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MailOnline

Far out in Finland: Scenery, seafood, spas and saunas in a north European nirvana

By [Sadie Whitelocks](#)

Last updated at 12:02 PM on 22nd July 2011

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'A special kinship with the wilder variety of nature - with virgin forests, unproductive fells, and the animal life that haunts them,' wrote the author Hudson Strode of the Finnish in his book *Finland Forever* in 1941.

He had a point - a point that, 60 years on, still rings with the truth. This Nordic country remains untouched. Starbucks hasn't arrived and the country, measuring 130,596 square miles, has a population of around 5.4million. London, has a population of over 7.8 million crammed into 607 square miles.

So if you're looking to escape the city lights and take time, out Finland offers a peaceful retreat.



Pristine: Finland is a land of forests and water where you can truly escape the stresses of modern life

A three-hour flight from London will get you to the capital Helsinki, where a short car journey will

transport you into rural bliss. Boasting 35 national parks, 187,888 lakes and 179,584 islands, the country - which is the largest producer of wood in Europe - is carpeted with a lavish spread of pine, spruce, birch and larch.

Bordered by Sweden to the west, Norway to the north and Russia to the east - with Estonia lurking nearby across the narrow strait of the Gulf of Finland - a quarter of Finland's territory lies within the Arctic Circle. But despite frosty temperatures during the winter, the summer months bring warmer climates and enviably long days - it doesn't get dark until around 2am.

For a little luxury take a three-hour drive to the four-star Anttolanhovi Art&Design Lakeside villa complex, near the town of Anttola. Built four years ago, the gaping contemporary structures still feel new. All of the ground-level apartments, which sport floor-to-ceiling windows, have been constructed and furnished using natural materials such as birch, local stone, linen, cotton and wool.

Strewn along the shoreline of the mirror-like Saimaa - the fourth largest lake in Europe - director Juhani Palonen describes them as buildings 'in which the fine arts and design would be solidly integrated, a bit like in a bird's nest.'



Clean lines: The Anttolanhovi Art&Design Lakeside villas enjoy a pristine rural setting

Each rental can sleep up to six people. Their walls display pieces commissioned from native artists. From the arty splash-backs behind the cookers to the chic settees, everything has been meticulously thought out. Cupboards are amply stocked. Shot glasses, fresh ground coffee, herbal teabags, recycling bins - you name it.

FINLAND FACTS

The fifth most liveable city in the world: Helsinki - according to lifestyle and travel mag Monocle

President Tarja Holanen: One of the top female leaders in the world according to TIME

Eurovision song contest wins: 1

Santa Claus: The one and only

The world's cleanest water: According to the UN

World Heritage Sites (Unesco): 8 (including the massive Suomenlinna fortress in Helsinki)

Armed with a private jetty, rowing boat, bicycles, and barbecue, you won't be short of things to do.

Take the opportunity to 'enjoy' a morning dip in the lake - even in winter the Arctic temperatures have health benefits, an enthused local tells me - and dabble in some of the spa treatments.

A traditional smoke sauna is located in the heart of the complex. Saunas are a key feature of Finnish life and there are over two million in the country - an average of one per household.

This particular sauna takes over four hours to prepare - a long enough time for you to indulge in a few treatments. Don't be put off by the fact that the face masks are made from mud dredged from the lake bed - it leaves you skin feeling surprisingly spruced.

I am also introduced to *vihtha* - leafy bunches of birch twigs which, when beaten against the skin, are believed to open up the pores and relieve stress. It certainly provides a woody aroma - but I must admit, hitting yourself with sticks gradually loses its spark.

As well as the lakeside houses there are also six two storey, semi-detached villas.

Nearby, in Mikkeli, is the Neitvuori (Maiden Mountain) - the highest hill in the region at 184m. A short hike up the fern-strewn hillside will provide you with a superb view of the cauldron of islands in the Luonteri lake - most of which formed during the last Ice Age.

Luckily, the day I visit is blessed with temperatures of around 25 degrees Celsius - matched by an infinite blue sky. In the summer months, canoeing and sailing are popular outdoor activities.



View from the top: Sadie absorbs the wild beauty of the Finnish landscape



Woods for the trees: Some 86 per cent of the Finnish landmass is shrouded by forest

For a more rustic feel, there are a range of alternative accommodation options. As Finland has traditionally been an agrarian culture, most bed-and-breakfasts are located on family-run farms, which offer great value for money.

Stepping into these homes, you get a real sense of local culture. Your hosts are eager to tell you more about their country - from ancient tales of mythical beasts to legendary landmarks.

Two recommendations are Okkola Holiday Cottages (www.okkolanlomamokit.com), which boasts 22 secluded lakeside lodges in the region of Puumala - and Lomamokkila Farm in Savonlinna (www.lomamokkila.fi), which has tennis courts and a small farm. The family also offers home-reared beef on the menu.



Home from home: Lomamokkila Farm offers a rustic, family-run style of accommodation, and a warm welcome



Fresh from the sea: Finnish cuisine leans heavily on fish, with salmon a staple part of the diet

No matter where you stay, you will have the opportunity to sample local delicacies and seasonal treats. During June and July strawberries are a regular fixture.

As grapes don't grow in the region, berries are used to make wines and liqueurs. If you have a sweet tooth, be sure to try Lakka - a tippie derived from the whimsically named cloudberry fruit.

If you are a fan of fish, then you will be in your element. Smoked, marinated, cured, pickled or poached, the choice is yours. Salmon is a popular pick, served cold, smoked or raw with lemon juice and lashings of dill. Other popular options include zander, pike, perch and Baltic herring.

If you are looking at booking a trip next year, be sure to snap up tickets for the Savonlinna opera festival. Next year will mark the 100th year anniversary of this annual event, which takes place in the medieval Olavinlinna Castle, built in 1475.



Medieval might: Olavinlinna Castle, in the town of Savonlinna, is a dramatic 15th century structure

The town of Savonlinna is an hour's flight from Helsinki - and during festivities the local airport wheels in a grand piano and a soprano to ease your journey through check-in and security.

Positioned on the water, the opera takes place within the castle's vast cobbled courtyard. Even if you are not an arts buff, the setting is enough to inspire. It is around a 20-minute walk from the centre of Savonlinna.

Alternatively opt for the one-and-a-half hour Paul Wahl steam boat cruise (www.vipcruise.info). Built 100 years ago, this wood-panelled sailing vessel evokes a bygone era - think Poirot meets Finland. With dinner included, this scenic tour of the lakes sets you up nicely for a sophisticated evening.

Whatever time of year you visit, be sure to get to some of the local markets, which showcase a wide range of local arts, crafts, and foods - such as the *lortsy* pastry - a pastry either filled with savoury mincemeat or stuffed with an apple or berry jam - and traditional pasties baked in rye crust.

If you are visiting during the winter, the area is transformed into a snowy wilderness offering activities from ice sculpture competitions to husky safaris - along with those ever-present sauna sessions.

And don't forget to pay a visit to Lapland the official home of Father Christmas.

Travel Facts

British Airways (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com), Finnair (0870 241 4411, www.finnair.com) and Blue1 (0906 294 2016, www.blue1.com) all fly to Helsinki from London Heathrow.

Villas at the Anttolanhovi Wellness Village (00358 207 57 5200; www.anttolanhovi.fi) start at €1310 (£1150) per week. Double rooms start from €100 (£88) per night.

For more on Savonlinna, see www.savonlinna.travel.

For more on Finland see www.visitfinland.com.

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[What to do in Helsinki?](http://www.kiasma.fi) ARS 11 - major international art event in Kiasma. www.kiasma.fi

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Published by Associated Newspapers Ltd

Part of the Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday & Metro Media Group

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