

# FINDING YOUR WAY TO FINLAND

Why should anyone want to come to Finland? What would they expect to find – and would they find it? What would Finland have to offer or, in salesman speak, what is its USP (Unique Selling Point)? — DIANA WEBSTER

For many years the purpose of a Finnish travel poster seems more to have been on getting there – ‘Go to Finland’ not ‘Come to Finland’ – than what to do on arrival. This is hardly surprising when one thinks that very many travel posters are largely advertising a particular travel company. However, one also gets the impression that to start with the Finns were dubious about what exactly they had to offer the foreign tourist and instead concentrated on the trip itself. The result is endless posters of the most modern ships of the period sailing smoothly on the sea (naturally always calm) or already in the sunny Finnish archipelago. Later on, they show other methods of travel to and within Finland.

What you actually did when you arrived is only vaguely suggested and often misleading. In poster number 40, for instance, the ship’s route is aimed at Helsinki, but the scene surrounding it is of Lapps (today’s Sami) playing merrily in the snow. If this is what you expected to find in the capital, you might be sorely disappointed and dismayed to learn that another very long train trip involving a sleeper was required before you came anywhere near such a scene. Even then, most Lapps you would encounter would not be dressed in Lapp costume.

‘Exotic folklore’ seems to have been a common answer to the question ‘What would tourists expect?’, since the nubile blonde girl in Finnish folk costume is a constant in many of these posters until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (where she has become a nubile blonde air-hostess). There seems in fact to be an accepted code throughout: Finns are fair-haired; tourists and Lapps are dark-haired. Now, it’s not that there are not many blondes in Finland, some very nubile indeed, nor that folk-dress did not exist (it does still in certain contexts) – it’s simply that the posters are misleading as a generalization.

In the early years of these posters, too, the artists seem more to have asked themselves ‘What do people want?’ than ‘What have we to give?’. In the 1930s, for instance, the French Riviera was an immensely popular

destination for the European tourist, so consequently we have poster number 97 advertising ‘The Finnish Riviera’ in Terijoki and a similar set for Hangö/Hanko. Only someone with a heroic stretch of optimism could imagine that either of these could compete with Nice.

The traveller, lured by the Hangö (Hanko) posters in particular of the beach huts, the endless stretch of sand, the tall, handsome hulk like an Australian Lifeguard and of the elegant lady posed on the sand admiring him, was surely bound to be disillusioned. Not that Hangö did not have its charms as well as its beach huts, but they were not, and are not, those of the sophisticated playground of the rich and famous that was the hallmark of the French Riviera of the 1930s.

Up until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were not very many tourists in Finland from other countries than Sweden and, before 1939, Estonia. If any came, they were intrepid and curious souls who were there almost by accident, like Mrs Alec Tweedie, the wife of a business man, who in 1897 wrote a fascinating book called *Through Finland in Carts*. A photograph of the author shows her with a wasp waist no broader than her face, a large hat about three times the breadth of that, a high-necked dress trimmed with a complete fox, and a long ermine stole and muff. The picture of such elegance in a cart is hard to imagine.

Mrs Tweedie’s book is definitely designed to explain to her countrymen an almost unknown country and people, distant and exotic, as Finland still seemed to me when I came in 1952. Tourism did not appear to exist then, except for some Swedes and the occasional hiking or camping German. Nor were travel posters common – or not in England at least. To most British people at the time, Finland was almost a white space on the map. When I announced that I was going to take up a nine-month job there, the reactions varied:

‘You’re going to Finland? But *why?*’

‘Finland? Where on earth is it?’

‘But isn’t that Russia?’

Or, even worse: ‘Is that one of ours?’, meaning part of the British Empire.

I was not much better informed myself. My local library had no books about Finland and the only encyclopaedia I consulted was from 1936. I finally heard of a Finnish film being shown at a tiny Arts Theatre in London. *The White Reindeer*, made by Edwin Laine, was fairly recent and now, I thought, I would get some real information and see what Finland actually looked like.

The film was set in Finnish Lapland. It was in Finnish, with Swedish sub-titles, neither of which languages I knew. The copy was a poor one, with many scratches, but the film was admirably suited to the black-and-white medium because it consisted mainly of snow and dark, desolate fells. Occasionally what I took to be the ghost of a white reindeer would emerge from the mist or a dark-haired woman (in Lapp folkdress) would be dramatically silhouetted on the skyline, shrieking something incomprehensible into the howling wind. I came out of the cinema baffled. The film had certainly been atmospheric, but as a guide to modern Finland it was about as helpful as if a Finnish visitor going to Scotland had sought information from Mel Gibson’s medieval film *Braveheart* in Gaelic with Nepalese subtitles.

You might imagine that I would have been fully informed about Finland because of the Olympic Games being held there just before I arrived in 1952. You would be wrong. There was of course no TV then to publicize the Games and the only information was on the Sports pages in newspapers. As a student, I could not afford a daily newspaper, nor was I then at all interested in athletics, so the Games – it seems astonishing now – passed me by completely. I had, however, seen one recent news item: that a Finnish girl, Armi Kuusela, had become Miss Universe. She was a very nubile blonde indeed and her photograph had been in folkdress, so it did nothing to change the general image.

The poster of the ultra-modern ship gliding across the tranquil sea also proved to be misleading, as not only was the sea rough on the trip out, but the ship was a sister ship of the old *Wellamo* (poster number 9), built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though endearing, it was more like an ancient river steamer and the deck too close to the water for confidence. It was also a rather ancient bus which joggled and bumped me along the narrow, windy road on the 4-hour journey to my destination of Turku/Åbo. With its mostly wooden, two-storey houses

it was more reminiscent of the Wild West than of the modern city it was to become. I felt Finland to be as exotic and distant as Mrs Tweedie had done over half a century earlier.

Like Mrs Tweedie, too, I found it had great things to offer the foreigner in the end, but they were not those of most of the travel posters. The earliest one to give a real idea of Finland is that of poster number 30, stressing the archipelago and giving some of its feel. The modern ship is still there in the distance, but the tourist has already landed and the log cabin and sailing-boat hint at summer pleasures. The ‘Off the Beaten Track’ theme (a good slogan for the time) on poster number 14 also suggests sailing in the archipelago, and on posters 66–69 we see the introduction of skiing, camping and canoeing on the lakes and, on poster number 80, of fishing. All of these, both then and now, being some of the things that Finland has to offer the tourist.

The outbreak of the Second World war stopped all thought of tourism and the posters came to an abrupt halt. Not only were the potential European tourists at war and travel impossible but the Finns, with their tiny population, were fighting a truly heroic battle against the might of the Soviet Union.

When the war finally ended, there is a triumphal note about the brochure (number 110) with its ‘Finland Again!’ slogan. The outline of Finland, though, now has that straight line at the bottom right-hand corner (number 113) signifying the relinquishing of the Finns’ beloved city of Viipuri and much of Karelia to the Russians after the final Peace Treaty.

It is after the war that a child appears for the first time on a Finnish travel poster (number 114). I laughed when I saw this because, though the nubile blonde was very up-to-date in a bikini (regarded as very daring in 1946), the child is naked. I imagine this poster was designed for the home market, since for even a young child to be seen naked on the beach was unthinkable at the time in Britain and, as far as I know, in France, Italy and Spain as well. In 1952, I remember being amazed at the naked family seen (rear view only) disappearing happily into the distance which was printed on the Finnish 1000-mark banknote, and thinking it a very curious thing to have as well as rather risqué.

The appearance of a child in the post-war posters, however, and a change of the appearance in general of the tourist shown on them was significant of a change in the people travelling. Up to the war the tourist everywhere

had mostly been limited to a certain social class. In every part of Europe, average holiday-makers spent holidays in their own country. This was partly because of the expense involved in long-distance travel by ship or train, partly because the average working man (women did not count) only had a couple of weeks' holiday a year and there was no time to travel far. To travel to the South of France, let alone the days it would have taken to get to Finland, demanded time and money. In other words, the only people who travelled further afield, apart from businessmen, were the well-off and the leisured. The middle-classes and the working-class took their brief holidays at home – the Rivas for those in the northern counties of Europe were places like Blackpool in England, the North Sea coast in Germany or, for the Finns, Terijoki and Hangö.

The type of foreign tourists in the early Finnish posters makes this quite clear: they are in couples or sometimes singles, never a family. For the well-off, there would have been servants at home, nannies and others to look after the children so that their parents could have a child-free holiday. The men and women are fashionably dressed, like the elegant lady of the late 1930s sitting with a bucket of champagne and gazing somewhat wistfully out of the window at what would in reality be the railway lines in Helsinki. The sultry woman looking at the artist on the ship on poster number 10 is dressed in an enormous picture hat and a feather boa. On poster numbers 50 and 64, we find the men wearing trendy plus-fours and the women the chicest of little hats. Whether this would be suitable clothing for a trip though the Finnish forest is a moot point, but at least they are wearing more probable clothes than the bathing belles on poster 151 in their bikinis advertising Turku in 1952. As late the 1960s, the artist on poster number 209 seems unable to dispense with the idea of extremely high-heeled shoes as suitable footwear for climbing Finnish rocks.

In the post-war years, however, the tourists pictured begin to change. As the middle-classes get longer holidays and more money, Finland becomes possible as a destination. The clothes become more casual – and more suitable. There is the occasional child and, in the 1960s, even a barefoot one in shorts looking down from the famous and much-pictured Koli heights where earlier the smart couples stood. But even now, the families have yet to appear.

Reality has to some extent set in, too, in these later posters and photographs of real scenes increasingly replace imagined drawings. There are factories as well as folklore and the emphasis begins to be on modern architecture,

of which Finland can well boast. Lapland, however, is still characterized, even in a photo, by people dressed in Lapp dress and the reindeer all have magnificent horns. On a trip to Lapland in 1953 I only encountered one Lapp genuinely in folk-dress (snoring on the floor of a bus) and was deeply disillusioned by meeting my first reindeer: a rather ungainly animal which reminded me more of an overgrown sheep and was without a horn in sight.

This last collection of posters does not cover of course the development of fast flights to Finland or latterly the cheap package tours or the Big Ship Cruises on one-day visits to the capital cities of the Baltic. Nor does it include the back-packers, the weekend flights to an ice hotel in Lapland or the modern Father Christmas flights in winter. All these bring yet more kinds of tourist with very different expectations and demands and the posters change accordingly.

Many of the travel posters of today, however, still seem to me to make the mistake of asking 'What does the tourist want?' rather than 'What is special to Finland. What is its USP?'. 'Getting them there' still seems to be one of the major considerations rather than 'getting them there and then returning for another visit'. The latter of course demands that expectations should be fulfilled or surpassed rather than disappointed.

It seems to be misguided to advertise, for instance, the throbbing night-life of Helsinki. It does these days have a night-life, but Helsinki night-life does not throb half as hard or loudly as the throbs of London, Paris, Berlin or even the popular holiday resorts for the masses of this century. The occasional theme park is tame compared with Disneyland or even those on offer in England. And so on. It is like the early attempts to speak of a 'Finnish Riviera'. Why in fact even try to compete with these when Finland has other things which cannot be found in most other countries?

So what does it have to offer? And to whom? How would I want it portrayed on a modern poster? It is certainly no longer Off the Beaten Track – even Antarctica is not entirely that these days – but it is still peaceful, still uncrowded and 'Get Away from it All' would still be an appropriate slogan. It seems to me to have a unique combination of the modern (whether that applies to architecture or to transport or to the availability of modern comforts) and of an old style of life. This is what the Finns themselves value, this is why the towns empty in the summer and families retreat to their mainly very modest cabins in the countryside, ideally by a lake or the sea. They shed their business suits, their high-heeled shoes and

– if only possible – their computers and emails to live for two months or so in the country, often as their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents have done before them, even in the very same houses.

Many may not have running water and have to draw it themselves from a well; they will chop wood and light the sauna fire themselves; they will wear old clothes and their children will go barefoot. Their food will be simple and largely healthy – and there are the best strawberries and other berries in the world. Their pleasures will mainly be outdoors in what is frequently delightful summer weather, neither too warm nor too hot, with often cloudless skies for several weeks on end. They will possibly have the delights of what an early 20<sup>th</sup> century writer called ‘just messing about in boats’ and of being well away from their nearest neighbour so that they can do as they please and switch off from the stress and pressures of work and modern life.

Of course, this summer life-style is inevitably changing too. A number of Finns are converting their country houses for round-the-year living, complete with the modern conveniences of the towns. Since these people usually retain a pied-a-terre in the city, it is an attempt to have the best of both worlds. In fact they are of course losing out on the ‘real world’ of the countryside in the process and of what is to me the main attraction of the Finnish summer – the back-to-nature experience. This is exactly what makes it so special. Fortunately ‘updating’ their country lifestyle is still considered unthinkable by most Finns.

These days Finland has a good system of rent-a-country-cabin projects for tourists. All kinds are available, both purpose-built ones with all the modern amenities and those in the old style. A boat may well be thrown-in with the rent. Hiking in Lapland, with its great sense of space and emptiness, or exploring the archipelago in a boat or cabin cruiser with no tides to worry about and thousands of islands, mostly still uninhabited, are also great experiences which are seldom found elsewhere quite like this.

Finland could easily be advertised, too, as a place for Green Holidays. True, the carbon emissions in a plane getting there are high, but no more so than those to Italy or Greece if you are from the UK. The air is wonderfully clean in the countryside, the sea and lakes relatively

unpolluted and there are very strict rules on such things as insecticides. A cabin in the country is low on most things except petrol for a motor-driven boat, there’s not much electricity consumed in summer, and water from a well is free. Go Green in Finland!

Finland should not really be advertised for the package tourist or for anybody who loves to be in a crowd and have Entertainment laid on for them. Nor is it for the devoted Gourmet, although there is the experience of eating Finnish crayfish in season, advertised so charmingly by the humorous poster number 184. It is not for the lover of elegant city life either, even Helsinki being a fairly casual place. These demands other countries can supply.

Finland, however, is an outstanding place for families and for those who want to give their children a taste of real childhood. It is especially enjoyable for children between 4 and 13 or those older children who value an outdoor life – and any adult who does so too. Compared with most places these days, it is relatively safe: children can play outdoors alone and, providing the children can swim if water is around, be left to their own games and devices. There is lots to do for children outside in winter – skiing, skating, snow-boarding, making snowmen or snow-houses – and even more in summer. Children are free in a way that has sadly almost vanished in more populated areas of the world. And this leaves their parents free as well, instead of having to worry about them, supervise their play the whole time or provide something to do because they are bored.

Just before writing this, I saw my young grandsons on a small island in the archipelago, spending all day just amusing themselves with home-made bows and arrows and slings, allowed to explore alone, then jumping expertly into a boat with their father to draw water from a well on another island. In the late afternoon they had a sauna and dived like fish into the sea. They then went fishing off a rocky point and were called reluctantly in to have supper, discovering that they were ravenous, and falling into bed and sleep in a way they never do in town. ‘What a privileged childhood!’ I thought. That, above all, is what Finland has to offer that no other country can give. That’s why someone might want to come to Finland. And that’s why someone might want to stay. □

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