

SCENE SETTER HELSINKI, FINLAND



PERFECT TIMING
It's less crowded for Helsinki tourists during the holidays, which mark the off-season.

GO FINNISH FOR A NEW START

World junior attendees can take in the happy, historically rich and highly caffeinated culture of Helsinki between tourney games

By Ronnie Shuker

FINLAND MADE NEWS IN NOVEMBER BY becoming the first nation in the world to release a set of government-approved emojis. In a healthy mixture of pride and self-deprecation, the country that created the irresistibly addictive game Angry Birds approved three official Finnish emojis: a headbanger with rock-on hands raised in the air, a naked couple in sweet sauna bliss and a Nokia phone. Apparently, Finns have no problem embracing their stereotypes.

This shouldn't be surprising. After all, by all accounts, Finns are pretty pleased with themselves. Finland ranked No. 1 on the Happiness Equality Index in a recent study by something called the Happiness Research Institute and was sixth in the United

Nations' World Happiness Report released earlier this year. The country has inexpensive healthcare, entrenched labor rights, a world-leading school system and low student loan rates.

Oh yeah, and hockey. The government didn't give it an emoji, but it's safe to assume hockey has contributed a lot to all this good feeling floating around Finland. It may not be the country's official pastime, but it is by far Finland's most beloved sport. And the country is arguably the best hockey nation in the world (see pg. 66).

From Dec. 26 to Jan. 5, that happiness index could spike when Finland welcomes the World Junior Championship to Helsinki. With stars-in-the-making Jesse Puljujarvi and Patrik Laine, Team Finland has a chance to upset the heavyweights and win gold the way it did two years ago in Sweden.

For North Americans planning on making the trip, flying from Canada or the U.S. will run north of \$1,000, but at least Helsinki won't rapine any wallets like Toronto and Montreal did last year. Ticket prices are as low as \$6 U.S. for kids and top out at just \$63 for adults to attend the gold medal game. The lowest ticket price for Canada's round-robin games last year was \$66.

Hartwall Arena (capacity 13,349) and the smaller Helsinki Ice Hall (8,200) will be the epicenters of a Helsinki holiday during the world juniors but, before and after games and especially on off days, fans can experience Helsinki's hidden charm during the city's tourism off-season, something summer visitors miss. In winter, Helsinki gets fewer than six hours of daily sunlight and temperatures dip down to the mid-20s Fahrenheit (minus-5 to minus-10 Celsius), but it's actually the

HELSINKI HIGHLIGHTS

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINLAND

Explore Finnish history from prehistoric times to present day Finland through six permanent exhibitions.

THE DESIGN DISTRICT

Home to antique shops, fashion stores, museums, art galleries and restaurants, but the heart of the district are the Design Museum and Museum of Finnish Architecture.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF FINLAND

A shrine of literature and architecture. The library gives visitors a glimpse into the city's classic design.

HELSINKI CATHEDRAL

This Lutheran Cathedral shines with its impressive dome and detailed white walls. Climb the 53 steps and for a view of Senate Square.

ALEKSANTERINKATU STREET: VILLE MANNIKKO/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

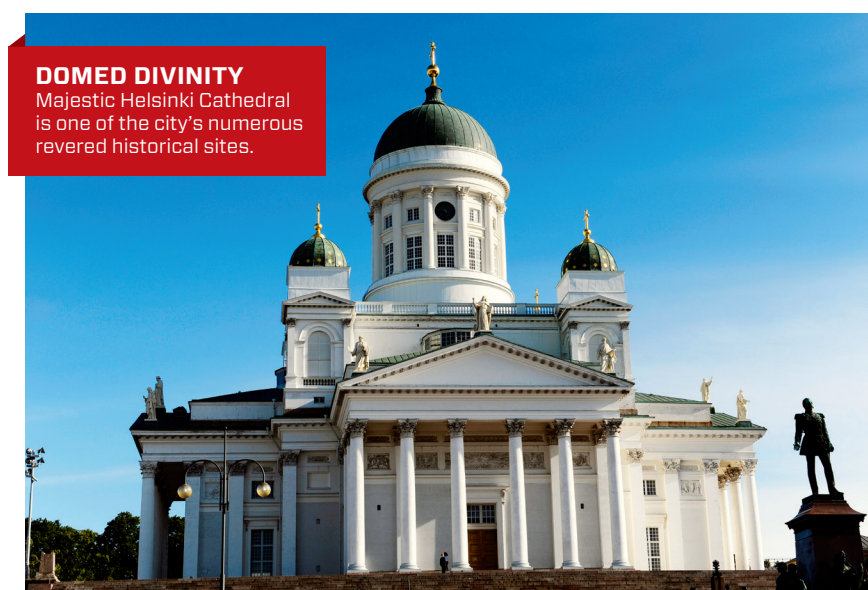
CATHEDRAL: PHAS/UG VIA GETTY IMAGES

HELSINKI, FINLAND SCENE SETTER

best time of year to participate in authentic Helsinki culture. The capital is less a city for sightseeing – though it still has its fair share of sites to check out (see below) – and more a place to observe Finns and absorb Finnish culture. And there's no better time of year to do that than during the holidays when one of the biggest international tournaments is going on.

WARM THE COCKLES

The simplest way to get a feel for Helsinki is to imbibe the local liquids. Finns consume the most daily cups of coffee (2.64) per capita in the world, so it's no surprise Helsinki has a thriving cafe culture. Cool coffee shops adorn every Helsinki neighborhood, so it's easy to make multiple pit stops daily to warm up and take in the kind of easygoing happiness for which Finns are known. For those who aren't cafe connoisseurs, there's a fermented Finnish tradition that'll keep the insides warm and the spirits high. Hot glogi is a seasonal drink of mulled wine that Finns serve at home and office parties during the holidays.



DOMED DIVINITY
Majestic Helsinki Cathedral is one of the city's numerous revered historical sites.

It's made from spiced wine, almonds, raisins and, sometimes, a dash of vodka, and it's easy to find at street markets and holiday events. Of course, it's just as Finnish to skip straight to the strong stuff. With Russia on its eastern border, Finland has taken vodka and made this Russian staple its own. To get into the Finnish spirit, say "Kippis" ("Cheers") to toast the season.

GET NAKED

The most well-known Finnish word in English is "sauna," and it's obvious why. There are more than three million sau-

nas for about 5.5 million people, roughly one per household. There are saunas in apartments, cottages, swimming pools, gyms, hotels, boats, buses – you name it. Finnish embassies abroad have their own saunas, and there's even one inside parliament. Finns frequent them year-round for ritual cleansing, but they're a perfect way for visitors to revitalize during the dead of winter. Kotiharjun Sauna and Sauna Arla are two of the best in Helsinki. They're only a few blocks apart and easily accessed from the city center. Wherever you go, just don't be shy about stripping off your skivvies. Finns don't frown upon foreigners for wearing bathing suits, but traditional Finnish clothing for saunas is towels only.

CHILL OUT

The sauna experience can be made even better by first getting out into the great outdoors. There are more than 100 miles of cross-country trails around the capital, especially in Helsinki's Central park, and skis are available for rent at the Paloheina Recreational Centre, only five miles from downtown. If you prefer the ice to the forest, Helsinki's Ice Park in the Railway Station Square is open for skating. You can also skate – and even go for a stroll – on the frozen Baltic Sea.

All these outdoor options are tame, however, compared with the authentically Finnish tradition of ice-hole swimming. Rastila Camping, a short metro ride east of the city center, has a winter swimming hole at a nearby public beach. There are also the Kuusijarvi Recreation Centre just north of the city and the Oittaa Recreation Centre, beside beautiful Lake Bodom, about a half-hour west.

'TIS THE SEASON

For anyone with extra space in his or her suitcase, Aleksanterinkatu is Helsinki's official Christ-ininkatu is Helsinki's official Christmas street and one of the city's best-known shopping strips for gift buying. On an off-day evening, take in the Winter Circus at the Cable Factory, a warmhearted show suitable for all ages and a tradition for many families. You can also head over to the island of Uunisaari, a short walk over a winter bridge from the city center, where you can enjoy a Christmas concert, a dinner and a sauna. On New Year's Eve, Senate Square holds the city's official celebrations, topped by a magnificent fireworks display at midnight to ring in 2016 after Sweden and Canada face off in the annual WJC New Year's Eve showdown. **THE**

LABYRINTH GAMES ROOM ESCAPE

Take a break from sightseeing and work together to solve puzzles to escape a room. You can choose from a number of different quests.

FORTRESS OF SUOMENLINNA

The fortress was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1991 and has become one of Finland's most popular tourist attractions.

THE ROCK CHURCH

This house of worship was built directly into a rock wall in the heart of Helsinki. It has large panoramic windows and a huge skylight that lets in natural light.

HELSINKI ZOO

Established in 1889, one of the oldest zoos in the world is home to approximately 200 animal species and 1,000 plant species.