

My Trip to Finland

July 9: I arrived at JFK at 6 am (first class, thanks to Erik), but my flight to Helsinki did not leave until 7 pm. My son came to the rescue. He and Henry were staying at a motel near JFK, and I took a cab and met them there. We had most of the day, so we rode the subway to downtown New York and took the elevator to the observation deck of the Empire State Building. Central Park, the Hudson River, the Statue of Liberty, Jersey City, and much more are visible, and we had a clear day. We also checked out the huge city library. We eventually made it to the airport and Erik and Henry flew to Washington DC, and I met up with several of my tour group, made it through security, and boarded Finnair to Helsinki.

July 10: We (38 in tour group) arrived in Helsinki at 10 am. It was a seven-hour flight. I couldn't get over how clean and appealing the airport was. Rafu, our guide, met us outside the airport and we boarded a deluxe tour bus. Pentti was our bus driver, and as the days went by we marveled at his driving skills, especially backing the bus through narrow streets. Our first stop was Nuuskio National Park only 35 kilometers from Helsinki. We were treated to a buffet lunch and a tour of the park building and we watched a video on Finland's national parks. Later in the afternoon we boarded a ferry that took us to Nauvo in the Turku Archipelago. We stayed our first night in Hotel Strandbo.

July 11: The next morning we began our tour of several islands via six ferries. This route is called the Archipelago Ring Road, and many bicyclists were spending the day doing the same. Our first stop was Korppoo where we met a local guide who filled us in on the typography and history of the area. I saw several midsummer poles. From Korppoo the next ferry took us to Houtskar where we had lunch. From there to the island of Inio and then to Kustavi. There we visited a pottery shop, a blacksmith shop, and a cafeteria that served delicious munkki.. Our last leg took us to Turku where our guide grew up and a stay at the luxurious Marina Palace Hotel. We learned that the owner of the Hesburger chain (similar to McDonald's) has his penthouse on the top floor. After dinner I walked a ways along the Aura River, which runs through the city. Unfortunately, I had a second night of very little sleep. Finland is 10 hours ahead of Portland.

July 12: Deprived of sleep, I made it to the second floor of the hotel at 7 am where I was blown away by the assortment of food and drink for breakfast. Am I awake? There were tables full of breads and pastries and butter and assorted jams, plates and bowls containing herring and smoked salmon, cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, containers of oatmeal, cereals, scrambled eggs, hard boiled eggs, bacon, sausage, and little round Finnish pancakes. I didn't know where to begin. After stuffing myself, I waited for the stores to open so I could buy Kai his Turuun Sinappi (strong mustard). Later in the morning, Rafu took us on a walk to the old church (Kai was baptized there) and to what was once the huge outdoor market, which is now shut down until the underground parking garage is completed. Once we got underway,

we stopped at Villa Mairea near Lavia for a tour. It is a lovely home designed by Aino and Alvar Aalto. The collection of paintings is worth a fortune: Cezanne, Picasso, Monet. Our tour group arrived late at Laihia and a visit to the Museum of Stinginess, which was a hoot because all the utensils and plates and cups were tiny. Everything was in small portions. We arrived that night at Hotel Astor in Vassa, and in the evening we gathered in the lounge and each person said something about himself or herself, and we all got to know one another a bit better. After people left I stayed at the bar, ordered a bourbon and seven, and chatted with the bartender, a young woman who was saving money and planning her wedding.

July 13: Up early (5 am) and took a walk in Vassa. Because of the northern latitude, it is light most of the night. I walked to the market square, saw the statue commemorating the victory of the Whites over the Reds in the Finnish Civil War of 1918, and made it to the bay loaded with boats. After another breakfast of all things imaginable, our tour bus headed toward the Kvarken Archipelago, the only Finnish national heritage site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This area has over 5000 islands, and all of them are subject to uplift now that the massive ice sheet is long gone. Every year they rise so many centimeters. We crossed the Replot Bridge, the longest bridge in Finland (1045 meters) and then took a ship to the Valasaaret island group, an important fishing area. We climbed an observation tower at Bjorkoby and surveyed the islands, the inlets, a fishing village, and even some fields where farmers let their cows graze. From Bjorkoby, we took a 90-minute boat ride to the island of Mikkelsaaret, the northern most group of islands. The Gulf of Bothnia stretched as far as the eye could see. On the island, which used to be a coast guard station, we hiked to an ancient rock cairn built by fishermen in the 1700's. Back on the boat, which took us to Berny's Restaurant next to the Replot Bridge. We stayed one more night at Hotel Astor in Vassa.

July 14: Interesting fact: in 2000 years, according to geologists, the current uplift will create a land bridge between Finland and Sweden. Heading north we stopped first at Pietasaari and went on a walking tour of Old Town Skata, a large area of old wooden houses and residential area for sailors and factory workers. Nearby we stopped at Strandis for smoked salmon, the best I have ever had. A couple of hours later we were at the beach resort of Kalajoki, not far from the city of Oulu. Next stop was Oulunsalo where we boarded a ferry to the island of Hailuoto. At the Hailuoto Hotel on the far side of the island we ate "overcooked" beef for dinner and cheesecake for dessert. I walked the long stretch of sandy beach afterwards, and at 9 pm I took a sauna with Ismo, a Finn, now living in Florida. The sauna made me sleepy, but I awoke at 3 am (it was light outside). Walked on the beach—me, the sea, the sand, and the wind.

July 15: While on the way to Oulu, Rafu talked about Finland's socialized medicine. A person can meet a doctor for just \$20 and spend a night in the hospital for \$30. Most Finns like the system because medical issues will not put anyone in financial woes, but some Finns do complain about a wait to see the doctor if the injury or sickness is not serious. One can see a private doctor, however. I noticed that the garbage can in

the hotel (and other hotels) has three sections, one for paper, one for organic material, and one for “other.” In Oulu I wandered over a bridge and admired the view of boats and waterways and walkers and bicylists while the other tour members were at the market square. When I returned, I bought strawberries and blueberries, and I had my picture taken with a statue representing an Oulu policeman. I bought several small items for Karin and am excited to give them to her upon my return. Wish we had more time in Oulu, but alas we boarded the coach and headed to Rovaniemi. On the way we saw the Kiiminki Rapids, had lunch at Ii, and continued on to Kemi and a tour of the icebreaker, Sampo, followed by a visit to the Kemi Snow Castle. Sweden is only a few miles away at Tornio. We are at the northern most point of the Gulf of Bothnia. We ended the day’s journey in Rovaniemi, capital of Lapland, at the Pohjanhovi Hotel. I had a gorgeous view from my hotel room of the Kemi River, Finland’s longest,.

July 16: At 4 am I ate the rest of my strawberries and blueberries. At 6:30 am I enjoyed another fantastic breakfast. Later in the morning we headed to Santa’s Village or the Arctic Circle Shops. First thing I did was straddle the Arctic Circle and after that I paid 30 Euros to sit and chat with the real Santa Claus. I even spoke a little Finnish to him. I sent Karin a postcard from Santa Claus Main Post Office. Our next stop was Vartiosaari where we had lunch of braised reindeer and salmon soup. Delicious. We now headed easterly and stopped briefly at Timisjarvi, at one time a reindeer farm. Several of the log buildings reminded me of the Lindgren Cabin at Cullaby Lake near Gearhart. On the road again, and after seeing many reindeer in the woods and along the highway, we arrived at Iso-Syote located at the top of a fell. It is a ski area with a few downhill runs. Each of us stayed in a log cabin with sauna, and of course, I took a long sauna that evening. I could not get over the endless expanse of forest in all directions. No sign of clear cuts. I just stood at the top of the fell and took in the view.

July 17: An embarrassing moment—I failed to wake up and everyone was on the coach waiting for me. It was 7:30 am. I had finally fallen asleep at 5 am and was dozing when Rafu knocked on my door. They could have left me on the fell. I got teased for a couple of days. Today we drove east to the Finnish-Russian border near Suomussalmi and Raate. Breakfast was at Saija Lodge by Lake Jokisarvi. The owner has 100 sled dogs. The Raate Road was the site of bitter fighting between Russian and Finnish troops. 17,000 soldiers lost their lives over several days, and the Russians lost 16 men to every one Finnish man. In the Raate Museum we watched a short video on the Winter War and viewed artifacts from tanks to machine guns, to rifles, to winter garb. Being there made me think of Vaino Koskela and Toivo Sjoblom who fought in the war. A six-kilometer drive took us to the border, and I did stick my feet on the Russian side. A short drive took us to lunch at Kultainen Kukko in Suomussalmi. Heading south we stopped briefly at a huge athletic area near Vuokatti. We saw the one-mile underground cross-country ski tunnel and an impressive ski jump. Rafu laments the fact that no Finns have won gold lately in ski jumping. Late in the evening we arrive at the upscale Katinkulta Apartments in

Vuokatti, each with a sauna. That evening I called Karin and we talked for half an hour. Could have talked the night away.

July 18: Our first stop today is a farmhouse at Puukarin Pysäkki in Valtimo. The owner served a wonderful organic breakfast, and she also played the kantele for us. Going to such a place could have only happened because Anita Smiley is doing her 24th tour of Finland, and she knows many people and places that are off the beaten path. She is full of energy for someone who is 84. She lives in Preston, Connecticut. Then we have another interesting stop at the home of Jaana who lives on a farm near Nilsia and the popular Tahko area. She instructed us in the making of karjalan piirakkaas. Lunch was at the top of the fell and ski area at Pehku Baari, which during the winter is a lively and rowdy place. People are encouraged to dance on the tables in the evening. They even have a contest for the best table dancer. In mid-afternoon we were wine tasting at Alahovi in the lake district. We boarded a boat and cruised across Lake Kallavesi to Kuopio and then to the Scandic Atlas Hotel located on the square in the center of the city. By now, I have made friends with many people on the tour, and I am pleased that there is no one I dislike. What a good group of people. Two of the group, Jane Kelly and Marvin Sotka, were high school students at Ilwaco, went their separate ways, married, lost their spouses, and four years ago reunited, and have been together ever since. She lives in Olean, New York, and he in Sun City West, Arizona. They are always traveling or visiting one another.

July 19: Today our first stop is Sauna Village at Jämsä. Volunteers are dedicated to saving and restoring several savu saunas, some as old as 1760. The host explained the many uses of the sauna, and they range from cleanliness, health purposes, relaxation, socialization, giving birth, to killing lice. Lunch was at Hirvikartano (moose manor). Moose stew, potatoes, vegetables, and salad were on the menu. Outside in pens the owner had three moose, four deer, and two reindeer. After that, we visited the Craft Museum in Jyväskylä, but I wasn't that interested. However, it was interesting to see the different female dresses that were common in the various regions of Finland. Our day ended in Tampere at the Ilves Hotel in the center of the city. The weather was warm (low 70's) and many people were outside enjoying themselves at the many brew houses and restaurants. Tampere lies between two lakes and the Tammerkoski Rapids runs through it. I walked a mile or two along the waterfront. People were partying on boats and a huge concert was taking place at Ratinanniemi Festival Park. Across the plaza from the Ilves Hotel was the Pyynikin Brewhouse, and it was packed. A guitarist played one song after another, and many were classics from the Beatles and Rolling Stones. The drinking and dancing lasted until 2 am, and I gave up trying to sleep, so at midnight I sauntered to the brewhouse and enjoyed the festivities. I got a total of three hours of sleep.

July 20: In the nineteenth century Tampere was known as the "Manchester of Finland" because of its fabric mills and textile industries. We toured the Finlayson mill complex built in 1820, named after the industrialist James Finlayson. A short trip from the mill complex took us to the Amuri Museum of Workers' Housing for a guided tour. Families lived in one of 32 plots, four sections to a plot. Each section

had four small rooms and a common kitchen for four working families. Cramped quarters, needless to say. In stark contrast to those small living spaces, we had lunch at the top of the Näsinneula Observation Tower that greeted us with spectacular views of the city and the lakes. Like the Space Needle, this Tower revolves, making a 360 rotation every forty minutes. Salmon was our appetizer and beef was the main dish. After lunch we drove to Hauho and visited the historic church of Saint John the Baptist. This church has the oldest Bible in Finland, dated 1632. Hämeenlinna was our overnight destination, but we stayed at what I thought was a neo-classical palace named Hotel Vanajanlinna. It was rectangular in shape with an elegant restaurant and bar. The bartender is known for having won an international prize for the best gin and tonic in the world. I spent \$13 Euros and had one, and without question it was deserving of the title. Near this hotel is Finland's number one rated golf course in the country.

July 21: The next day took us to the Sibelius Museum in Hämeenlinna. It was the childhood home of Jean Sibelius. From Sibelius' home to Mannerheim's hunting lodge by Loppi at Marskin Maja was next on our list to see. Mannerheim's troops gave that lodge to him on his 75th birthday in 1942. We ate lunch there (lamb, carrots, potatoes) and listened to the host tell us about General Mannerheim's habits, likes, and dislikes. He was one loquacious individual. The lodge today is owned by the Finnish Army Officers' Union. Before arriving in Helsinki we made one more stop at Lotta Seura in Tuusula. It is a museum depicting the women who served in various capacities during the Winter and Continuation Wars, such as in medical, catering, communications, and equipment. All the women wore gray uniforms. Their symbol was the swastika, which had peaceful connotations dating as far back as India's Gupta Empire; however, Adolf Hitler, who adopted it, forever changed the denotation and connotation of the symbol, and people no longer see the symbol for what it once was. Before the day was over we arrived for a two-night stay at Sokos Hotel Helsinki on the corner of Aleksanterinkatu and Kluuvi.

July 22: Another breakfast to die for. My God, breakfasts will never be the same. I took off that morning on a very long walk that lasted into the afternoon. My first visit was the Railway Station and from there I followed Pohjoisplanade (a street and none have short names) to the waterfront market square (kauppatori). From there I saw many ships, the island Katajanokka, and the large ferris wheel. After gawking, I reversed direction to the Helsinki Book Store (four stories) and to the seven-story Stockmann retail store. If well heeled, it is a shopper's paradise. By then it was vital for me to stop at Fazer's and buy a large bowl of vanilla ice cream for lunch. Next I walked to Tuomiokirkko (a cathedral) adjacent to Senaatintori (Senate square). From there I went to see Finland's premier art gallery, the Ateneum, but it is closed on Mondays. I was hoping to see Akseli Gallen-Kallela's triptych of Väinämöinen pursuing the maiden Aino from the *Kalevala*, the Epic of Finland. Mannerheimintie (a major street in Helsinki) took me to the Helsinki Music Center, Parliament House, the Kansallis-Museo (Finland's National Museum), and to Finlandia Hall, designed by Alvar Aalto. There I turned back and made my way to the hotel. Our farewell dinner was at Kulosaaren Casino Restaurant. The superb meal of beef, salmon,

potatoes, and carrots came with two complimentary glasses of wine. Each of us spoke briefly about what the trip meant to us, and then Meeri, Anita Smiley's talented granddaughter, sang some songs, played guitar and piano. Pentti, our coach driver, informed us that we had traveled 3326 kilometers overall.

July 23: Time to go home. At 8 am we headed to the airport for a 12:20 flight to JFK. The seven-hour flight was smooth, but I could not fall asleep. At JFK, we got through customs all right, but going through security was irksome, stressful, and slow. Thank gosh Erik got me a first class flight to Portland. I flew home in style.