

BALTIC BEAUTY

A World Design Capital in 2012, with the approving citation 'embedding design in life', Helsinki is the epitome of Nordic style and character, along with a fascinating history

WORDS AND MAIN IMAGES NORMAN MILLER

Though dating back to the 16th century, Helsinki only became Finland's capital in 1812, when Russia seized the country from Sweden and decided to move the capital from the west coast city of Turku to somewhere closer to Russia – a bit of geopolitics one Turku resident told me is still mocked with a line about Helsinki then being 'just a fishing village with six huts'. It's come on a lot since then, and now boasts some fine cultural beacons. The Kiasma gallery is a shining glass-and-steel slice of American pizzazz from US architect Steven Holl, while the nearby Amos Rex gallery is a quirky new subterranean space. Alvar Aalto's iconic Finlandia concert hall is cool Nordic counterbalance on the wooded shores of Töölönlahti, a Baltic inlet curving into the heart of the city.

Neoclassical grandeur reminiscent at times of St Petersburg predominates in the city centre – the Russian connection again, and just a three-hour train ride east of Helsinki's stunning art nouveau rail terminus. Designed by Eliel Saarinen, the carved granite lamp-bearing giants that guard the station entrance inspired the cinematic look of Gotham City in the first Batman film. Finland's capital has also stood in for Russia during Cold War shoots in classic films like *Doctor Zhivago*, *Gorky Park* and *Reds*. Just take in the sweep of the cobbled Senate Square near the main harbour, where the snow-



Government Palace in Senate Square, built in the neoclassical style in 1822



Helsinki Secondhand is a warehouse full of affordable treasures, large and small

white Tuomio church contrasts with the onion domes of the nearby Uspenski cathedral.

Helsinki mixes intimacy with the epic, its myriad design shops and cafés providing street-level temptation amid the copper-domed turrets, ornate Jugendstil facades and seductive art deco curves. There's plenty of sheer loveliness too in a city dubbed the 'Pearl of the Baltic'. The shoreline curls through a succession of harbours, where ferries whisk you into a beautiful archipelago of woody islands dotted with clapboard cottages and traditional saunas, as well as places like the maritime fortress of Suomenlinna (see Must-see).

Just outside the centre, Kaapeli (The Cable Factory) is Finland's biggest arts complex – an industrial conversion hosting three distinctive museums plus art and design spaces. The Finnish Museum of Photography is small but fabulous, complemented by amazing costumes at the Theatre Museum, plus vintage industrial design interiors at the Hotel & Restaurant Museum. But it's the Design Museum where you can tune your antennae for what to look for in Helsinki's plethora of vintage design outlets. It shows how Finland's design nous grew from humble roots where everyday items were fashioned by artisans whose 'simple and functional' ethos morphed into modern Finnish style's pared-back beauty.

The simply-named Helsinki Secondhand – twinned with Fasaani Antiques – is a brilliant place to start your vintage hunt, a cavernous Aladdin's cave just a couple of hundred yards from the Design Museum. I've never left empty-handed, with treasured finds including a beautiful Arabia milk jug, a gorgeous 1960s geometric Pentti Sarpaneva vase, and an iconic 1970s Kumela 'Rock' vase. 'We get lots of local buyers – people furnishing their home who want things with unique Finnish style,' says Hilja Nikkanen, who works here when not designing contemporary wood creations sold at London's Design Museum. 'People want products with a story, made from materials that will last forever.'

Many of Helsinki's vintage design outlets cluster in the central Design District of Punavuori – grab the free Design District leaflet in many shops – as well as several branches of the excellent vintage-filled charity chains UFF and Fida. Another hotspot is the Kallio neighbourhood, where Helsinki's best selection of vintage textiles are at Astiaparatiisi. 'I have a lot I just can't display,' sighs owner

Tips for the first-time visitor

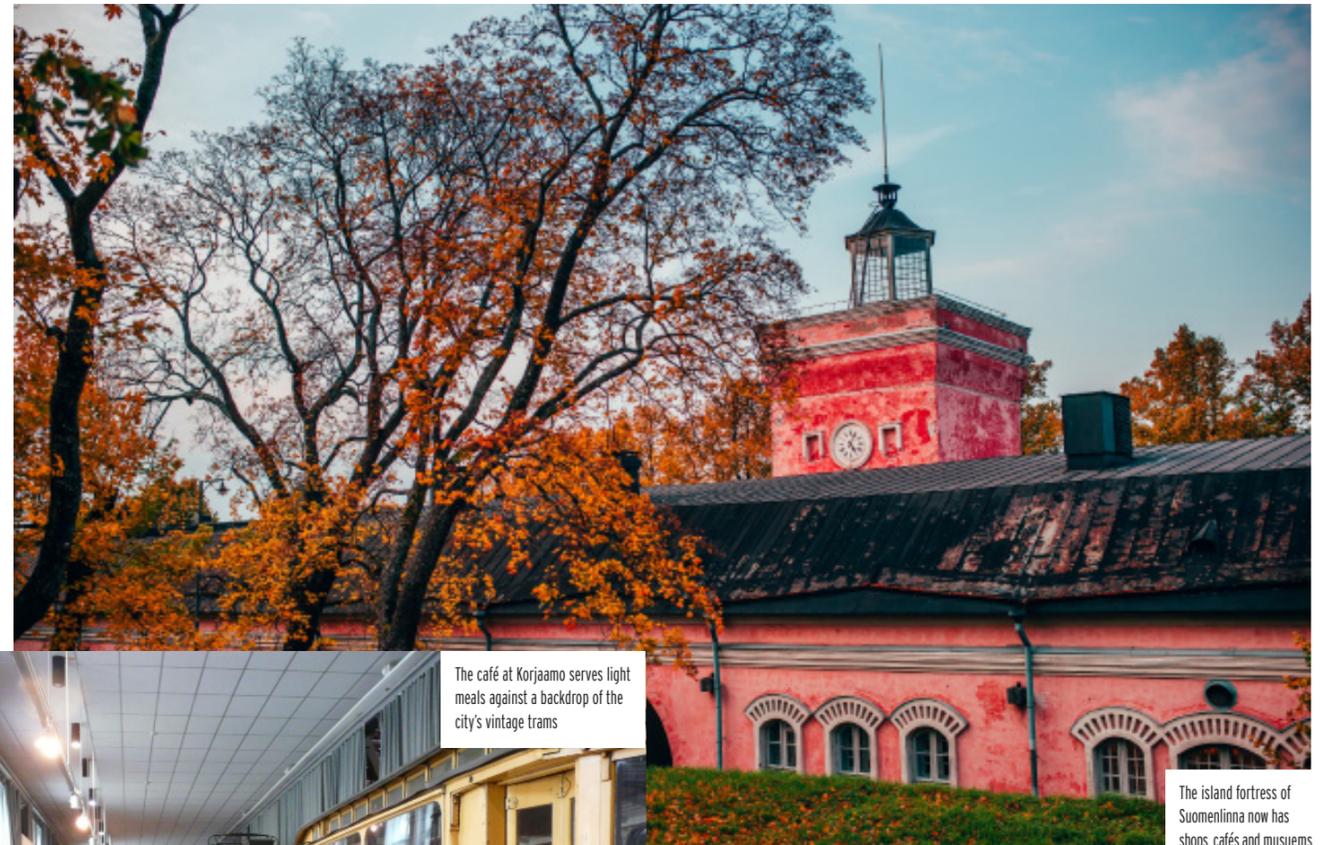
- My Helsinki is a constantly updated on-the-pulse guide to what's going in the city, with an option to fashion your own tailored itinerary – even for vintage shopping. Check it out online (myhelsinki.fi) and on Twitter (twitter.com/myhelsinki).
- Don't expect British shopping times: 11am opening is standard, and not everywhere opens on a Sunday; plus some brilliant vintage shops, such as Kaunis Arki (see Visit), only open 3–5pm most days.
- The Cable Factory (Kaapeli) hosts vintage fairs throughout the year, featuring up to 100 dealers at a time. Details of upcoming events are on Facebook (facebook.com/hrvde).
- For weekend flea markets (kirppis in Finnish), head to the harbourside square at Hietalahti (in front of the beautiful vintage food hall) or join rummaging locals every Sunday on Hakaniemi Market Square.

Hesham Ramadam, before revealing plans to rejig his two adjacent shops to make one a focus for textiles.

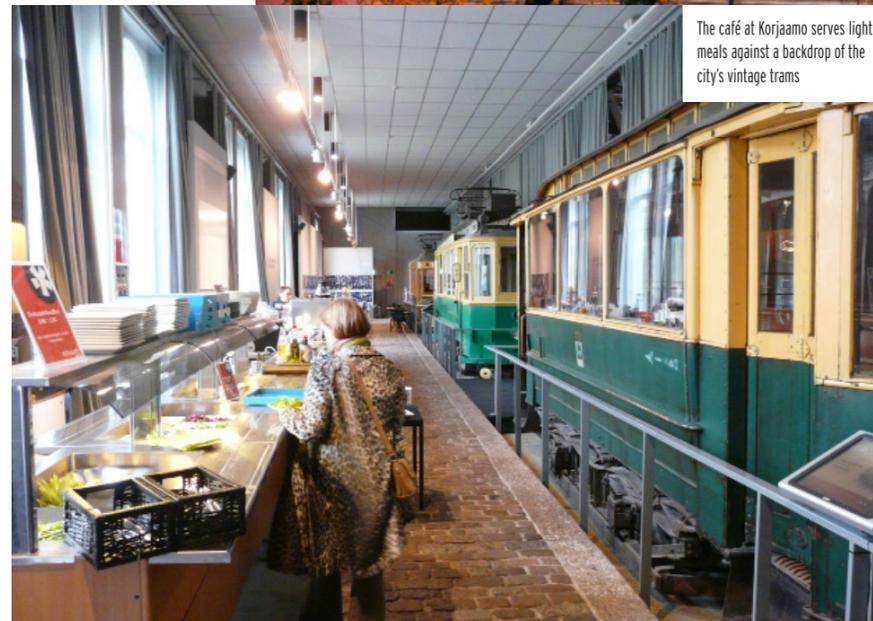
Having traded in Kallio for 20 years, Hesham has seen the arrival of hipster spots like designer café Rupla and other retro outlets like vintage fashion beacon Hoochie Mama Jane. But the neighbourhood's old working-class vibe still shines through in venerable bars including Pub Sirdie (check out the vintage jukebox) and the Kotiharjun sauna (see Must-see).

If glass is your thing, Lasikammari – in the lovely streets of Kruununhaka a few blocks up from Senate Square – offers a collection amassed over 20 years by Gittan Kokko. 'I sell just Finnish glass from 1910 onwards, but mainly the 1940s to 1960s,' says Gittan, revealing how she and her husband had worked for the iconic Iittala company – and were taught by perhaps Finland's most famous glassmaker Kaj Franck. 'I like to find things not everyone else has,' she says. 'And I like to highlight designs by women too.'

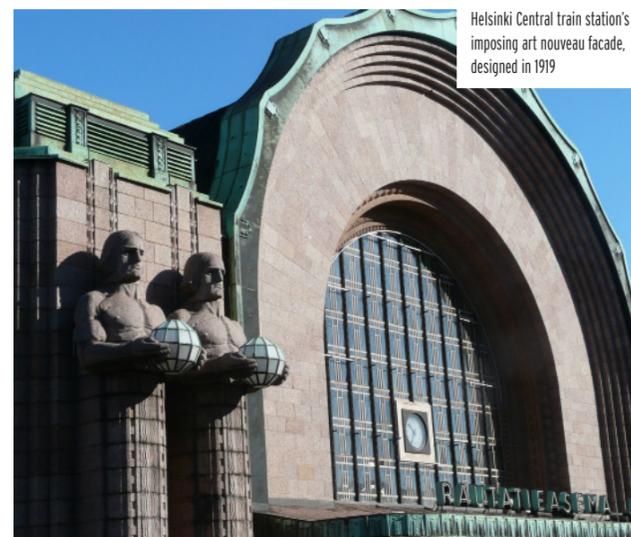
My vintage hunts are interspersed with recharging at some of Helsinki's fab cafés. At the Korjaamo arts centre I enjoy caffeine and nibbles surrounded by vintage trams, while the mish-mash vintage décor at Taikalamppu fuses coffee with colour in Kallio. The Blue Villas café (Sinisen Huvilan) provides a perfect alfresco perch by a 19th-century villa on the shores of Töölönlahti. And for a sundowner with unbeatable views, head to the seafront terrace of Mattolaituri on the edge of Kaivopuisto Park. Its name – translating as 'carpet-washing pier' – nods to an old tradition of cleaning rugs here, before a watery vista. Helsinki really does enliven even the mundane with beauty.



The island fortress of Suomenlinna now has shops, cafés and museums



The café at Korjaamo serves light meals against a backdrop of the city's vintage trams



Helsinki Central train station's imposing art nouveau facade, designed in 1919

Must-see

Suomenlinna

A 15-minute ferry ride from the main harbour Market Square, this UNESCO-listed former 18th-century maritime fortress spreads across six interconnected islands. Today, it's home to craft shops, cafés, historic buildings, nature trails and a half dozen museums ranging from military history to toys. Ferries run from early morning until after midnight.

○ suomenlinna.fi

Saunas

A proper wood sauna is a blissful way to get close to the soul of Finland and meet the locals. Go old-school at Kotiharjun, the city's oldest traditional public sauna (you can rent towels; birch whisks optional!). Or go 21st-century at Löyly, a sleek futuristic seafront building Time magazine put in its World's 100 Greatest Places in 2018.

○ harjutorinkatu1.kotiharjunsuuna.fi

○ hernesaaarenranta4.loylyhelsinki.fi



Many vintage stores can be found in the city's Design District of Punavuori, including charity shops



The sleek Kiasma gallery houses contemporary art and is part of the Finnish National Gallery

The essentials

VISIT

Amos Rex Mannerheimintie 22-24; amosrex.fi

Astiaparatiisi Fleminginkatu 21; astiaparatiisi.fi

Blue Villas/Sinisen Huvilan Café

Linnunlauluntie 11 H; see Facebook

Cable Factory/Kaapeli Tallberginkatu 1; kaapelitehdas.fi/en

Fasaani Antiques Korkeavuorenkatu 5; fasaani.fi

Fida Hämeentie 5 and Iso Roobertinkatu 28; fida.fi/en

Helsinki Secondhand Korkeavuorenkatu 5; helsinkisecondhand.fi

Hoochie Mama Jane Agricolankatu 11; see Facebook

Kaunis Arki Mariankatu 20; kaunisarki.fi/vintage

Kiasma Mannerheiminaukio 2; kiasma.fi/en

Korjaamo Töölönkatu 51 A-B; korjaamo.fi/en

Lasikammari Liisankatu 9; lasikammari.fi

Mattolaituri Ehrenströmintie 3A; royalravintolat.com/en/restaurants/restaurant/mattolaituri

Pub Sirdie Kolmas linja 21; see myhelsinki.fi

Rupla Helsinginkatu 16; rupla.fi

Taikalamppu Agricolankuja 1; see Facebook

UFF Fredrikinkatu 36 and Bulevardi 30; uff.fi/myymalat

EAT

Juuri

The USP at this laid-back restaurant is the changing menu of innovative small-plate Finnish tapas (sapas). Enjoy dishes like raspberry marinated arctic char with radish sauce or Finnish sausage with vodka mustard.

○ Korkeavuorenkatu 27; juuri.fi

Sea Horse

Venerable 1930s diner – locally nicknamed 'Sikala' – serving traditional Finnish nosh like crispy fried Baltic herring, in a pretty vintage setting. Its sea horse mural is a Helsinki icon.

○ Kapteeninkatu 11; seahorse.fi

STAY

Sokos Hotel Vaakuna

Fabulous hotel by Central station, built for the Helsinki summer Olympics of 1952 and lovingly restored last year to the pinnacle of its original

sublime 1950s style. Think gorgeous wood-panelled spaces, classic period chairs and lights, plus delightful decorative motifs. Breakfasts in the 10th floor restaurant offer fabulous city views too.

○ Asema-aukio 2; sokoshotels.fi/en/helsinki/sokos-hotel-vaakuna

Hotel Anna

This cosy 1920s red-brick hotel – owned by the Finnish Free Church – combines a great location on a quiet street in the heart of the Design District with a retro ambience, great views from upper floors and affordable prices.

○ Annankatu 1; hotelanna.fi

TRAVEL

British Airways, Finnair and Norwegian fly direct from the UK to Helsinki's Vantaa airport from London Heathrow and Gatwick, plus Manchester and Edinburgh – flight time around 3 hours. Frequent trains run between the airport and Helsinki Central station, taking 30 minutes. There is also a Finnair bus between the airport and Central station, taking around 45 minutes.