

Before this trip I really didn't know much at all about Finland except that my Scandinavian friends say Finns are not Scandinavian, and when I saw their fans during the 2016 Euro Cup in Paris they were NOT ALL platinum blonds with ice blue eyes!



I have had the opportunity to see some Finnish films in Paris over the past couple of years (Lapland Odyssey, The Man Without a Past and, most recently, Tom of Finland) and to read Finnish Author Arto Paasilinna's Year of the Hare and The Howling Miller. As I look into contemporary Finnish writers I am eager to take in a few more, although the movement towards more science fiction/fantasy settings is not necessarily to my taste.

However, the moniker "Finnish Weird" for the current body of writing is intriguing.

I think "weird" is perhaps too strong a word, but I do detect a special tenor to Finnish wit. Interestingly, the current theme on the official Finnish travel website (www.visitfinland.com), in the country's centennial year, is The Symphony of Extremes. "Finland is home to many contrasts and extremes, not just the many faces of our seasons. In fact Finnish people's DNA is the most diverse in all of Europe. Extremes are literally in our blood."

Far north Lapland where in summer the sun doesn't set for 70 days and in winter doesn't rise for 52 days, with average January temperature -18C and as many reindeer as people is one example of extremes. The country's 55,000 lakes are more than any country in Europe, and there are at



least 3 million saunas in the country, about the same number as cars, for a population of 5.5 million. 100% of Finns take at least one sauna per week.



This is definitely a country of water as not only do lakes abound but there is a coastline of 1250 km (750 miles). Just off the coast of Helsinki are about 330 islands and on the west coast the Aland Autonomous Monolingual (Swedish) region consists of 6500 islands, "the world's largest archipelago". Shipbuilding has historically been a principal industry. The Marine Museum in Turku does a nice job of telling the real-life stories of those who go to sea in all the roles from dishwasher to captain! And the Meyer shipyard in Turku continues to build some of the world's largest cruise ships, including TUI's series of Mein Schiff (My Ship) 1-5 which call regularly here in Agadir. In fact today (September 26) as I write this, Mein Schiff 4 is here having arrived

at 7 am and departing at 10:30 pm., unfortunately a foggy day! The newest Mein Schiff 6 that was delivered in June is not scheduled to call here at least for the next year that I can see.



To the East Finland shares a 1340 km (833 mile) border with Russia, thus between the European Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Norway actually wraps around Sweden and Finland to the north (having the second longest coastline of any country in the world after Canada according to at least one source), has its own border with Russia and a point where the three countries are contiguous.



Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden for almost 500 years from 1323 to 1809 and both Swedish and Finnish are official languages. The Swedish legal and social systems took root in Finland and as feudalism was never a part of this system, the Finnish peasants retained their personal freedom. During the Swedish time, Turku was the most important city in Finland, considered the capital of “Eastern Sweden” and is the oldest city in Finland.

In the 16th century the reformation started by Martin Luther reached Finland and Sweden, and it helped to create the Finnish-language culture since Luther insisted that people be able to read the holy Bible and hear sermons in their own language. Mikael Agricola, who became Lutheran Bishop of Turku created the first written Finnish in the mid 1500's. His statue stands outside the Lutheran Cathedral in Turku, whose steeple is visible from virtually every part of the city.



In 1809 most of the Finnish speaking areas were ceded by Sweden to the Russian Empire creating the Autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. Finnish national identity was emerging and was summarized in the famous quote (attributed to several Finnish statesmen) “Swedes we are not, Russians we will not become, so let us be Finns”.

In 1812 Russia made Helsinki the capital, and Finland became an independent country in 1917 after becoming the first country in the world to enact full universal suffrage in 1906 and electing its first women to Parliament the following year.

In 1995 Finland joined the EU and it became part of the Euro zone in 2002.

Even today the country is 76% forest (comprising 11% of all of Europe's forest) and building construction was virtually all of wood until the mid-1800's following disastrous fires in Turku and Helsinki.

Many completely wooden towns still exist, one of which, Naantali, near Turku, we visited. The summer tourist season ended definitively on Sunday, September 3rd this year so a visit the following day meant we had the town to ourselves. It also meant not even a cup of coffee was available in the old town but after a lovely coastal walk we had a buffet lunch at the huge Naantali Spa Hotel complex overlooking the water.



There are many marinas and it is reminiscent of New England coastal towns.



Across one bay you see the tower of Kultaranta, the summer home of the Finnish President, whose gardens can be visited in the summer. The medieval stone church (originally a convent of St Birgitta nuns established in 1442) dominates the view and ferries to Aland depart from here.



Naantali is also the home of Moomin World, the theme park populated by the Moomin characters created by Tove Jansson in the 1950's. These white roundish trolls with large snouts became beloved through books, movies, comics and even a tv series. Moomin memorabilia shops still exist in London, Hong Kong and Tokyo! Do NOT think Disneyland. Moomin World is a small part of a small island. Although closed for the season we could see some bits of the attractions.



The city gradually acquired excellent open-air museum everything from wooden blocks on a



Turku was largely destroyed by fire in 1827 but due to its protection by the river Aure and the Observatory Hill, the Cloister Hill section of small wooden cottages escaped. these properties which are now an with active craftspeople creating needlework to saddles to prints 16th C press.



The round flat bread with the hole in the middle is still in use today and we found it delicious!



Following the fire, German architect Carl Ludwig Engel (previously city planner for the rebuilding of Helsinki) was selected to create a new plan for the city and that downtown grid remains today, anchored by the new central square which had active markets each day we were there. Handsome new neo-classical, renaissance revival and art nouveau buildings were created.



Interestingly, many of the traditional wooden buildings still exist both along the river and in the town center.



The river Aure is the main artery of the city with many of the museums and finest restaurants



located along it. And although not considered one of the top ten restaurants in Turku, our meal at Fojja on the main square was outstanding!

In addition to the Cathedral, badly damaged in the fire and rebuilt, the granite art nouveau art museum, 1904, which crowns a hill overlooking the town center, is very impressive. During WWII it was saved from becoming the German HQ for Turku because the glass roof was considered too risky, so the Germans occupied the observatory instead.

Similar to Senate Square in Helsinki, Engel surrounded the rebuilt Cathedral with university and government buildings.



Hidden away behind these is a small modern museum dedicated to Jean Sibelius, composer of Finlandia. It is most known for its superb acoustics and frequent music performances.



At the harbor end of the river stands Turku Castle (13th C - restoration completed 1987). Its stone church dates from the 1480's before the Reformation came to Finland/Sweden.



Not only was exterior construction of wood, but interiors as well. At Turku Castle the ceilings in the King's Reception room (from the 16thC Renaissance portion of the Castle) are magnificent as well as the staircase in the Turku Art Museum.



And in the central west harbor area of Helsinki a new neighborhood known as Jatkasaari, scheduled to house 17,000 people, is arising. It is anchored by the two-tower Clarion Hotel that opened in 2016, and one part of it is known as “Wood City”.



Due to an accommodation mix-up our planned two-day two-night stay in Helsinki was reduced and made less convenient by accommodation out of town instead of in an apartment in the center of the city. However, the Hop on Hop Off bus tour gave us the chance to see the wide variety of neighborhoods, the beautiful parks, and the constant proximity of water – with a lake in the center and surrounded on three sides by the sea, you are rarely out of its sight!



The Senate Square, presided over by the Evangelical Lutheran Cathedral designed by Engel, anchored the new design following the fire of 1808. Helsinki in many areas reminded me of St Petersburg and, indeed, Engel had been influenced by his travels there. During the latter half of

the 19th C many parts of the city were built in the Art Nouveau (also known as Secessionist or Jugend) and, later, National Romanticism styles.



On the day we visited there were four giant cruise ships in town, but Helsinki is large enough to handle the influx of 8 to 10,000



cruise visitors.

No visit to Helsinki is complete without sampling the beautiful high design wares, especially of Marimekko and Artek. Due to the shortened visit I wasn't able to visit Alvar Aalto's home and studio but luckily for me the Ateneum Art Museum was having a temporary exhibition of his work and his interior design components continue to be available at Artek.



Another famous Finnish architect, of art nouveau era, is Eliel Saarinen and arriving in Helsinki's main train station, completed in 1919, you couldn't help but be impressed.



The Rock Church, literally hewn out of a granite rock outcrop in the middle of a residential neighborhood, is another memorable building. The concave ceiling is made of copper wire and light streams in through 180 slabs of glass.



This seemed particularly symbolic to us as during the trip from Helsinki to Turku and back we were constantly impressed by the quantities of rock. I wondered, also, if the design of the airport train access corridor was meant to emulate all the rock tunnels!



With the lakes, forests and fields (hay being harvested, baled and wrapped in plastic), even this small taste of southern Finland impressed us with the country's natural beauty.



Our final evening in Helsinki was spent on a boat tour (remember those 330 offshore islands I mentioned?). Unfortunately, it rained most of the evening, but we got a taste of the diversity of the islands, the beautiful summer homes, and the boating activity. Many of the islands are served by ferries and, in addition to the Suomenlinna former fortress complex, have many parks.



The Viking cruise ferries serve multiple ports in Sweden plus Tallinn in Estonia and other parts of Finland.



We learned that the Baltic Sea has virtually no salt due to more fresh water rivers draining into it than Atlantic Ocean water entering through the narrow Danish Kattegat. Thus, vast areas freeze solid during winter, and access has to be kept open by icebreakers, several of which we saw moored in Helsinki harbor.



We had a beautiful view of the city on returning to port. This was the best view I had of the Uspenski Orthodox Cathedral. The cathedral is the seat of the Archdiocese of Helsinki in the Finnish Orthodox Church which has about 60,000 members and is part of the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate based in Constantinople.



I really liked the mission of “Finnish Universities for a Better World”.

