are in northern Finland, particularly Lapland, where vast swathes of wilderness invite trekking, cross-country skiing, fishing, and canoeing.

Linnansaari and Kolovesi National Parks, near Savonlinna, are the best parks in the Lakeland area and home to the extremely endangered Saimaa ringed seal. To see larger mammals – such as the shy and elusive elk – it's best to visit one of the national parks in the northeast, such as Oulanka National Park, or further north in Lapland, such as Lemmenjoki, Pallas-Ounastunturi and Urho Kekkonen National Parks. These parks are vast and services and facilities are few; to make the most of a visit you should be prepared to spend several days trekking and camping. See opposite for trail recommendations and more information about trekking.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

In Finland, forestry products are a huge source of income and employment, and generate some 35% of the country's total export revenue. It is also the main cause of pollution and the main topic of environmental debate. Paper and pulp industries provide work for thousands but also cause environmental hazards, which are easily seen in areas surrounding factories.

Finland is the second largest exporter of paper products in the world and is dependent on paper manufacturing. Around 70% of the country is forest – the highest percentage in the world – and most of this land is managed forest that is harvested for cutting. While this is very well-managed, it has an unavoidable impact on local ecosystems, with ecological diversity lowered. However, the main problem in Finland is water pollution, especially from use of fertilizers on the forest areas.

While Finland may look idyllic and pristine, things are not always as they seem. In the most recent government survey, published in 2005, only 43% of the country's rivers were rated 'good' or better while about 80% of lakes, were given the nod of approval. Worryingly, however, Finland's sea areas had markedly declined in water quality in the early years of the 21st century. While massive emissions from Russian St Petersburg and Vyborg contribute heavily to this, it's a worrying trend.

The forestry industry is also fighting battles up in the north, where Sámi reindeer herders have complained that the companies are erecting fences that jeopardize traditional movement between pasturing areas. The Sámi are seeking legislation to prevent this, while the forestry companies claim that only a minimal area is affected and the reindeer have more than enough space anyway.

Domestic conservation efforts are spearheaded by the Finnish Forest and Park Service, which oversees 120,000 sq km of land. This organisation also works to protect endangered species and promote biodiversity on forest lands that are used for commercial purposes. For more information about the National Park Service and protected wilderness areas, see p43.

The Finnish branch of the World Wide Fund for Nature runs week-long volunteer programs every summer where you participate in a work-camp on some conservation project. Email info@wwf.fi for details of upcoming camps.

The Great Outdoors

Finland's beauty and appeal lies in its fantastic natural environment, with vast forests, long waterways and numerous lakes to explore, as well as the harsh Arctic wilderness in the north. It's the best way to experience the country and Finland is remarkably well set-up for any type of activity, from all-included safari-style packages to map-and-compass do-it-yourself adventures. There's almost unlimited scope in both summer and winter. Fishing is popular year-round; in winter you just need something to drill a hole in the ice, and a warm drink while you wait for a bite!

HIKING

The superb system of national parks offers memorable trekking throughout Finland in the summer months. The routes are backed up with resources for camping and sleeping, so it's easy to organize a multiday wilderness adventure.

The terrain is generally flat and easy-going, and pristine wilderness covers much of the country. National parks offer excellent marked trails, and most wilderness areas are crisscrossed by locally-used walking paths. Nights are short or nonexistent in summer, so you can walk for as long as your heart desires or your feet will permit.

It's important to remember what the Finnish landscape does and doesn't offer. You will get scented pine and birch forest, low hills, jewel-like lakes and brisk powerful rivers. Don't expect epic mountains, fjords, cliffs and valleys; that's not Finland.

The trekking season runs from late May to September in most parts of the country. In Lapland and the north the ground is not dry enough for hiking until late June, and mosquitoes are a serious irritation during July.

RIGHT OF PUBLIC ACCESS

The *jokamiehenoikeus*, literally 'everyman's right', is an ancient Finnish code that gives people the right to walk, ski or cycle anywhere in forests and other wilderness areas, and even across private land as long as they behave responsibly. Canoeing, rowing and kayaking on lakes and rivers is also unrestricted. Travel by motorboat or snowmobile, though, is heavily restricted.

You can rest and swim anywhere in the Finnish countryside, and camp for one night *almost* anywhere. To camp on private property you will need the owner's permission. Try and camp on already-used sites to preserve the environment. Camping is not permitted in town parks or on beaches.

Watch out for stricter regulations regarding access in nature reserves and national parks. In these places, camping may be forbidden and travel confined to marked paths. Some areas are equipped with compost bins or toilets, and even rubbish bins and recycling containers. Many areas are not, however, and you should take out any rubbish you bring with you.

MAKING CAMPFIRES

Under the right of public access, you may not make a campfire on private land unless you have the owner's permission. In national parks, look for designated campfire areas, called *nuotiopaikka* in Finnish, and watch for fire warning signs – *metsäpalovaroitus* means the fire risk is very high.

If heading off trekking on your own, always advise someone of your route and intended arrival date, or note these details in the trekkers' books.

Felling trees or cutting brush to make a campfire is forbidden; use fallen wood instead.

GATHERING BERRIES & MUSHROOMS

It's permissible to pick berries and mushrooms – but not other kinds of plants – under Finland's right of public access. Blueberries come into season in late July and wild strawberries are another gem.

Orange cloudberry is so appreciated by Finns that you may not have a chance to sample this slightly sour, creamy berry in the wild. In some parts of Lapland, cloudberry is protected. Edible mushrooms are numerous in Finnish forests, as are poisonous ones; make sure you have a mushroom guide or know what you are doing!

WHAT TO BRING

Food

You will have to carry all food when you walk in wilderness areas. If you plan to walk between wilderness huts, you generally won't need cooking equipment, but it's best to have a camp stove in case of fire bans. The most common fuels in Finland are *petroli* or *paloöljy* (kerosene), *spritä* (methylated spirits) and *lampuöljy* (paraffin). Camping Gaz and other butane cartridges are available from petrol stations and adventure sports stores.

Insect Repellent

Mosquitoes are a big problem in Finland, particularly in summer and particularly in Lapland. They are accompanied by phalanxes of other biting creatures from midges to horseflies. Skimp on protection at your own peril. Some trekkers even use a head net; they may look comical, but so does a nose swollen with bites.

ACCOMMODATION

The Metsähallitus (Forest and Park Service) maintains most of Finland's wilderness huts. Finland has one of the world's most extensive networks of free, properly-maintained wilderness huts. Some huts require advance booking, or they have a separate, lockable section that must be reserved in advance for a fee (usually €9). This is called a *varaustupa*.

Huts typically have basic bunks, cooking facilities, a pile of dry firewood and even a wilderness telephone. You are required to leave the hut as it was – ie replenish the firewood and carry away your rubbish. The Finns' 'wilderness rule' states that the last one to arrive will be given the best place to sleep, but, on busy treks in peak season, it's good to have a tent, because someone usually ends up sleeping outside.

Outside of Lapland, trekking routes generally have no free cabins, but you may be able to find a simple log shelter (*laavu*); you can pitch your tent inside or just roll out your sleeping bag. A 1:50,000 trekking map is recommended for finding wilderness huts and these cost €14 from tourist offices, national park visitor centres or map shops.

WHERE TO TREK

You can trek anywhere in Finland, but national parks and reserves will have marked routes, designated campfire places, well-maintained wilderness huts and boardwalks over the boggy bits.

Lapland is the main trekking region, with huge national parks that have well-equipped wilderness huts and good trekking routes. See p295 for details. There are other classic trekking areas at Oulanka National Park near Kuusamo, and in North Karelia.

FORGET YOUR SKIS, DID YA?

Finland is proud of having invented the burgeoning sport of Nordic Walking, originally devised as a training method for cross-country skiers during the summer months. Basically, it involves using two specially-designed poles while briskly walking; it may look a little weird at first, but involves the upper body in the activity and results in a 20-45% increase in energy consumption, and an increase in heart rate, substantially adding to the exercise value of walking.

Nordic Blading is a speedier version, using poles while on inline skates – some pretty scary velocities can be reached!

Some recommended treks are described here. Excellent trekking maps are available in Finland for all of these routes.

Karhunkierros (Bear's Ring) The most famous of all Finnish trekking routes, this circular trail in northern Finland covers 75km of rugged cliffs, gorges and suspension bridges. See p288.

Karhunpolku (Bear's Path) This 133km marked hiking trail of medium difficulty leads north from Lieksa through a string of stunning national parks and nature reserves. See p158.

Susitaival (Wolf's Trail) Running along the border with Russia, this 100km trail stretches from the marshlands of Patvinsuo National Park, north of Ilomantsi, to the forests of Petkeljärvi National Park. See p158.

UKK Route The nation's longest trekking route is this 240km route through northern Finland. It starts at Koli Hill, continues along the western side of Lake Pielinen and ends at Iso-Syöte Hill. Farther east, there are more sections of the UKK Route, including the Kuhmo to Peurajärvi leg (connections from Nurmes) and the Kuhmo to Iso-Palonen leg. See p282 for a brief description of this trek.

CYCLING

Riding a bike in Finland is one of the best ways to explore parts of the country in summer. What sets Finland apart from both Sweden and Norway is the almost total lack of mountains. Main roads are in good condition and traffic is very light compared to elsewhere in Europe. Bicycle tours are further facilitated by the liberal camping regulations, excellent cabin accommodation at official camp sites, and the long hours of daylight in June and July.

The drawback is this: distances in Finland are vast. And let's face it, a lot of the Finnish scenery can get repetitive at a bicycle's pace. It's best to look at planning shorter explorations in particular areas, combining cycling with bus and train trips – Finnish buses and trains are very bike-friendly.

Even if your time is limited, don't skip a few quick jaunts in the countryside. There are very good networks of cycling paths in and around most major cities and holiday destinations (for instance, the networks around Oulu and Turku).

In most towns bicycles can be hired from sports shops, tourist offices, camping grounds or hostels for around €8 to €15 per day, or €45 to €60 a week.

BRINGING YOUR BICYCLE

Most airlines (but not the budget ones) will carry a bike free of charge, so long as the bike and panniers don't exceed the weight allowance per passenger. Inform the airline that you will be bringing your bike when you book your ticket. You will usually have to dismantle it.

Bikes can be carried on long-distance buses for around €3 if there is space available (and there usually is). Sometimes they can go on for free. Just advise the driver prior to departure.

'Orange cloudberry is so appreciated by Finns that you may not have a chance to sample this slightly sour, creamy berry in the wild.'

Bikes can accompany passengers on most normal train journeys, with a surcharge of up to €9. Inter-City (IC) trains have spaces for bikes, which should be booked in advance; you'll have to take your bike to the appropriate space in the double-decker wagon – you can lock it in with a 50-cent coin. You can take your bike on regional trains that have a suitcase or bicycle symbol on the timetable; put it in the luggage van.

WHERE TO CYCLE

You can cycle on all public roads except motorways. Many public roads in southern Finland have a dedicated cycling track running alongside.

Åland

The Åland islands are the most bicycle-friendly region in Finland, and (not surprisingly) are the most popular region for bicycle tours.

Southern Finland

Southern Finland has more traffic than other parts of the country, but with careful planning you can find quiet roads that offer pleasant scenery. The Ox Road runs through rural areas from Turku to Hämeenlinna (see p187). There are also some good shorter rides around Turku.

The Lakeland/Karelia

Two theme routes cover the whole eastern frontier, from the south to Kuusamo in the north. *Runon ja rajan tie* (Road of the Poem and Frontier) consists of secondary sealed roads which pass several great Karelian villages and ends in northern Lieksa. Some of the smallest and most remote villages along the easternmost roads have been lumped together to create the *Korpikylien tie* (Road of Wilderness Villages). This route starts at Saramo village in northern Nurmes and ends at Hossa in northeast Suomussalmi.

A recommended loop takes you around Lake Pielinen, and may include a ferry trip across the lake. Another good loop is around Viinjärvi west of Joensuu.

Western Finland

This flat region, known as Pohjanmaa, is generally good for cycling, except that distances are long and scenery away from the coast is almost oppressively dull. The 'Swedish Coast' around Vaasa and north to Kokkola, is the most scenic part of this region.

WINTER SPORTS

There's loads to do in Finland in winter, and of course a long season in which to do it! With snow cover in the south from November to April, and even longer in the north, Finns are very much at home on white surfaces, whether on skis, snowmobiles or reindeer-racing!

One of the most popular and romantic of winter journeys is a sled safari pulled by reindeer or, even better, enthusiastic husky teams. You can head out for an hour, or go on an epic week-long adventure, looking after your own dog-team. Lapland (see p295) is the best place to do this, but it's also available further south in places like Nurmes (p165) and Lieksa (p160).

Similar excursions can be made on snowmobiles (skidoos). Operators in the same locations offer these trips. You'll need a valid drivers' licence to use one. The basic prices are increased for more powerful machines, or if everyone is on their own vehicle.

DOWNHILL SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

Finnish slopes are generally quite low and so are well-suited to beginners and families. The best resorts are in Lapland, where the vertical drop averages 250m over 3km. In central and southern Finland, ski runs are much shorter, averaging about 1km in length. For steeper, longer and more challenging slopes head across the border to Sweden or Norway.

The ski season in Finland runs from late November to early May and slightly longer in the north, where it's possible to ski from October to summer high season. Beware of the busy winter and spring (February and April) holiday periods, especially around Christmas and Easter – they can get very crowded, and accommodation prices go through the roof.

You can rent all skiing or snowboarding equipment at major ski resorts for about €25/110 a day/week. A one-day lift pass costs around €28/140 a day/week (slightly less in the shoulder and off-peak seasons), although it is possible to pay separately for each ride. Skiing lessons are also available from around €30 a day.

The best resorts are Levi (p305), Ruka (p286), Pyhä-Luosto (p312), and Ylläs (p302), but Syöte, Koli, Pallas, Ounasvaara, and Saariselkä are also good.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

Cross-country skiing is one of the simplest and most pleasant things to do outdoors in winter in Finland. It's the ideal way to explore the beautiful, silent winter countryside of lakes, fells, fields and forests, and is widely used by Finns for fitness and as a means of transport.

Practically every town and village maintains ski tracks (*latu* or *ladut*) around the urban centre, in many cases illuminated (*valaistu*). The one drawback to using these tracks is that you'll need to bring your own equipment (or purchase some), as rentals usually aren't possible.

Cross-country skiing at one of Finland's many ski resorts is another option. Tracks get much longer but also are better maintained. Ski resorts offer excellent instruction and rent out equipment. The best cross-country skiing is in Lapland, where resorts offer hundreds of kilometres of trails. Keep in mind that there are only about five hours of daylight each day in northern Lapland during winter – if you're planning on a longer trek, spring is the best time. Cross-country skiing is best during January and February in southern Finland, and from December to April in the north.

WATER SPORTS

ROWING, CANOEING & RAFTING

For independent travel on waterways, you will need to rent your own rowing boat, canoe or kayak. The typical Finnish rowing boat is available at camping grounds and some tourist offices, usually for less than €20 per day, and hourly rentals are possible. Hostels and rental cottages may have rowing boats that you'll be allowed to use for free. Use them on lakes, especially for visits to nearby islands.

Canoes and kayaks are suitable for trips that last several days or weeks. For longer trips you'll need a plastic barrel for your gear, a life-jacket and waterproof route maps. Route maps and guides may be purchased at local or regional tourist offices and at **Karttakeskus Aleksi** (see p59) map shop: you can also order via its website. Canoe and kayak rentals range in price from €15 to €30 per day, and €80 to €200 per week. You'll pay more if you need overland transportation to the start or end point of your trip

'Practically every town and village maintains ski tracks around the urban centre.'

'With snow cover in the south from November to April, and even longer in the north, Finns are very much at home on white surfaces, whether on skis, snowmobiles or reindeer-racing!'

or if you need to rent extra gear such as tents and sleeping bags. See the relevant sections of the guide for the names of rental outfitters.

WHERE TO ROW & PADDLE

The sheltered bays and islands around the Turku archipelago and Åland in southwest Finland are good for canoeing in summer.

Finland's system of rivers, canals and linked waterways means there are some extensive canoeing routes. In the Lakeland, the Kolovesi and Linnansaari National Parks (p124) are excellent waters for canoeing, and offer plenty of exploration opportunities. North Karelia, particularly around Lieksa and Ruunaa, also offers good paddling. Rivers further north, in the Kuusamo area and in Lapland, are very steep and fast-flowing, with tricky rapids, making them suitable for experienced paddlers only.

Rapids are classified according to a scale from I to VI. I is very simple, II will make your heart beat faster, III is dangerous for your canoe, IV may be fatal for the inexperienced. Rapids classified as VI are just short of Niagara Falls and will probably kill you. Unless you're an experienced paddler you shouldn't negotiate anything above a class I rapid on your own. Always be prepared to carry your canoe or kayak around an unsafe stretch of river.

Ivalojoiki Route (Easy) A 70km route along the Ivalojoiki, in northeast Lapland, that starts at the village of Kuttura and finishes in Ivalo, crossing 30 rapids along the way.

Kyrönjoki Routes (Easy-Medium) In western Finland the Kyrönjoki totals 205km, but you can do short trips down the river from Kauhajoki, Kurikka or Ilmajoki.

Lakeland Trail (Easy-Medium) This 350km route travels through the heart of the lake district (Kangaslampi, Enonkoski, Savonranta, Kerimäki, Punkaharju, Savonlinna and Rantasalmi) and takes 14 to 18 days.

Naarajoki Trail (Easy) A 100km route in the Mikkeli area, recommended for families.

Oravareitti (Squirrel Route, Easy-Medium) In the heart of the Lakeland, this is a 52km trip from Juva to Sulkava.

Savonselkä Circuit (Easy-Hard) The circuit, near Lahti, has three trails that are 360km, 220km and 180km in length. There are many sections that can be done as day trips and that are suitable for novice paddlers.

Seal Trail (Easy) From Kolovesi to Linnansaari, this is a 120km route that takes one to seven days.

Välväylä Trail (Medium) This Lakeland trail goes from Kouvola to either Lappeenranta (90km) or Luumäki (60km) and includes some class I to class III rapids.

Plenty of operators offer white-water rafting expeditions in canoes or rubber rafts. The Ruunaa area (p161) is one of the best of many choices for this adrenalin-packed activity.

FISHING

Finnish waters are teeming with fish – and with people trying to catch them. Finland has at least one million enthusiastic domestic anglers. Commonly caught fish include salmon (both river and landlocked), trout, grayling, perch, pike, whitefish, break and Arctic char.

With so many bodies of water there are no shortage of places to cast a line. In winter, when most water surfaces are frozen over, ice-fishing is all the craze. You simply cut a hole in the ice, drop in a line and wait for a bite. Lapland has the greatest concentration of quality fishing spots, but the number of designated places in southern Finland is also increasing. Some of the most popular fishing areas are the Tenjoki in the furthest north, the Torniojoki, the Kainuu region around Kajaani, Ruovesi, Hossa, Ruunaa, Lake Saimaa around Mikkeli, Lake Inari, and the Kymijoki near Kotka.

Local tourist offices can direct you to the best fishing spots in the area, and usually can provide some sort of regional fishing map. An annual

guide to fishing the entire country is available from the **Metsähallitus** (Forest & Park Service; ☎ 09-270 5221; fax 644 421; www.outdoors.fi; Tikankontti, Eteläesplanadi 20, Helsinki). Their website also details fishing regulations in each protected area.

Permits

Several permits are required of foreigners (between the ages of 18 and 64) who wish to go fishing in Finland. Simple angling with hook and line requires no permit; neither does ice-fishing, unless you are doing these at rapids or other salmon waterways.

For other types of fishing, first, you will need a national fishing permit, known as a 'fishing management fee'. A one-week permit is €6 and an annual permit €20; they're payable at any bank or post office and shortly via the Internet (www.mmm.fi). Second, fishing with a lure always requires a special regional permit, also available at banks and post offices. Finally, you will need to pick up a local permit which has time and catch limits (say, two salmon per day and an unrestricted amount of other species). The local permit can be purchased for one day, one week or even for just a few hours. Typically these cost around €8 per day or €30 per week and are available on the spot, from the location where you're planning to fish. There are often automatic permit machines; tourist offices, sports shops and camping grounds can also supply permits. The waters in Åland are regulated separately and require a separate regional permit.

Equipment Rental

Many camping grounds and tourist offices rent out fishing gear in summer. To go ice-fishing in winter, however, you'll either need to buy your own gear or join an organised tour – nobody rents out ice-fishing tackle in Finland because every Finn has this!

OTHER ACTIVITIES

BIRD-WATCHING

Bird-watching is extremely popular in Finland, in no small part because many bird species migrate to northern Finland in summer to take advantage of the almost continuous daylight for breeding and rearing their young. Look carefully when in Finnish forests and you'll see that bird-mad locals have filled the trees with birdhouses to encourage visits by their favourite species. The best months for watching birds are May to June or mid-July, and late August to September or early October.

Liminganlahti (Liminka Bay), near Oulu, is a wetlands bird sanctuary and probably the best bird-watching spot in Finland. Other good areas include Puurijärvi-Isosuo National Park in Western Finland, Siikalahahti in the Lakeland, Oulanka National Park near Kuusamo, the Porvoo area east of Helsinki and the Kemiö Islands. An excellent guide is *Birds* by Peter Holden. The version available within the country is in Finnish, so you will need to purchase an English-language version before you go.

GOLF

You need a green card (or handicap certificate) to play the best Finnish courses, but many courses are open to the public for €20 to €30 per round. At last count, there were around 100 uncrowded golf courses throughout Finland, typically open from late April to mid-October. The most unusual golf course in Finland is the Green Zone golf course in Tornio (see p277) – it crosses the boundary between Finland and Sweden.

Check out www.birdlife.fi for a good introduction and links for bird-watching in Finland.

For information on Finnish golf courses, contact the Finnish Golf Union (Suomen Golffitto; ☎ 09-3481 2244; www.golf.fi).

The website www.fishing.fi has plenty of useful information in English on fishing throughout the country.

Food & Drink

Finnish food was contemptuously described in 2005, by both Jacques Chirac and Silvio Berlusconi, as the worst in the EU. Now, just a moment please! There are two very distinct sides to Finnish cuisine. In winter, heavy, fatty foods have traditionally been eaten, originally designed to nourish a peasant population living in an extremely cold climate. In summer, however, Finland's fields, forests and gardens come to life, and produce some of the tastiest fresh produce imaginable. A meal of fresh salmon, the tenderness of new potatoes with home-grown dill from a Finnish garden and wild mushrooms and berries picked from the wood down the road is quite a meal, memorable for taste and freshness. Considering that Finland is north of the 60° latitude line, it's amazing, in fact.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Finnish cuisine has been influenced by both Sweden and Russia and has drawn on what was available; fish, game, meat, milk and potatoes. Dark rye was used to make bread and porridge. Few spices were employed.

These basics remain constant, although inevitably added to by the broader choice in today's society. Restaurants have created a gourmet-Finnish cuisine, with delicate use of berries, wild mushrooms and other traditional ingredients.

Soups are a Finnish favourite, and are common in homes and restaurants. The heavy pea, meat, or cabbage soups are traditional workers' fare, while creamier fish soups have a more delicate flavour.

One light snack that you'll see everywhere is the rice-filled savoury pastry from Karelia, the *karjalanpiirakka*. These are tasty cold, heated, toasted or with egg butter, and have several variations.

Understandably, a lot of fish is eaten in Finland. Salmon (*lohi*) is ubiquitous, both fresh and smoked, and often served with a creamy wild-mushroom sauce. *Silli* is pickled herring and comes in jars with a variety of sauces. The favourite sauce is sweet mustard, delicious with new potatoes, a traditional summer dish. Other traditional fish dishes include small deep-fried lakefish (*muikku*), and, in the north, the Arctic char.

Two much-loved staples that you'll see in many places are grilled liver, served with mashed potatoes and bacon, and meatballs. Finns have been known to fight over whose granny cooks the best ones.

Reindeer is a domesticated animal, and has always been a staple food for the Sámi. The traditional way to eat it is sautéed with lingonberries; many restaurants also offer it on pizzas or as sausages. It also comes in fillet steaks, which, though expensive, is the tastiest way to try this meat.

Elk is also eaten, mostly in hunting season, and you can even get a bear steak in some places, although the latter is very expensive, as only a small number are hunted every year.

In summer, barbecues are the thing to do, particularly at the summer cottage. The number of sausage varieties in Finnish supermarkets has to be seen to be believed. Sausages are eaten with processed mustard; the traditional Turun Sinappi is the most loved, but has been boycotted by many since the multinational that owns it has moved production from Turku to Sweden. The equally good Auran mustard is bought in its place.

In summer too, fresh berries and wild mushrooms are delicious and ubiquitous. Many people pick them themselves and store them over the winter in the form of jams or cordials or simply frozen. Arctic

cloudberries are the deliciously creamy king of berries, and feature on the Finnish €2 coin.

With your coffee, it's traditional to have a *pulla*, a sweet cardamom or cinnamon-flavoured bun with rock-sugar on top. Other delicious pastries, and there are many, include *korvapuusti* (cinnamon roll).

Finns love their sweets, although some of them make the unsuspecting visitor feel like the victim of a novelty shop joke. Salty liquorice, fiery 'Turkish peppers', and tar-flavoured gumdrops may sound like punishments rather than rewards, but are delicious after the first few times. Finnish chocolates, particularly those made by Fazer, are also excellent.

Finns tend to eat their biggest meal of the day at lunchtime, so many restaurants put on an all-you-can-eat buffet lunch, usually between 11am and 3pm Monday to Friday. This costs approximately €6 to €10 and may include soups, salad, bread, cold fish dishes, hot meat dishes, coffee and possibly even dessert. All hotels offer a free buffet breakfast, which includes bread, cheese, pastries, fruit, cereals, more fish, sausages, eggs and lots of coffee. Finns have dinner as early as 5pm, often just a light meal.

DRINKS

Finns drink a mountain of coffee, some 10 kilos each per year, placing them first or second in the world (Norway is the other competitor). Teas are available in smarter cafés, as are bottled juices. Finnish tapwater is delicious, so still bottled water hasn't really taken on.

Strong beers, wines and spirits are sold by the state network, the beautifully named Alko. There are Alko stores in every town and they're generally open 10am to 6pm Monday to Thursday, until 8pm on Friday and 9am to 6pm Saturday. Go to www.alko.fi to survey its wares and prices online. Drinks containing more than 20% alcohol are not sold to those aged under 20; for beer and wine purchases the age limit is 18. Beer and cider under 4.7% alcohol are readily available in supermarkets. The selection of wine at Alko is good, and reasonably-priced. Restaurants, however, add around €20 per bottle on top of this.

What is served in Finland as *olut* (beer) is generally light-coloured, lager-type beer, although Guinness stout and other dark brews have gained in popularity in recent years (along with a proliferation of Irish pubs). Major brands of lager include Lapin Kulta, Olvi and Koff. There's also a growing number of microbreweries in Finland (look for the word *panimo* or *panimo-ravintola*), and these make excellent light and dark beers. Such places worthy of a visit include Huvila in Savonlinna, Plevna in Tampere, Koulu and Herman in Turku and Beer Hunters in Pori.

The strongest beer is called *A-olut*, or *nelos olut*, with more than 5% alcohol. More popular is III-beer (called *keskiolut* or *kolmonen*) and I-beer (called *mieto olut* or *pilsneri*), with less than 2% alcohol. A half-litre of beer or cider (the latter is made from apple or pear) in a bar or restaurant costs €4 to €6. Alcohol is taxed by content, so the stronger it is, the more expensive.

The Finnish spirit of choice is the traditional Koskenkorva, a vodka-like grain spirit often affectionately known as *kossu*. A favourite Finnish habit is to dissolve salty liquorice sweets into a bottle of the stuff, creating *salmiakikossu*, which has an evil black colour but a surprisingly smooth, if understandably salty, taste. You can also buy it ready-made.

Also look out for *sahti*, a sweet, high-alcohol beer traditionally made at home on the farm – you can find it in a couple of pubs in Lahti and Savonlinna at certain times of year, and *Lakka*, a tasty cloudberry liqueur. At Christmas time, *glögi* is a heart-warming mulled wine.

If you're seduced by all the delicious pastries in cafés here, *The Great Scandinavian Baking Book*, by Beatrice A Ojakangas, will help you reproduce some of them at home.

Back home and pining for decent rye bread and Finnish mustard? Never fear, www.finnishfood.net will deliver it for you!

Another classic is *lonkero*, or 'gin long drink', a premixed blend of gin and grapefruit juice, popular after a sauna. It's fairly light and refreshing.

Finlandia vodka is a multinational-owned Finnish vodka. Look out for the souvenir T-shirts involving an elk drinking the stuff and filling a bottle of Swedish Absolut from the other end!

If you buy cans or bottles, you pay a small deposit (about €0.15). This can be redeemed by returning them to the recycling section next time you visit a supermarket.

CELEBRATIONS

Finns celebrate Christmas enthusiastically, with Santa often making a doorstep appearance on Christmas Eve to ask awestruck children if they have been good that year. The most important Christmas food is the delicious salted and baked ham, while *rosolli*, a salad of potato, carrot and pickle, and porridge are also iconic. The person who gets the lucky almond in their porridge usually sings a song or similar.

At Midsummer, everyone gets a few days off and people tend to head into the country. On Midsummer night there are big bonfires and copious consumption of beer and *kossu*, often followed by a precarious rowboat journey to visit friends on the other side of the lake.

Later in the summer, it's a tradition to have crayfish parties, where the succulent little creatures are consumed by the dozen.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Finns have a well-established café culture, particularly in cities like Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Oulu, but also in many smaller towns. In summer, chairs and tables appear outdoors. Most cafés in Finland serve snacks, light meals and desserts, as well as coffee – and lots of it. A *kahvila* is a simple café, a *kahvio* is a café inside a supermarket or petrol station, and a *baari* serves snacks, beer and soft drinks, and probably also coffee. A refill of coffee is often free.

Every town has a *kauppatori* (market square) where you can buy smoked fish, fresh produce (in season), berries, pastries and the like. Most larger towns also have a *kauppahalli* (covered market) where stalls sell cheap hot meals, sandwiches, meats, cheese and deli produce.

A restaurant is a *ravintola*, although, confusingly, you'll see many pubs also described as this even if they don't serve food. A Finnish institution is the *lounasravintola* (lunch restaurant) which will serve a lunch buffet and/or hot specials on weekdays between about 11am and 3pm and then shut. Most other restaurants also offer lunch specials and either stay open or reopen for evening meals.

TAKE ME IN CHAINS

Finns enjoy the informality and family-friendly atmosphere of home-grown chain restaurants, which flourish here. Every town has several, often attached to the major hotels. The cuisine is generally bland, or pepped up with flavouring agents, but long opening hours and lack of other choices in small towns means you'll likely use them at least once. We've rarely listed them in the guide, but every town will have at least two of the following:

Amarillo Tex-Mex food and a lively if expensive bar.

Fransimanni The best of the bunch. Tasty with a rustic-French theme.

Golden Rax Offers an all-you-can-eat pizza and pasta buffet.

Hesburger Finland's biggest home-grown hamburger chain.

Koti Pizza Good-value pizzas eat-in or home-delivered.

Rosso Long menu with pasta, pizza, steaks and more. Best on the basics. Good with kids.

Sevilla Fairly upmarket, Spanish-style theme restaurant.

New Flavours from Finland, by Eero Mäkelä, is a good recipe book compiled by three of the brightest lights of the new wave of gourmet Finnish cuisine.

FINLAND'S TOP FIVE

- A Helsinki classic is **Sea Horse** (p75), serving traditional Finnish staples like meatballs and grilled liver in a great 1930s atmosphere.
- In a refurbished harbourside warehouse, **Nokka** (p76) is one of the best of the smart new generation of Helsinki restaurants.
- A slice of Tampere's industrial past has been converted into a great brewery-restaurant, **Panimoravintola Plevna** (p176), with heavy Germanic food and a good beer list.
- In lovely Kuopio there's **Musta Lammas** (p139), a romantic gourmet restaurant near the water.
- Feast on traditional roast mutton in **Säräpirtti Kippurasarvi** (p148), a Karelian country restaurant.

Finns tend to eat dinner early and will often stop for a bite on the way home from work. A group of friends going out to eat, though, on a Friday night, might well dine at 10pm or later. Opening hours reflect this; more upmarket restaurants (and hotel restaurants) and chains are usually open much later than cheap diners. The exception is the classic Finnish grilli, fast-food stalls selling burgers, sausages, chips and the like that stay open for the after-pub crowd. In this guide, if opening hours aren't provided, 'lunch' is at least 11am to 3pm, and 'dinner' at least 5pm to 9pm. Restaurants tend to open slightly later and shut earlier on Sundays.

In smaller towns, it can sometimes be quite difficult to find authentic Finnish food. Italian and Mexican food is very popular in Finland and these, along with kebab/pizza joints, dominate, as do the chain restaurants (see boxed text, opposite). Finland's best eating is in the big cities and, somewhat ironically, in Lapland, where the busy tourist industry necessitates it.

Pubs, bars and nightclubs are many, and range from seedy male-dominated drinking dens to some of Europe's trendiest style bars. Finns rarely drink in rounds, and people normally buy their own; this also applies to restaurants, where waiters are used to splitting the bill.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Finnish cuisine isn't overly friendly to vegetarians, but nearly all à la carte restaurants will have at least a couple of options, and ethnic restaurants such as Chinese and Thai reliably serve vegetarian meals. Finnish buffets always include soups, salads, rye bread and potatoes, and are often cheaper if you don't want the meat or fish portion. Some soups, such as the ubiquitous pea soup, use meat stock, but mushroom and other common vegetable soups tend not to.

Helpfully, many modern restaurants, including the chain restaurants mentioned, flag their menus with codes indicating which dishes are vegetarian, lactose-free and gluten-free.

There are only a handful of true vegetarian restaurants in Finland, and most of them are in Helsinki.

EATING WITH KIDS

In the main, Finnish restaurants are very child-friendly, and often have a menu of children's portions, or some sort of deal for families whereby the kids eat more or less for free. Finnish food is fairly spice-free and unlikely to upset stomachs. Some of the best places for kids are the chain restaurants (see box opposite). See p331 for more on travelling with kids in Finland.

The Finnish vegan society keeps a list of vegetarian and vegan restaurants on its website, www.vegaanliitto.fi

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Finnns tend to eat their main meal at lunchtime, and will usually only eat a big dinner on a social occasion. If invited to dinner at a Finnish home, it's appropriate to take a gift. Coffee and pastries is almost a Finnish cliché: wine, flowers or chocolates always go down well. The rules when visiting a Finnish home are quite simple; take your shoes off at the door, and never refuse the offer of a sauna or a cup of coffee!

Restaurants are similar to elsewhere, except that in many you are expected to seat yourself on arrival. Tips are only added for exceptional service.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Nearly all restaurants these days have a menu in English. If not, the Swedish menu may be easier to decipher than the Finnish. The following phrases will help, see the Language chapter (p358) for more details.

Useful Phrases

The bill, please.

Saisinko laskun.

The menu/drinks menu, please.

Saisinko ruokalistan/juomalistan.

Do you have ...?

Onko teillä ...?

I'm a vegetarian.

Olen kasvisvöjä.

Nothing else, thanks .

Ei muuta, kiitos.

I'd like ...

Saisinko ...

I don't eat ...

En syö ...

Table (for one/two/four) please?

Saisinko pöydän (yhdele/kahdele/neljälle)?

Another one, please.

Saisinko toisen.

Food Glossary

These forms are as you would see them on a menu. Other endings apply to use them correctly in phrases.

GENERAL

<i>aamiainen</i>	breakfast	<i>pääruoka</i>	main course
<i>lounas</i>	lunch	<i>jälkiruoka</i>	dessert
<i>illallinen</i>	dinner	<i>keitto</i>	soup
<i>alkuruoka</i>	starter	<i>leipä</i>	(some) bread

DRINKS

<i>vesi</i>	water	<i>(iso/pieni) tuoppi</i>	(lg/sm) tap beer
<i>kahvi</i>	coffee	<i>viini</i>	wine
<i>mehu</i>	juice	<i>maito</i>	milk
<i>olut</i>	beer		

MEATS

<i>kala</i>	fish	<i>liha</i>	meat
<i>muikku</i>	small whitefish	<i>kana</i>	chicken
<i>pihvi</i>	steak/patty of meat	<i>kinkku</i>	ham
<i>nauta</i>	beef	<i>poro/poronkärästys</i>	reindeer/sautéed
<i>lammas</i>	lamb		reindeer stew
<i>lohi</i>	salmon	<i>makkara</i>	sausage

OTHER

<i>peruna</i>	potato	<i>appelsiini</i>	orange
<i>pippuri</i>	pepper	<i>kanamuna</i>	egg
<i>omena</i>	apple	<i>juusto</i>	cheese
<i>suola</i>	salt	<i>voi</i>	butter

The seemingly unpromising website <http://212.213.217.194> is the address for FinnPlace, which has an online translator of Finnish words to English and vice versa. It's limited but may come in handy!

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