

Land of the lakes

Intrepid HEIDI FULLER-LOVE goes motorcaravanning and moose-hunting in the pine-clad Tampere region of Finland

Tampere is the third-largest city in Finland, and is characterised by its many beautiful lakes



HEIDI FULLER-LOVE has split her time between Spain and France for the past 15 years, and spends around six months of the year touring throughout Europe.

Travelling towards Tampere town, which is set on a narrow peninsula between two of the region's numerous lakes, I was hoping to spot a moose. After all, this big-antlered member of the deer family is Finland's emblematic animal, so surely we'd get to see one of these notoriously shy creatures while we were in the country?

HAIL HELSINKI

Getting here in the 'van had seemed like a miracle in itself. Bordering Russia in the east, Norway in the north and Sweden in the west, a large part of Finland lies above the Arctic Circle and getting there is quite a trip. After a few months travelling through France and Holland, we journeyed north to Hamburg one chilly September morning, on our way to the vast Travemünde Skandinavienkai

Terminal. There, we boarded the morning ferry to Helsinki. The ferry had cosy cabins, plenty of shops, great restaurants and even a sauna onboard, so the 28-hour trip felt more like a cruise.

By early morning on the second day we were sailing through the narrow funnel of Baltic sea, past dramatic fjords, forests and hills, into the port of Helsinki.

With its stylish architecture and chic boutiques, Siberian bars and Baltic seascape, the city is a wonderful mélange of east and west. Leaving our 'van at Rastila, a lovely little campsite with log cabins and great facilities just outside town, we caught a bus into the centre and met our guide from the Helsinki City Tourist Information office who took us on a tour of this trendy place. First stop was the Design District, a crowded warren of boutiques,



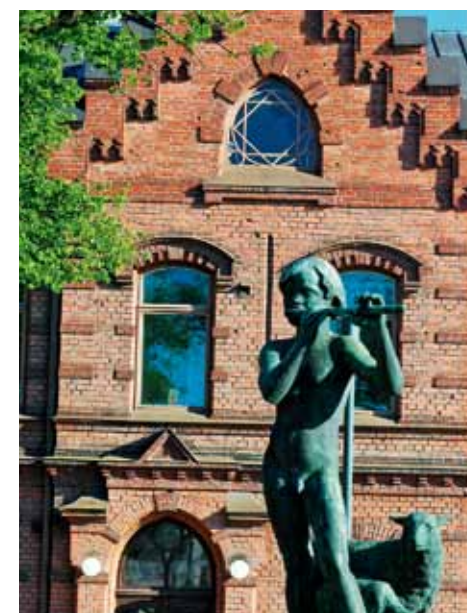
trendy clothes shops, art galleries and restaurants clustered around the beautiful Museum of Finnish Architecture and Design, with its red-brick façade. After a wander around the museum, which explores the history of Finnish design, we bought a sugar-dusted bag of local speciality *voisilmäpulla*, a deliciously buttery cardamom-spiced bun that's a favourite snack in Finland.

That afternoon we hopped on a number 24 bus to Seurasaari, an amazing open-air heritage museum where dozens of 18th- and 19th-century wooden houses have been brought from all over Finland and installed here among dense pine forest.

Back in the centre of town that evening we had dinner at Juuri, a farmhouse-style restaurant serving bite-sized dishes of homemade sausage in vodka mustard and smoked-trout soup — delicious.

Over the next few days we took a scenic boat trip to Suomenlinna, a vast UNESCO Heritage-classed, 18th-century fortress that's now home to a fascinating collection of museums, cafés and shops. We also visited the National Museum of Finland, which houses a treasure trove of gold coins and other intriguing Finnish artefacts dating from prehistory to the present day. We had a fun afternoon in Sealife Helsinki, too, with its sharks, piranha fish and 'jelly disco' where several dozen species of jellyfish bob to pop music!

Most days we'd wander into the town centre and browse the boutiques selling fashionable Finnish woollies, elegant jewellery and antiques, before going to Hermannin: it's Helsinki's oldest public sauna, and we relaxed on gleaming wooden benches as the



Tampere is characterised by its red-brick buildings, and Ikaalinen for its music festival



heat eased away our aches and pains. On our final day we took a ferry to Helsinki zoo on Korkeasaari island where I was overjoyed to meet my first moose!

TAMPERE AND A THOUSAND LAKES

Friends we'd met in a German campsite had recommended we visit Tampere, a little-known region further north that's known as the Land of a Thousand Lakes.



Main pic On the shores of Lake Pyhäjärvi near Tampere Inset Traditional Finnish biscuits

After a two-hour drive along the peaceful E12 road heading north, we reached the first of the lakes at Hämeenlinna; it's a pretty little town that's crowned by a 13th-century castle, which was the birthplace of Jean Sibelius. Unfortunately, the museum dedicated to the famous composer was closed when we arrived at midday, so we drove on to Tampere, arriving at Suomi campsite on the shore of Lake Pyhäjärvi at around dusk. There was hardly anyone in the campsite, so we chose a wonderful pitch under a pine tree overlooking the lake.

Up early next morning, we had a typical Finnish breakfast of hot coffee and rice-and-egg-stuffed Karelian pasties, then took a bus into Tampere town.

Located on the banks of the Tammerkoski, a wide channel linking two lakes either side of town, Tampere's skyline is littered with handsome brick chimneys that are all that remain of the city's industrial past.

In Finlayson — a former fabric factory converted to a hip hive of shops and restaurants — we visited the Spy Museum. The first of its kind in the world when it was created in 1998, this intriguing museum is packed with spy gadgets, including lipstick guns and pen cameras.

DELICIOUS FINNISH FOOD

Home of the Kyyttö forest cow, wild reindeer, hundreds of edible berries and fish-packed lakes, Finland offers a wide variety of gastronomic specialities. All the travellers that we'd met had raved about the food here, so we asked Anne Spärman-Sievola, head of the local tourist board, to put together a three-day tour that would help us discover the region via local food. ☺

Finland is known as the Land of a Thousand Lakes – it actually has almost 200,000



All the food was delicious in Finland, with amazing meat, bread and vegetables

Following Anna's map the following day we drove along winding roads to Hameenkyro, a lovely region of lush pastures and log cabins an hour's drive north-west of Tampere. Stopping off for a slice of homemade blueberry pie in the farm restaurant of Frantsila, we stayed on to have a look around this pioneering organic herb farm, which produces some of Finland's top natural health products.

That evening we followed a tree-lined road – studded with signs warning us to watch out for wild moose – to Ahlman farm, home of the Kyytto, a stocky brown and white cow that's so rare there are only 500 left in the world. We then spent a peaceful night camped by the lake near Ikaalinen, a pretty town renowned for its summer folk music festival.

Up early next day, we had a swim in the icy lake then set off to the Vehoniemi Automotive Museum. After marvelling at exhibits of vintage Finnish motorcars, we had a snack of sweet mashed potato and lingonberry Ronttonen pastries at the Yellow House, a vintage-style café and B&B in the tiny hamlet of Pälkäne.

Totally unsuited to grape growing, the chilly Finnish climate is ideal for a wide variety of berries, ranging from bog whortleberries to cloudberry, most of which are used to make wine. Keen to visit a winemaker, we drove to the century-old, alpine-style farm of Ronnvik, where we sampled several scrumptious berry wines and liqueurs – my favourite was the sweet strawberry-currant mélange. As dusk fell, we headed for Villa Hepolahti, for what was perhaps the most magical part of our trip.

In Finland, the wild crayfishing season is the highlight of the culinary year, and in August and September there are alfresco crayfish parties all over Finland. Skidding out over the lake in Villa Hepolahti's motorboat, we stopped near rocks and baited flat nets with fish heads. By the time darkness fell, our nets were brimming with shellfish, which we took back to the timber villa to be cooked. Sitting at long tables, we drank schnapps, sang songs and had a delicious feast.

MUSHROOM FORAGING

On our last day we wanted to do something really special, so we met up with a guide and went foraging in the woods. We were looking for mushrooms, and found lots of brown-capped Boletus and frilly skirted chanterelle. That evening, our guide led us back through the forest to Peltola, a Finnish farmhouse. There, we tucked into a farm banquet, before sweating in a smoke sauna, then diving into the icy waters of Lake Ajosjärvi! It was the perfect end to our tour of Finland and, as we boarded the ferry, we vowed that we'd come back to the land of the mighty moose.

TOUR ESSENTIALS

↑ Way to go

- There are daily sailings from Travemünde in Germany to Helsinki on the Finnlines ferry. You need to board the ship at around 11pm and it sails at 3am, arriving in Helsinki 28 hours later.
- Driving in Finland is safe and pleasant. Cars drive on the right and the basic speed limits for motorways is 100kph; in towns it's 30kph. If the police stop you for drinking and driving you will go straight to jail. European drivers will need to carry their green card, valid driving licence, passport, logbook, insurance certificate and vehicle-registration document.

🏠 Where we stayed

Campsites in Finland are generally excellent, but it's good to know that wild camping seems to be tolerated.

• Rastila Camping

Karavaanikatu 4, 00980 Helsinki

Tel +358 (0)931078517

Web www.rastilacamping.fi

Open All year round

From €5 per person and €16 for a pitch

• Suomi Camping

Leirintäkatu 8, 33900 Tampere

Tel +358 (0)207199777

Web www.suomicamping.fi

Open May to September

From €4 per person and €14 for a pitch

i Find out more

• Helsinki City Tourist Information,

Pohjoisesplanadi 19, Helsinki

Tel +358 (0)9310 13300

Web www.visithelsinki.fi

• Visit Tampere

Railway station, Rautatienkatu

Tel +358 (0)3565 66800

Web www.visittampere.fi

- The Helsinki card, available from Helsinki City Tourist Information (www.visithelsinki.fi), gives you free entry to various sites, free transport and more.
- Packed with tips for motorcaravanners, site info and much more, Vicarious Books' *Nordic Camper Guide* is a very useful resource for those travelling in Finland and other parts of Scandinavia.
- Insight's *Guide to Finland* is packed with gorgeous photos and fascinating information that will really get your mouth watering before you go.

£ Costs

Fuel	£239
Sites	£52
Food and drink	£358
TOTAL	£649