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# The Ins and Outs of Helsinki

by Olivia Greenway

Hundreds of special events are being held this year to celebrate Helsinki being the Design Capital. Olivia Greenway guides us around the best things to do and see in the Finnish capital...

With a population of just over 5 million, one fifth of its inhabitants live in the capital city, Helsinki and its metropolitan area. Relatively rural until the 1950s, Helsinki has enjoyed rapid urbanisation and commercial growth. Education, standard of living and freedom of the press are among the best in the world. Being fairly compact and having a variety of historical buildings and cobbled squares, it's also an ideal city for discovering on foot.



Despite being annexed to Russia for many years, Helsinki has a distinctly upbeat, sophisticated European feel. It's an exciting choice for a weekend city break, with five Michelin-star restaurants and plenty to do and see. Although most people prefer to visit in the summer, a winter trip should not be dismissed. Like most countries where the winters are cold, they are geared up to cope with it well.

Hundreds of special events are being held this year to celebrate Helsinki being Design Capital. Everywhere you look, design seems to be entrenched in the Finnish consciousness. Helsinki even has its own Design District, where shops specialising in design have a sticker in their window. These

Olivia Greenway

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now number over 200. Finnish designers are opening their studios and late night shopping until 9pm is available on Thursdays.



One of your first ports of call should be the tourist office, just off the market square. Here you will find what's on, seek information about visitor attractions and can have your questions answered by helpful assistants. They can also assist you with booking tours and advise on transport tickets.

Central Helsinki is well served by trams that are fun and easy to use. You can buy a ticket that lasts for an hour (around €2) from when you get on your first tram or buy an HSL day ticket (€9). Another option is the Helsinki Card (€36) that also gets you in to several museums and attractions, but best to take advice from the tourist office to see which option is best for you. Taxis are expensive. They are best restricted to late night journeys or when you have luggage.

The most recognised building in Helsinki is probably the distinctive white Lutheran cathedral in cobbled Senate Square, seemingly guarding the city from on high. Illuminated at night, it has the twelve apostles on the roof. You may also like to visit the Church in the Rock, literally built around a rocky outcrop. Inside, its modern design is in stark contrast to those of more traditional churches.



As far as museums and galleries go, Ateneum gets my vote, but there are a huge number of others to explore, including the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, the building itself worth looking at in its own right, with its sleek, bold curves. The Ateneum has the largest collection of paintings in Finland and much space is given to home grown talent. In common with most museums in Helsinki, it's closed on Monday. The gallery hosts superb exhibitions: until 29 April 2012 you can enjoy the work of the Swedish artist Carl Larsson, who specialised in depicting idyllic country life. Born into

a poor family, he succeeded as an artist due to his talent alone. He had eight children and used them all as models for his works, which became enormously popular.

It's also worth visiting the Sibelius Monument at Sibelius Park, if only to ponder at the unusual structure – hundreds of pipes, welded together and weighing several tons. The story goes that the sculpture was so disliked when it was first unveiled in 1967, the artist, Eila Hiltunen fled the city. Building the structure took her four arduous years, with only one assistant and working with the metal gave her chronic asthma. The head of Sibelius was added a few years later, to keep traditionalists happy.



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Helsinki has a number of smart boutique hotels and small chain hotels. I stayed at the Glo Hotel in the city centre, one of several in the city. The biggest benefit was its location; within minutes I could be near all the main shops and attractions.

Shopping is particularly enjoyable if you like independent outlets, selling unusual items we just don't seem to get at home. If you need the security of a department store, Stockmann sells nearly everything and of course well-known world brands are everywhere.

Helsinki has a reputation for being expensive but if you eat your main meal at lunchtime, instead of the evening, taking advantage of the meal of the day or special set menus, you'll save yourself money. I liked the historic Fazer coffee shop opposite the hotel, where as well as coffee and impossibly irresistible cakes, they serve superb light lunches. Do try to get to the indoor market in Hakaniemi Market Hall, an easy tram ride from the centre. Immaculate stalls are crammed with local foodstuffs: reindeer meat, dark rye bread, soured herring. At several of the small indoor cafes, you may like to try the delicious Karelian savoury pastries or some of the dainty filled rolls.



For a special treat, try the newly opened Kämp Signe, where chef Sami Tallberg sources up to thirty varieties of foraged food and bakes 200-year-old bread. Attractive watering holes are everywhere, from where you can plot the next day's excitements.

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