

# Fodor's Travel



## Why now is the time to visit Helsinki.

It's Helsinki's architecture that first startles me—the muted green of the Senate Square dome, contrasting with the cloudless blue sky; the reddish façade of the Uspenski Cathedral, crowned with a similarly muted green dome, topped with gold accents. I have never been to Finland before, but suddenly—and eerily, I might add—everything looks familiar, as though I were in the city mere months ago. I look around the street and note the color palette of the buildings and the swoop of their architecture. Then, it hits me: Helsinki is a dead ringer for St. Petersburg, Russia.

I had been to Russia nearly twenty years prior as an angsty teenager brooding over a family trip that would rip me from my beloved MTV. We flew to St. Petersburg at the behest of my stepmom, a Russian immigrant with fond memories of her childhood in the Soviet Union. For the most part, my two-week foray into Russian culture was a blur of smells, vibrant colors, and punchy flavors. Looking back, I recalled a few vivid details: the aroma of an outdoor wooden sauna in the Russian countryside, the vivid pink of a steaming bowl of borscht, and the onion-shaped domes of the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, with its swirled colors reminiscent of an ice cream cone.

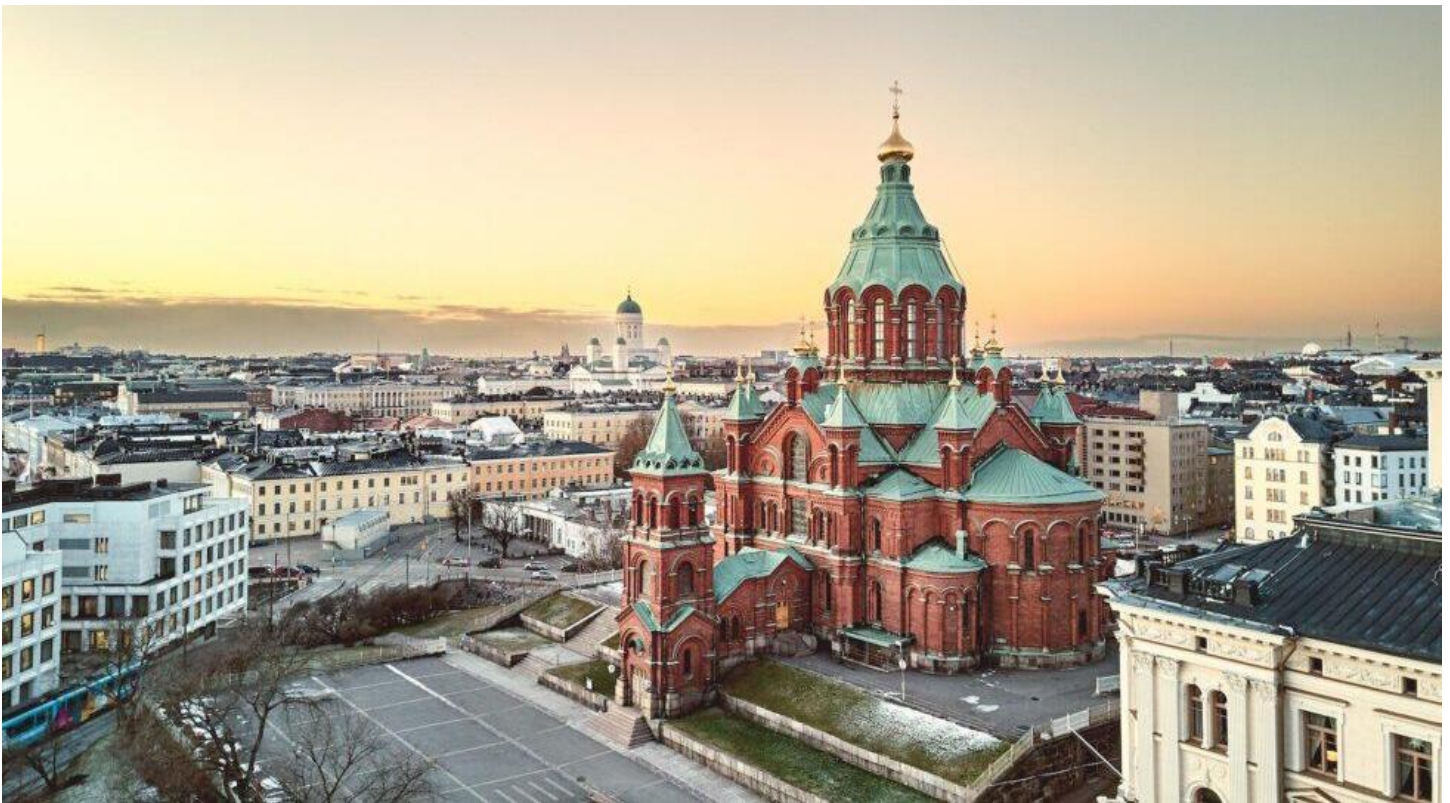
Arriving in Helsinki, I had expected to find a city similar to those throughout Scandinavia. I envisioned colorful wooden houses like those lining Copenhagen's Nyhavn Harbor. I

pictured a clash of old meets new, the way Oslo's Art Nouveau architecture contrasts with the grass-covered turf homes found throughout Norway. But what I did not expect was to feel as though I had landed squarely back in St. Petersburg's central Nevsky Prospect, suddenly awash with sensory memories of a trip that had largely faded into obscurity.

## A Country Heavily Influenced by Sweden and Russia

If I had taken the time to read up on my Finnish history before landing, I'd have learned that Finland was part of Sweden up until 1809, when Russia stepped in and conquered the country. Until 1917, Finland remained a prominent part of the Russian empire, with Helsinki crowned the capital of a newly formed autonomous region once known as the Grand Duchy of Finland.

The Finland we see today displays influences from both Swedish and Russian cultures. You see Russia in the same Neoclassic architecture prominent throughout St. Petersburg, now on display in Finland, even once earning Helsinki the nickname "St. Petersburg in miniature." You find Sweden and Russia in the cuisine, pulling inspiration from the Swedish *smorgasbord* and the Russian *zakuska* table. But despite the convergence of these two countries, I get the sense that Finland is keen to shrug off its Swedish and Russian roots and shape its own identity.



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Ukrainian flags flap proudly in the wind, especially in the buildings surrounding the Russian embassy, sending a clear message that—history be damned—Finland does *not* stand with Russia. Bars tout Finnish-made brews that seem to say, “Now *this* is what Finland tastes like.” Restaurants offer eclectic and sustainable menus that pull inspiration from global cuisines adapted into Finnish-forward dishes.

The overall vibe of Helsinki feels defiant, like, say, a teenager on a family trip keen to shrug off and do her own thing. To visit Helsinki right now is to discover an exciting city eager to celebrate its local talent, define its cuisine, and share what makes the Finnish some of the happiest people on earth.

## Love at First Sight at Helsinki Hotels

Checking into Hotel Lilla Roberts is to get a first-hand glimpse of how Helsinki is celebrating its Finnish talent. Originally opened in 2015, what was once an electric station has blossomed into a 130-room boutique hotel that touts Finland’s designers through year-round local partnerships.



Hotel Lilla Roberts

Inspired by the Art Deco of the 1930s, Hotel Lilla Roberts—much like the city itself—is a confluence of flavors, design, and style, from the Nordic-forward menu at its Krog Roba restaurant to its funky zebra-print furniture and animal-inspired lamps. Located

(unsurprisingly) within the city’s design district, if Hotel Lilla Roberts is stylistically loud, funky, and oozing with local Finnish design, then Hotel Haven is cozy, romantic, and a (literal) haven for lovers.

Dubbed the “unofficial wedding hotel of Helsinki,” Hotel Haven is elegant, understated, and—dare I say—sexy. Many hotels boast “love packages” that offer a bottle of champagne and flowers. Hotel Haven, on the other hand, takes the business of romance seriously. Yes, couples get all the expected trappings of a typical love package—from handmade chocolates to champagne— but Hotel Haven goes the extra mile by offering a sexual therapist aimed at helping couples reconnect.



Hotel Haven

## In Search of Finland’s Saunas and Forests

While I had little expectation of what Finland would offer, I did anticipate two things: a sauna and Finnish forests. Thankfully, Helsinki did not disappoint. Löyly is a design-forward sauna that opened in 2016. Nestled on the southern tip of the Helsinki Peninsula, people come to sweat it out in their choice of a traditional or smoke sauna before taking a plunge directly into the sea. On-site is a lovely restaurant with expansive views of the ocean and a decidedly Nordic menu, with staples such as salmon soup (a must-try).

For those quintessential Finnish forests, a quick ride on a Rib Boat Tour whisked me away to the nature surrounding Helsinki, an archipelago surrounded by 300+ islands. Riding the Rib boat, which travels at high speeds of up to 57mph, I realized that Helsinki is a unique place that perfectly blends a bustling metropolis with easy access to pristine wilderness.



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Coming from New York City, where our options for nature come down to a crowded lawn in Central Park or a two-hour car ride upstate, I am immediately envious of Helsinki's knack for balancing the urban and the natural. From a boat trip to the nearby islands to a foraging trip through Helsinki's woodland areas, I quickly love how this city can take you to another world entirely—one that looks like a forest in a Hans Christian Andersen tale.

## **An Eclectic and Forward-Thinking Food Scene**

Throughout my time in Helsinki, I felt like I was trying to nail the city's cuisine. Was it more Nordic-inspired or Russian? Was that dish reminiscent of Sweden or another country entirely? In the end, Helsinki's food and drink scene felt eclectic, balancing a desire to honor other cultures with a need to say, "*This is Finnish.*"

At Pien, the first privately-owned beer shop in Finland, two friends created a store-meets-bar that celebrates international and Finnish craft beer. At Nolla, the restaurant's uncompromising dedication to becoming zero-waste sets a standard for what *all* restaurants should be striving for, a sustainable model that doesn't come at the expense of its forward-thinking menu.

At Yes Yes Yes, stylish cocktails and a vegetarian menu are unbounded by cuisine or culture. As the restaurant writes on its website, its menu is "free to travel to any city and any culture and create its own style," a nod to the ways Finland's culinary scene seems to pull inspiration from other cuisines.

By the time I leave Helsinki, I can't help but wish I could spend a few more days peeling back the layers of Finland's capital. The city feels dynamic and nuanced, like staring into a prism that catches the light in new ways depending on how you hold it. Much like its past, Helsinki is a unique blend of other cuisines and cultures whipped together in a way that is decidedly Finnish.