



Our Nordic Adventure: A Cycling Holiday in Finland

Our bike tour in Finland was a glorious adventure. We didn't know what to expect really, but as each day unfolded—the Finnish landscape, culture, and beauty engaged us completely. Finland was a different “pick” for us. Friends lured us there with a gracious invitation, and we were thrilled to get a chance to explore this Nordic country. Bounded by Russia in the east and Sweden in the west—Finland incorporates both eastern and western cultures. **For some historical context:** Sweden ruled Finland for 600 years until 1808, when the Russians gained control of Finland after they fought the Swedes. They ruled for about 100 years after which Lenin granted Finland independence in 1917. **FYI:** Both Finnish and Swedish are official languages. A Swedish-speaking minority lives in the west and south of Finland.

Finland is a land of *lakes, forests, saunas, and berries*, all of which we embraced wholeheartedly. With (boreal) forests covering 69% of the country and with 188,000 lakes, the Finns enjoy the wonderful nature that surrounds them, in summer certainly, but even during those long winter months, with miles of ski trails as well as ice fishing, and swimming! Saunas (pronounced *sowna*) are part of the lifestyle and are found in every home—new or old. We enjoyed many saunas, in private homes, B&Bs, and lakeside cottages. The ultimate sauna experience is ending it off with a refreshing dip in the lake. We did that too! Forest berry-picking is also a national pastime, and this year they had a “bumper” crop of wild raspberries, lingonberries, low bush blueberries, and bilberries. No permits are needed to pick berries (and mushrooms) and any money made from the sale of these products is not taxed. We enjoyed berry-picking like everyone else even though we didn't have high rubber boots to trudge through the forests, a basket to collect our bounty, or enough to sell! We just made a wonderful bike stop and satisfied our berry cravings! You get the picture-- *when you're in Finland, you're in nature.*

Covering about 750 miles, we did our usual “seat of the pants” trip with no reservations or defined routes upfront. Starting from Heinola, a small town 1½ hours north of Helsinki, we headed west, southwest with paper maps and boundless enthusiasm to Hameenlinna, then Turku (the capital under Swedish rule), and on to the islands. It's hard to summarize this trip, but here are some **highlights:**

- We visited 4 (of Finland's 7) **UNESCO world heritage sites** including *Sammallahdenmaki*,--the site of 30 Bronze age granite burial cairns, the *Fortress of Suomenlinna*, an example of European military architecture of the late 1700s off Helsinki's harbor, *Old Rauma*, an old Nordic city constructed in wood, and the *Verla Groundwood & Board Mill*, a unique, small-scaled industrial settlement. Wow!

- Our **unplanned route** included the “ox (or king's) road,” the oldest road in Finland, carved out to connect 2 of the King's castles—the Hame to the Turku Castle, island hopping in the Finnish archipelago of Pargas, Nagu, Karpoo, and Houtskar, and cruising along the many miles of paved bike lanes—along the roads with a buffer between cars and bikes, through the forested areas, and by the sea.

- Finding **accommodations** was tricky in rural areas, but we found wonderfully unique lodging, to include an historic tannery, a rustic cabin on the Baltic, an old schoolhouse B&B—museum and all, and Herrasmani, a settlement area going back 700 years, nestled amidst a lush forest along the “ox” road.

- As always, **people are the heart of our trip.** We made friends along the way—with cycle tourists Miina, Sampo, Taina, and Kari, and with Sakari, and his wife Hanna and others. Personal connections are so important to us. We got to meet many Finns, but also people from Sweden, Russia,

and Estonia. Our hosts and friends, Lea and Stephen, inspired this trip, and we cannot thank them enough.

Post bike trip we spent **six fantastic days in Helsinki**. What a city! Super accessible and progressive, Helsinki is filled with countless museums like The National Museum of Art, indoor/ outdoor markets, outdoor parks/concerts, 3 harbors with ferries to their island zoo, to a UNESCO site (fortress), and so much more. We fell in love with this beautiful city by the sea!

Of our many cycling trips,(over 3 decades) this *Finnish adventure is our favorite*. The nature, the cycling, the people, the culture, history and lifestyle captured our hearts, and the long, summer days enabled us to get the most out of each day on tour. Hope to be back. Tervetula! (welcome)

Happy cycling & enjoy your travels, Evie & Mike