



# hello HELSINKI

by Joseph Pedro



It's early morning in Helsinki, and it's a mad rush-hour commute. Well-heeled women and tall finely dressed men float along the loose-gravel sidewalks and effortlessly traipse ice sheets while they make their way in and out of the Central Railway Station. Above them two sphere-holding statues, frozen in time, stand guard and look out onto the city. I wheel my suitcase down the road leaving a trail of wheel imprints in the fresh snow as I quickly shuttle past trolley cars that whiz between the neoclassical buildings. Shopkeepers unlock their doors to reveal countless shelves filled with must-have fashions, got-to-buy-mom gifts, and warm rice-filled pastries. I try to follow my directions carefully written in both Suomi and Swedish, but get lost staring at the blindingly white Helsinki Cathedral that stretches to the sky. I slide through a group of school children wrapped up in their gossip, and I see my hotel with its castle-like entrance. Hello Helsinki.

Photo by: Mark Olesky



Also while up north, you can pay a visit to the actual Iitalla glass factory and pick up some cheap(ish) glass and cookware from the nearby outlet.

Meanwhile, just a short ferry trip from Helsinki (about five euros roundtrip), lies one of only two nude beaches in all of Finland. The beach, located on an island called **Pihlajasaari**, has plenty of naked men and women who cram the more-rocky-than-sandy coast to catch the rays. For gay men, go farther East. There you will find a sub-section of gays mixing, mingling, and doing whatever gays do at a nude beach. Bring a comfy towel and pick up a lunch before you head here because there are not many good food options. The island also offers fantastic seascapes and fun forest trails.

**H**elsinki is a very open-minded and happening place, and the gay nightlife is no exception. Ville tells me everything in central Helsinki is within easy walking distance and that the city is great for people visiting for a long weekend. Luckily for me, Ville's husband, Karri, is on the board of one of the most popular gay nightclubs in the city, **Don't Tell Mamma** or DTM as locals say. The bar recently moved locations (the previous location is where Adam Lambert made headlines for fighting with his Finnish boyfriend), and the new space occupies a large upper floor of a building on Mannerheimintie. When I visit, a much younger crowd flirts around the various areas and a few local performers hit the stage. Things started getting really crowded at around 2 A.M. so we went to a bar called **Mann's Street**. You may not know this bar exists unless you purposefully seek it out. It is located upstairs in an unassuming building. A bearish, older crowd sings karaoke or smokes in a nicotine-filled nook. But its charm far outweighs its quirkiness.

The next night I meet up with yet another Ville, Ville Äikäs, who is famous around Helsinki for his make-up skills. He's worked with many famous faces in the fashion world. He takes me to his favorite cocktail spot, **Hugo's Lounge**. Here, a cute and oh-so-friendly crowd eagerly

chats away while sipping pleasant cocktails in a cozy, well-decorated space. After many drinks, we float over to the other dance bar in town, **Hercules**. This manly bar filled with shirtless Finns is a hotspot for cruising and dancing. Here, revelers sip cheap sparkling wine and/or stiff drinks while listening to Europop and American Top 40.

While the gay nightlife in the city certainly showcases the live-and-let-live spirit of the city, like many countries, there are still things that need to be done to improve the lives of the LGBT community. "Helsinki is a very good place to live if you are an LGBT person. There are almost no hate crimes or open discrimination," Ylikahri says. While many Finns can live unthreatened being openly gay, they do not have the option of getting married. Finland is the only Nordic country that doesn't allow same-sex marriage; they still only have same-sex registered partnerships. Because of this, the law doesn't allow for gay or lesbian couples to adopt or share a name. "Currently there is legislation to approve same-sex marriage in the Parliament, but it is still awaiting enough signatures. Aija Salo the Secretary General of **Seta**, the non-governmental LGBT organization, sat down with me to talk about her organization's current initiatives. One of the main goals of the organization is education, particularly educating those in government as well as doctors, nurses, police, and immigration officials. Another major task is providing further support for the nation's transgender population by creating safe zones or group meetings for the Finnish transgender population.

While problems exist, there is much more good happening for the LGBT community in Helsinki than bad. "Support for Helsinki Gay Pride has really grown in the last few years," Ulla Kärkkäinen of Helsinki Gay Pride tells me. "Every year more and more people come to Pride, and it really shows how solidarity is growing." While still one of the smallest prides in Scandinavia, the weeklong showcase has over 80 events. "It's not just the gays and lesbians participating, we have everyone from old ladies and politicians to small children, and that's what makes it so...Finnish," she says smiling. ■

Baltic Sea



Photo by: Mark Olesky



Photo by: Dmitry Nikolaev

ple drink more coffee per capita than any other nationality in the world, so finding a place to take in an espresso break isn't too hard. Head to where the hipsters go to revive themselves with little bites and drinks at the super-trendy *Rytmi* (Rhythm). This hideout plays some great tunes at night, but is a very relaxing place during the day, and you won't find it too hard to spot some Finnish eye candy.

If you're in the mood to pick something up that's fresh and super-Finnish, head to *Kauppahalli* (Old Market Hall). The indoor food market showcases the best of Finland's fresh foods. Catch-of-the-day fish and endless rows of gorgeously baked breads line the market that has existed since 1088. Be sure to sample some of the baked goods like the little piece of heaven in your mouth called *Korvapuusti*, (similar to cinnamon rolls) or the famous *Karelian* (rye pastry usually filled with rice). You can sit inside or get your food to go and enjoy it by the water.

As in any major world capital, hotels in Helsinki run the gamut. During my recent trip, I have the opportunity to experience a variety of exciting options. I first check into the **GLO Hotel Art**. The recently opened hotel joins other GLO hotels in the city, but this property's building is unique. Housed in a 1903 Art Nouveau castle, the lobby of this 170-room hotel is moody with its painted vaulted ceilings, but it's also effortlessly modern with Finnish designed furniture. What else would you expect from a hotel located in the design district? The staff here is lovely because while I am staying here the building is still completing construction, but the staff repeatedly makes sure that I am comfortable. The rooms are Finnish designed and are a decent size with extra-large bathrooms with fogged showers and ultra-lush beds. For those who get inspired by the Glo Collection of Modern Art sprinkled around the hotel, you can request art

supplies from the front desk to take to your bright room.

For a smaller boutique experience, **Hotel Fabian** is an elegant, continental-style 58-room hotel that opened in August 2010. The loft-like rooms give added space and the nine-extended stays are perfect for those who want to save money by cooking. You'll quickly make a home for yourself in these apartment-style rooms with their cozy couches and I-can-sleep-in-this-forever beds. While many rooms offer cool balconies, there is also an outdoor courtyard garden—perfect for a moment of peace and quiet in the heart of the city.

Finland's only member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World collection is the stunning **Hotel Haven**. Warm, inviting, and classic are just a few words to describe both the service and the décor of this hotel located right next to the Esplanadi. My room here is elegant and bright with an oversized plush bed, a large bathtub (with a television above it), and fantastic views of downtown Helsinki. The most memorable moments of my stay came from the friendly staff who couldn't be more excited to help me navigate the city and who eagerly asked me about my day every time I returned back to the hotel.

In the summertime, Helsinki's population dwindles, especially on the weekends, as people journey either to the lakes or head off sailing. You should follow their lead and venture outside of the city as well. I decide to roll up north to a fairytale castle called **Vanajanlinna**. Just about an hour's drive north through lush forests, the massive estate, with roots in the 14th century, welcomes guests throughout the year. I stay in the newer area with a duplex room and private Finnish sauna. When I am not relaxing in the sauna, I wander the grounds and pretend that I actually live here. With world-class food, an over-the-top gay-friendly staff (say hi to Pekka he is the best!), and gorgeous scenery—enjoy a day away from it all.

atre, you only get the very best sound quality. While there are the traditional dance companies in Helsinki, a night at **Zodiak—Center for New Dance** demonstrates the evolution of the arts in the country. This progressive, new-age dance group puts on fabulously innovative shows by fostering creativity and celebrating creative minds. Expect routines that stretch the limit of what we consider performance.

Part of the World Design Capital initiative is to expand the arts even further. Pop-up art and design projects are happening all over town. During my visit, a café on wheels rolled through the city, and people from a remote location controlled where the café went. There are also projects like **Laboratory—Art Space for Now**. This is a gallery located in the Design District, and it runs alternating exhibits that showcase the talent found in the city. The motto of this pop-up gallery is “Nothing permanent—just like the moments of sheer brilliance good photography captures.” Boy, is it brilliant. When 2012 is over, so is the gallery, so be sure to visit.

While events continue throughout the year celebrating the city’s honor of being this year’s World Design Capital, a culmination of high-style events is set to take place from September 6-16 during **Helsinki Design Week**. This citywide celebration comprises fashion shows, art exhibits, markets, performances, artist studio tours, parties, and even music. In typical Finnish fashion, nobody is left out of this haute-couture happening. You can even host an event; just submit what you want to do. There is also an underlying tone of improving the world through design with events like the Everyday Discoveries—International Design House Exhibition that brings 20 international architects to the city to show off how home design can improve our lives.

In this year’s election, Finland’s Green Party made history by nominating the first openly gay candidate for president, Pekka Haavisto. Unfortunately, he did not win, but he received 37% of the vote and managed to rally many people around him, especially the younger generation, which

prompted news reporters to dub him the “Obama of Finland.” The green party, though, has a strong presence in the country’s parliament with ten seats and equally so, the city of Helsinki has a strong Green League presence. I met with openly gay City Councilman Ville Ylikahri at a gay café next to “Bear Park” called **Kulmakahvio** (Bear Park Café). Surrounded by rainbow flags, we enjoy delicious cappuccinos, and talk about his agenda for the city. “My main initiative is improving the cycling infrastructure in the city,” he says pushing up his glasses and taking a slow sip of his coffee. “The city will open a new major bike lane, which goes through the city center...it is built in the space where the old harbor railway used to be. It’s kind of a smaller High Line like you have in New York,” he excitedly describes. “We can call this Low Line, because this goes under the streets. There were plans to replace the railway with a motorway, but the Green Party opposed the plan and now we have a wonderful new lane for cyclist and walkers.”

When the espressos run dry, we walk to one of the two gay bars near Bear Park in the Kallio District for a Saturday afternoon beer. “Are you sure you want to go here?” he asks as we approach a dark, dark bar called **Fairytales**. “I’m from Brooklyn,” I say, “I’ll go anywhere...but can you walk in first,” I retort while pushing him in front of me. The bar smells like a bowling alley with a mix of sweat, booze, and stale cigarettes (though you can’t smoke in bars in Helsinki). We scope out the ancient crowd and grab a seat to talk more about the Green Party. “We have demanded less regulation and less bureaucracy when it comes to street parties and all kind of festivals,” he says taking a sip of Karhu beer. “Now it’s easier to organize all kind of happenings.” Kalli’s love for his city is obvious and contagious. “One of the most popular urban festivals is ‘**Restaurant Day**,’ which is held three times a year. During that day everyone can serve food and drinks in their home, on the street, or in the parks with no licenses or regulations,” his eyes light up when talking about it.

## FLYING GREEN

When one thinks of eco-friendly ways to travel, air travel is usually the last option on the list. However, **Finnair** is trying to change that perception by making conscious decisions to reduce emissions and fuel consumption, and implement greener procedures that significantly lessen the harm they cause to the environment. One system that they have implemented in all their airplanes is called “green landings.” During landing, they utilize a continuous descent approach (CDA) that saves up to five million kilograms of fuel each year. In addition, Finnair only flies new planes because each new model saves approximately 25% of fuel in comparison to the previous model. The average age of Finnair planes is six years for short-distance flights and three years for long-distance flights. In effect, this means that the newer the model, the fewer emissions released into the atmosphere. Finnair has been successful in realizing this goal for greener air travel. Between 1999 and 2009, they reduced emissions by 22% per seat and fuel consumption by 0.8 liters per 100 kilometers per seat. Their goal for 2017, in relation to their statistics in 1999, is to further reduce emissions by 41% and fuel consumption by 0.65 liters per 100 kilometers per seat. [www.finnair.com](http://www.finnair.com).

—Ailsa Sachdev

When it comes to food, Helsinki’s dining scene is a treasure trove of world-class options. A splurge-worthy Michelin star restaurant that is not to be missed is **Olo**, where modern-day Nordic cuisine awaits insatiable gourmands. Using traditional ingredients, Chef Pekka Terävä elevates recipes familiar to many Finns, but he incorporates modern techniques that provide maximum flavor. Snagging a table here for dinner is not easy, so I recommend going for lunch. While the options are a little more limited at this time of day, you won’t be disappointed. I have the fresh spring chicken entrée that is one of the most succulent pieces of poultry I have ever had. At night, Chef Terävä prepares a “secret menu” which diners are eager to taste.

For an extravagant dinner experience like no other, visit the two-Michelin-starred **Chez Dominique** located just off the Esplanadi. An innovative blend of Nordic and French cuisine that takes you on a two-hour, gustatory journey. Chef Hans Välimäki alternates the tasting menu four to five times per year, so each experience is rewarding and different. Be sure to choose the six- or nine-course wine-pairing tasting, this way you’ll allow Välimäki to truly dazzle you with his creations. I do the nine-course meal and wouldn’t have it any other way as I sample flavors and combinations that I would have never dreamed of. From the playful chips and dips and the melt-in-your-mouth pigeon to the gold-dusted dessert, the culinary excitement in the room is palpable. The level of care and preparation in each dish is unmatched. The pigeon is flown straight from France, undergoes over 30 stages of preparation by at least five different chefs, and is used in a variety of dishes. A master sommelier ensures that each dish is properly paired. By the end of the meal, you’ll be floating out.

While you’re probably going to need to save a few dollars after these two restaurants, you can do what the Finns do and head to one of the numerous cafés to grab a coffee or beer and a quick bite. Finnish peo-



Photo by: Henryk Sadura

## Finns take great pride in art and culture, and the numerous performing arts groups and the infrastructure to support them are a testament to their value in society.

objects that they probably didn't even know were Finnish. Be sure to check out the examples of Iittala's pioneering glassware, Eero Aarnio's world-famous bowl chairs, and the clever fire alarms by Harri Koskinen. Upstairs, the museum houses rotating exhibits. When I visit, a large-scale showcase of ergonomically designed portable buildings are on display, and visitors freely roam through them. Downstairs, a fabulous exhibit on fashion illustration showcases some young talents.

While heading to church may not be your first choice for an activity, one can't argue that Helsinki's most iconic building is the **Temppeleaukion Church**, a Lutheran church in Töölö. Designers Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen won a competition to design the church in the early 1960s at this rocky juncture, and it opened with a consecration in 1969. So why visit this church? Well it's probably one of the most architecturally stunning pieces I've seen in my life. The other name for this sanctuary is Rock Church, because it is essentially built within a rock. The interior is exposed, untouched bedrock, but it is bathed in natural light due to a gorgeous opening in ceiling that encircles a copper-chord dome. No matter what your religious affiliation, you'll find something to inspire you here.

Improving people's lives through design is another major component of

the Design Capital year. Just look at the **Chapel of Silence** in the middle of the Kamppi neighborhood. Various Helsinki parishes helped build the all-wood structure not to promote religion, but to offer a retreat in the middle of Helsinki. Inside the silent, restorative oasis, anyone in the city can enjoy a place of peace, or talk to a representative from the city's various faiths. The calming building juxtaposes the 19th-century Finnish art nouveau architecture of the nearby train station built in rough Finnish granite.

**F**inns take great pride in art and culture, and the numerous performing arts groups and the infrastructure to support them are a testament to their value in society. The **Finnish National Opera** has seating for 1,350 and offers both Finnish and international Opera performances as well as ballet in a gorgeous theater. For a cheaper cultural night out, grab a ticket to the **Helsinki Philharmonic**. The orchestra is based in a stunning 1,700-capacity new building called the **Helsinki Music Centre**. Designed by LPR-Arkkitehdit Oy, the building is an unforgettable example of Finnish ingenuity and design. The building is clean and elegant, but it is all wrapped together by jaw-dropping pieces of art by Finnish designers (be sure to admire the reflective chandelier). You can grab a seat on the cheaper end if you choose to sit not facing the orchestra. Because of the design of the the-

Even before being told that Helsinki was awarded the title of **World Design Capital 2012**, a quick walk through the streets proves that high style and design are woven into the city's fabric. With endless hip shops, stylish people, interesting architecture, and performance and art everywhere, it's easy to see why the city received this prestigious title. To showcase what Helsinki has to offer, be sure to pick up one of the many World Design Capital pamphlets that list all the specifically chosen design hotspots. You will also want to visit the **World Design Capital Pavilion** where various events take place through September. The pavilion, designed by Aalto University Wood Studio students, is an impressive temporary structure in the heart of the city. Here, you can get more information about where to visit, enjoy a drink at the café, or catch one of the various talks, performances, or lectures.

I choose to hire a design guide from the Pavilion, who first takes me to the **Design Forum Shop**, a store-within-a-store. A concept conceived of by the umbrella organization, the Design Forum, this must-see shop helps promote Finnish designers by selling their creations. With an ever-changing collection of goods, each trip provides something different. One thing that doesn't change, though, is the shop's belief that design is everywhere. From contemporary, industrial, quirky, and elegant to classic, you'll surely be leaving with a bag full of stuff. Don't be afraid to strike up a conversation with the adorable staff that is more than willing to introduce you to the artists' designs, tell you about the store's fruition and 20-year history, as well as lead you through the downstairs permanent displays.

There are also plenty of great shopping options around the famous **Esplanadi** (Esplanade Park). Before you take out that credit card, spend time exploring this expansive green that stretches from **Erottaja Square** to **Kauppatori** (Market Square). The park was built in the early 1800s to imitate Paris' ambiance. In the summer, locals love to picnic on the grassy

causeway and take time to soak up the sun. It's also good to get to know it on your map—I use it repeatedly as a reference point.

My first stop is **Iittala**, the world-famous Finnish glass design store where I completely disregard the euro amount of a few pieces, because they are perfect. (How can one pass up Moomin-character glasses?) I also venture into **Marimekko** (famous for dressing Jackie Kennedy), **Arabia** (to-die-for pottery), and **Artek** (the revolutionary chair designers). After about an hour, I start fantasizing about how I would decorate my Helsinki flat.

The nearby **Kluuvi Shopping Center** was recently renovated, and it's a great way to see the latest designs. Be sure to head all the way upstairs to view another example of Finland's clean and bright architecture. The top floor is bathed in natural light with large mushroom-like canopies providing shade for the top-floor diners. The basement has an all-local food store called **Eat&Joy** where you can pick up products from around Finland, including great souvenirs like chocolate, smoked fish, delicious jams, and more from over 500 producers.

The most famous place to go shopping in the city is at **Stockmann**, Scandinavia's largest department store. The store celebrates its 150th anniversary this year with a recent renovation that has improved the eight-floor experience. With a selection of amazing Scandinavian home products and designer goods, you'll find it hard not to spend a few dollars. Also, enjoy a variety of cafés here that serve great coffee and inexpensive lunches, just in case you need to refuel between purchases. If you notice some bedroom eyes from the male shoppers while you're checking out the linens, you've found one of Helsinki's many cruising spots.

Highlights of Finland's longstanding relationship with art and design can be seen at **Designmuseum** (The Design Museum). Housing 35,000 pieces, 40,000 drawings, and 100,000 images, guests will appreciate the evolution of Finnish design and see many

Helsinki Cathedral



Photo by: Estea

