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Fine fare in Finland

In the first report of a two-part feature, **Keith Morris** gets a taste for Finnish food, dancing and culture.

FINLAND IS A COUNTRY FULL OF SURPRISES. It's not all mobile phone, nude saunas and outrageous rock bands like Eurovision winners Lordi.

My first taste of **Finland** was a beautiful clear moonlit landing at Tampere airport, courtesy of a late-evening two-and-a-half-hour Ryanair flight from Stansted, followed by a friendly welcome at the Sputnik rock music bar where local beer and English songs were on the menu.

As a guest of Visit **Finland**, along with a handful of journalists from other parts of Europe, I had been invited to experience Finnish life and culture in Tampere, located in the south east, 170km north of capital Helsinki. The country's first industrial city, it is now its third largest urban area.

As capital of Finland's own lake district, Tampere is located on an isthmus between two unspoiled lakes. While under Russian rule, paper mills and factories were established there, driven by water power from the waterway and its rapids, which naturally connected the two lakes.

Scottish industrialist James Finlayson established the biggest factory in Scandinavia, a gigantic cotton mill in the 1820s, employing two-thirds of the local population.

But times and industrial processes have moved on and where once cotton girls wove and the iron hands of the blast furnaces and pulp boilers toiled, the city centre redbrick factories, including Finlayson, are now filled with museums, cinemas, shops, apartments, pubs, restaurants and other entertainments.

Unsurprisingly maybe, Nokia (also a small town 10km from Tampere) is the biggest employer today, using 35 different nationalities in its research and development labs.

Finland is a country of five million people, thousands of lakes and millions of forest trees. Its geographical location, sitting between East

and West, gives a big clue to the psyche of the Finnish people. The country vacillated between Swedish and Russian rule until its claim to independence was backed by Lenin in 1917, a fact for which the country has been forever grateful, regardless of the atrocities that followed in its neighbouring state in the name of Communism.

Indeed, Tampere lays claim to be the birthplace of the Russian Revolution and Communism, as in 1905 it was in the city that Lenin had his first fateful meeting with Stalin. He spent many years in Finland preparing for the revolution, safely away from the Russian Czar. A unique Lenin museum in Tampere now celebrates the meeting and everything that followed.

The East-West connections may also explain why Tampere is home to what is believed to be the world's only dedicated spy museum. It is devoted to the study of espionage, the illegal gathering of secret information and has displays on eavesdropping, ciphers, spy optics and weaponry. It is a popular destination for stag parties, when the unsuspecting bridegroom is subjected to an electronic lie detector test.

Tampere is the top local tourist location for Finnish families, being home to the Sarkanniemi Adventure Park with its observation tower, the Moominvalley museum, plus an aquarium, dolphinarium and planetarium.

It is also a major centre for education and the arts. Two universities and two polytechnics as well as police, medical and media academies mean that up to 40,000 students live there. Two theatres and a concert hall, home to the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, help explain why the city is a candidate for the title of European Capital of Culture 2011.

Local cuisine is often prepared from ingredients obtained from the surrounding



wilds. Lake fish, crayfish, elk, reindeer, mushrooms and many varieties of berry are favourite delicacies.

Tampere offers an impressive array of restaurants, including the Viking Restaurant Harald, where you can enjoy a feast Viking-style – helmets not compulsory. For real ale lovers, the Brewery Restaurant Plevna, located

in the former weaving hall of the Finlayson cotton factory, brews a number of its own beers on site and has a wide-ranging menu to go with them.

If you like charcoal-grilled steaks and appreciate art, The Grill is a popular city centre restaurant featuring works by artist Teemu Saukkonen.

But the best restaurant we visited was also one with the best views in Tampere, and possibly the whole of Finland.

The revolving restaurant of the Näsinneula Observation Tower, the highest in Finland offers the most stunning, and constantly changing views of Tampere and its two lakes by night. The food is not half bad either.

A sea blackthorn berry, ginger ale and vodka cocktail set us up nicely as we took in the views which grew more spectacular by the moment as the sun set on the distant horizon giving a stunning sunset, slowly replaced by the twinkling lights of Tampere and the region beyond the two lakes which flank it. A full moon and the floodlights from the Tampere football stadium in the distance, which was hosting a match from the UEFA Women's European Championships, added to the magical vista.

We were entertained with the 62 Finlandia menu, served in nouvelle cuisine style. A lamb

pastrami was a tasty appetiser, followed by my favourite, a fish platter with small portions of herring in mustard sauce, fried salmon, fondant potato and pike perch.

A creamy false morel soup in a tiny cup followed and then onto the main course, tender cuts of Kaldoaiivi reindeer.

The splendid meal was rounded off with a dessert of white chocolate cheesecake with sea blackthorn berries sorbet and coulis.

Before venturing further outside the city, we were introduced to Finland's religious history, which is almost as confused at its political one. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox and Lutheran Churches have all held sway.

Tampere's imposing Lutheran cathedral is made from granite and is somewhat plainer than we are used to in the UK. Except for the somewhat controversial frescos of naked boys, drawn in the National Romantic style, adorning its walls. It has been named the most beautiful church in the whole country.

After running into large groups of young people near our hotel, heading for a church service on a Saturday evening, I noticed an English service at 3pm on the Sunday afternoon at the Tampere Pentecostal Church. A very different and more contemporary Christian tradition, with a congregation of

about 80, including very many nationalities brought together by the English language on offer. I enjoyed a friendly two-hour service and was told that the youth service attracts between 500 and 600.

There is plenty to see and do in the forests and lakes surrounding Tampere.

Visavuori was the home and studio of famous Finnish sculptor Emil Wikström from 1894 until his death in 1942. Wikström hid himself away in his wilderness lakeside summer retreat, which helped inspire him to create some of the most important and impressive public monuments and statues in the whole country.

Close by is the Iittala glass showroom and factory. Iittala is a company which helps lead modern Scandinavian design and has a shop in London's Regent Street. Its story began in 1881 with the founding of a glassworks in the small village of Iittala. This laid the foundation for a unique design heritage that continues to this day. The factory now produces seven million items a year, including one million by hand in a 24-hour production schedule.

Culture and faith in Finland become inseparable with the unusual story of the medieval church of Tyrvaan Pyhan Olavin Kirkko. One of very few remaining such churches in the country, it was set alight by a

drunken arsonist in 1997. The shock and outrage reached national proportions.

The church was originally Roman Catholic but turned Lutheran following the Reformation. The paucity of such 16th century churches and the devastating loss of the traditional wooden roof, pews, balcony and altar, together with irreplaceable artwork, struck a nerve in the national psyche.

More than 1,000 people, mostly in their seventies or even older, volunteered to help in the huge restoration effort. Thousands of wooden roof shingles were carved out by hand and, over six years, the entire interior was replaced in traditional fashion using wood but no nails or glue.

To finish it off, over four summers, two nationally-famous painters, Osmo Rauhala and Kuutti Lavonen, produced a series of modern and evocative friezes of creation and the crucifixion of Jesus on panels around the altar and across the balcony.

During our visit to Tampere, we stayed at the Hotel Cumulus Koskikatu, a modern and comfortable hotel, right in the heart of the city, with an excellent restaurant and the obligatory

his and her saunas.

My first authentic Finnish gentlemen's sauna came complete with a sauna boardroom and a ring of naked Finnish men soaking up

the atmosphere and clutching cold cans of beer. It would have been rude not to have joined them.

Another Finnish pastime is dancing. But, in my admittedly limited experience, I have never encountered anything to match the melancholic Finnish tango, which varies in tempo but is always up close and personal and can be enjoyed in dedicated nightclubs as well as larger dance halls and open-air lake-shore dance pavilions in the summer.

We were treated to our own private Strictly Come Dancing lesson by the impressive Hurmio dance studio and its amiable members, who also joined us much later in the day as we were unleashed at a dancing club on the top floor of a city centre building. And not a Hard Rock Hallelujah in sight. ■

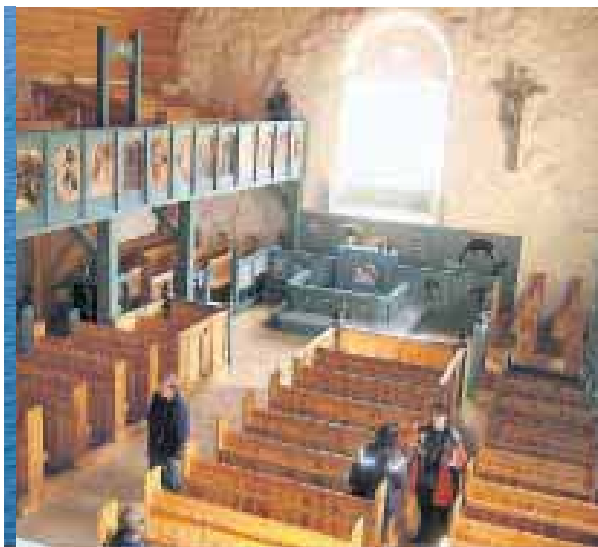
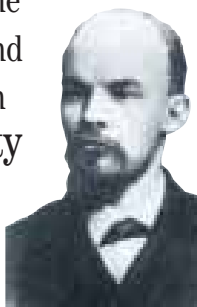
NEXT WEEK: Keith rounds off his Finland trip with a spot of crayfishing, a traditional Finnish smoke sauna, lake swimming and a bout of Nordic walking and mushroom hunting.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.gotampere.com; www.ryanair.com;
www.visitfinland.com/uk; www.visavuori.com;
www.iittala.com;
http://cumulus.fi/hotellit/koskikatu/en_GB/koskikatu/

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Main picture, left, Tampere and the Näsinneula Observation Tower. Right, top to bottom, the rapids and the former Finlayson factory in the centre of Tampere, now a vast entertainment centre; view from the revolving restaurant of the Näsinneula Observation Tower, the highest in Finland; and inside the rebuilt medieval church of Tyrvaan Pyhan Olavin Kirkko.