



Helsinki, Finland: Where to Stay, Eat and What to Do



Allas Sea Pool, courtesy Eetu Ahanen

There's never been a better time to visit Helsinki, with its cutting-edge Design District, chic shopping, vibrant food scene and island fortress UNESCO site. Located on a peninsula jutting into the Baltic Sea's Gulf of Finland, Europe's northernmost capital is equally well known for its distinctive blend of Western modernism and traditional Eastern European architecture as for its iconic designers, such as Alvar Aalto, Marimekko, Artek and Arabia. Spring, summer and autumn, when the Helsinki Design Week takes place, are all good times to visit the city, which is an easy add-on from Stockholm and St. Petersburg.

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Given the extreme winters, Finns' reputation for quiet persistence is not surprising, although their creativity and quirky playfulness may be. Finland has the distinction of

hosting the world championships for air guitar and mobile-phone throwing. It is also known as a tech disruptor and a leader in 3-D-gaming optimization: Nokia phones and the AngryBirds app have their origins here. But exploring Helsinki's design aesthetic, its many parks and its vast archipelago are the best ways to take it all in.

Lay of the Land: Where to Stay, Eat and Drink



Hotel Lilla Roberts Restaurant

The Esplanadi, a green space flanked by cafés and boutiques, with Market Square at one end and Erottaja square at the other, is the city's cultural center. Several excellent hotels are located here and nearby. The 130-year-old [Hotel Kämp](#), situated right on the Esplanadi, was a favored meeting place for politicians, artists and writers of the Finnish Golden Age and remains the top choice for international executives. [Hotel Haven](#), one block from the park, has sea views from some of its top-floor rooms. Other options in the Design District, which surrounds the Esplanadi, include [Hotel Lilla Roberts](#), with its Art Deco-inspired interiors, and the stylish [Hotel St. George](#), which opened last May and has a spa, restaurant and bakery on-site. A less-pricey option just a short walk from the Esplanadi is the [Hotel Fabian](#).

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The area contains many good restaurants. At **Ora**, chef Sasu Laukkonen's creations

using seasonal ingredients have earned the petite restaurant a *Michelin* star. **Savoy** is a classic with a tightly curated menu and interiors designed by Alvar Aalto. Taking a more rustic approach, *Michelin*-starred **Grön** offers a menu that is largely vegetable-focused but includes fish and meats prepared with as much reverence as the “roots and plants.” After dinner, the terrace at **Grotesk** is lovely for a late-night sip during the warmer months, while the rooftop **Sky Terrace at Klaus K Hotel** serves cocktails with a 360-degree view of the city.

Day 1: Coffee Culture, Design and Shopping



Lokal Boutique

Start your day with coffee and Finnish pastries, such as a cinnamon-cardamom scented *pulla roll*, at the elegant **Strindberg café** on the Esplanadi, which opens at 9 a.m. From there, walk to the diminutive **Designmuseo**. After a primer on the history of Finnish design, walk a block to **Lokal**, a concept store with a selection of Finnish ceramics, jewelry, artwork, kitchenware and furniture. Close by is **Common**, with ceramics and paper products from Japan inspired by the similarity between that country’s aesthetic and Nordic design. On the Esplanadi itself are Marimekko outposts selling the company’s classic clothing, bags and fabrics. Its products are also among the ceramics and housewares at **Iittala**, along with such iconic Finnish designs as Alvar Aalto’s undulating vases. In 1935, Alvar and Aino Aalto opened Artek, and you can peruse housewares and furnishings at its store just off the park.



Helsinki Designmuseum, courtesy Susanna Lonrot

For lunch, a fun choice is [Finlandia Caviar](#), a refined but casual restaurant located where the Esplanadi meets the harbor market, or [Yes Yes Yes](#), a hip vegetarian spot near the Designmuseum. Also good for a light meal is the café upstairs at [Kiasma](#), a branch of Finland's National Gallery that is housed in an unusual glass-walled building and showcases the work of Finnish and international contemporary artists. If you prefer to keep your attention on shopping, try [Schoffa](#) and [Fere](#), for men, and [Andiata](#), for women, all on the Esplanadi.

Located outside the Design District but close by, [Mycoko](#) sells bohemian-chic clothing and accessories for women. On the north side of Senate Square is **Helsinki Cathedral**, a gleaming white structure built in the mid-1800s and topped with striking green domes that can be seen from the sea; its relatively austere interior, apart from the gold-leaf altar, reflects its Lutheran past. From there, a short walk on Kirkkokatu or Hallituskatu toward the water provides an overview of the area's handsome prewar architecture. At **Pohjoissatama** (North Harbor), you'll see the imposing icebreakers that keep Helsinki's waterways open during the frigid winter months. Design lovers will want to make time for the impressive **Kamppi Chapel**, constructed as part of the World Design Capital program with an exterior of Finnish wood and intended to be a place for quiet reflection. They might also arrange a tour of the [Aalto House](#) and studio space, located just outside the city.

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Allas Sea Pool, courtesy Dorit Salutskij

If you've timed it right, you'll be at [Allas](#), a wooden-and-glass structure housing public swimming pools and saunas near the Market Square on the main harbor, at cocktail hour. Take a steam first or just order drinks and admire the hearty Finns swimming outside in warmer months, with the backdrop of the sea and city behind them. If you're ready for dinner (and have reserved well in advance), *Michelin*-starred [Olo](#), in a 19th-century house across from Allas, provides a fantastic culinary experience. The multicourse menu features locally sourced produce, fish and game, such as elk or moose.

For more casual options, walk back toward the icebreakers, where a refurbished warehouse is now filled with bustling restaurants, including the eclectic [Holiday](#). Among the wine bars that have taken root in Helsinki, **Le Petit Chaperon Rouge** serves European vintages and small plates.

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Day 2: Islands and Parks



Suomenlinna Fortress, credit Dorit Salutski

Go to **Robert's Coffee**, in the **Old Market Hall** (*Eteläranta, 00130 Helsinki*), next to the harbor market, to get a strong Finnish brew and perhaps a sweet, donut-like *munkki* before buying tickets for the scenic 20-minute ferry ride to **Suomenlinna**, an 18th-century fortress built across several connected islands. A one-mile "blue route" passes various historic points in this UNESCO World Heritage site, which is now home to several artist studios. Back on the mainland, take in more of the city's beautiful greenery as you walk to **Kaivopuisto**, perhaps Helsinki's loveliest park. On the gently sloped hill leading to it, you'll see elegant homes and several embassies, including those of the United States, Great Britain and France.

From Kaivopuisto, a quick trip on a ferry takes you to the restaurant **Uunisaari** (*Pohjoinen Uunisaari 2*), which melds Finnish and far-flung flavors in such dishes as ceviche and cauliflower with hummus. Or cross the bridge to another mini-islet to order wood-fired pizzas at **Skiffer**. If you'd rather enjoy the sea view from the shore, walk along the water to **Birgitta**, which has freshly prepares salads and sandwiches.

A short taxi ride takes you to the Töölö neighborhood, where the impressive Sibelius Monument, Eila Hiltonen's sculpture of Finland's renowned composer, sits in another

verdant (or, in winter, snowy) park. Finland still lends its conductors and musicians to many of the most important orchestras in the world. A visit to Töölö is yet another reminder of Helsinki's affinity for culture, nature and the sea.

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Lonna Restaurt

Summer Side Trip

If you are in Helsinki between May and September, reserve a sauna and dinner on the island of [Lonna](#), easily reached by ferry. When you arrive, you'll be given everything you need to enjoy a Finnish sauna experience in a roomy, two-story structure tucked into the woods with a view of the Helsinki Archipelago. When your session is finished, cool off in the bracing seawater and then enjoy refined local cuisine at the restaurant. Menu options might include a baked-carrot salad or local pike with wild herbs. After dinner, take the ferry back to Helsinki and observe the still bright skyline. Onshore, walk along the water to the restaurant [Mattolaituri](#), grab a seat upstairs, order a glass of rosé and watch the small boats navigate the narrow straits between the shore and the islets beyond.

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- Noelle Salmi on May 7, 2019

