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Visiting the Baltics... and Beyond – Finland (E18A-4)

After finishing up with my tour of the Baltic states, I took a 2-hour ferry ride from Tallinn, Estonia to Helsinki, Finland, where I spent five days exploring Helsinki and nearby Porvoo. I wasn't the only one visiting Helsinki. The Helsinki Summit between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin took place while I was there, resulting in some disruption to my sightseeing plans. But I did get to see one of them.

I didn't know much about Finland, but it was the only Nordic country that I hadn't been to. And through DNA testing I confirmed that I have a small amount of Finnish heritage, although I don't know anything specific about my Finnish ancestors yet.

Initially populated by Finno-Ugric tribes, Christian crusades eventually led to Swedish rule of what is now Finland. Swedish rule lasted for centuries, but Finland was never really integrated into Sweden. In the 1700s Sweden and Russia were often at war. Russia occupied Finland twice before finally taking it over from Sweden in 1809. But Russia didn't fully integrate Finland, either, instead establishing the Grand Duchy of Finland. This helped drive Finnish national identity over the next century. When the Russian Empire collapsed after World War I, Finland declared its independence in 1917, which was followed by a civil war.

Finland fought both the Soviet Union and Germany during World War II, although it ended up ceding almost 10% of its territory to the Soviets. Finland remained officially neutral during the Cold War, but took a sharp turn towards integration with Western Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Helsinki doesn't have an "old town" city center area like I found in the Baltic capitals. It's too new a city for that. Rather, much of the sightseeing focus when visiting Helsinki is in design, museums and Suomenlinna, a major sea fortress built by the Swedes in 1748 on several islands in Helsinki Harbor, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

My day trip destination, Porvoo, is the second oldest city in Finland. Its small Old Town city center is filled mostly with wooden buildings that date back to the 17th and 18th centuries. Its wooden merchants warehouses that line the river through town are a proposed UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Passengers walking to the city center from the West Ferry Terminal are greeted by Bad Bad Boy, created by artist Tommi Toija.

If you suspect that Bad Bad Boy might be the older brother of Belgium's world famous Manneken Pis in Brussels, I certainly wouldn't dispute the family resemblance.



Manneken Pis is so important to Belgian identity that Napoleon once captured it and brought it back to Paris.



Shopping stalls (mostly souvenirs now) and dining options at the Kauppatori on Market Square in the city center at Helsinki Harbor



Merchandise for sale at the Kauppatori on Market Square. It doesn't look like Santa Claus will be making his rounds this year.



I think Boris and Natasha got the last laugh with this Kauppatori dining option.



Vanha Kauppahalli, one of a handful of old-style market halls scattered around Helsinki.



Allas Sea Pool, a set of swimming pools built over Helsinki Harbor at Market Square, just in front of the presidential palace.



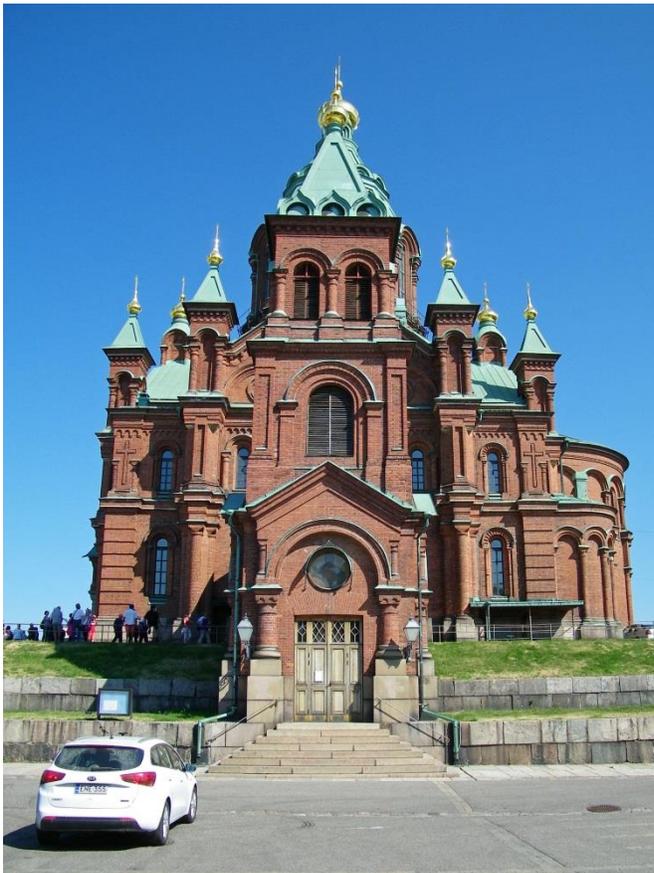
The presidential palace, site of the Trump-Putin Summit. Looks pretty secure.



But on the sidewalk just around the corner is this entrance to the “Office of the President of the Republic”. And, no, it never occurred to me to play “ding dong ditch”. Not at all.



Helsinki Cathedral, above, is the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Cathedral. Its size and location make it a prominent feature on the skyline of Helsinki's city center.



Uspenski Cathedral, left, is the main cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Finland. It may be the largest orthodox church in western Europe. Its location and size make it comparably prominent.



Tempeliaukio Church is a modern church built into a “bowl” carved into a rocky outcrop.



Inside Tempeliaukio Church. The rough rock walls of the “bowl” were left as-is for acoustics reasons.



The wooden Vanha Kirkko, the Old Church of Helsinki, dates back to only 1826, but that's old enough to make it Helsinki's oldest church



The Finnish parliament



Helsinki's world-renowned Seagull Museum.

Okay, not really. It's the Helsinki Art Museum. The seagull head is art.



Architecture detail at Helsinki's central train station

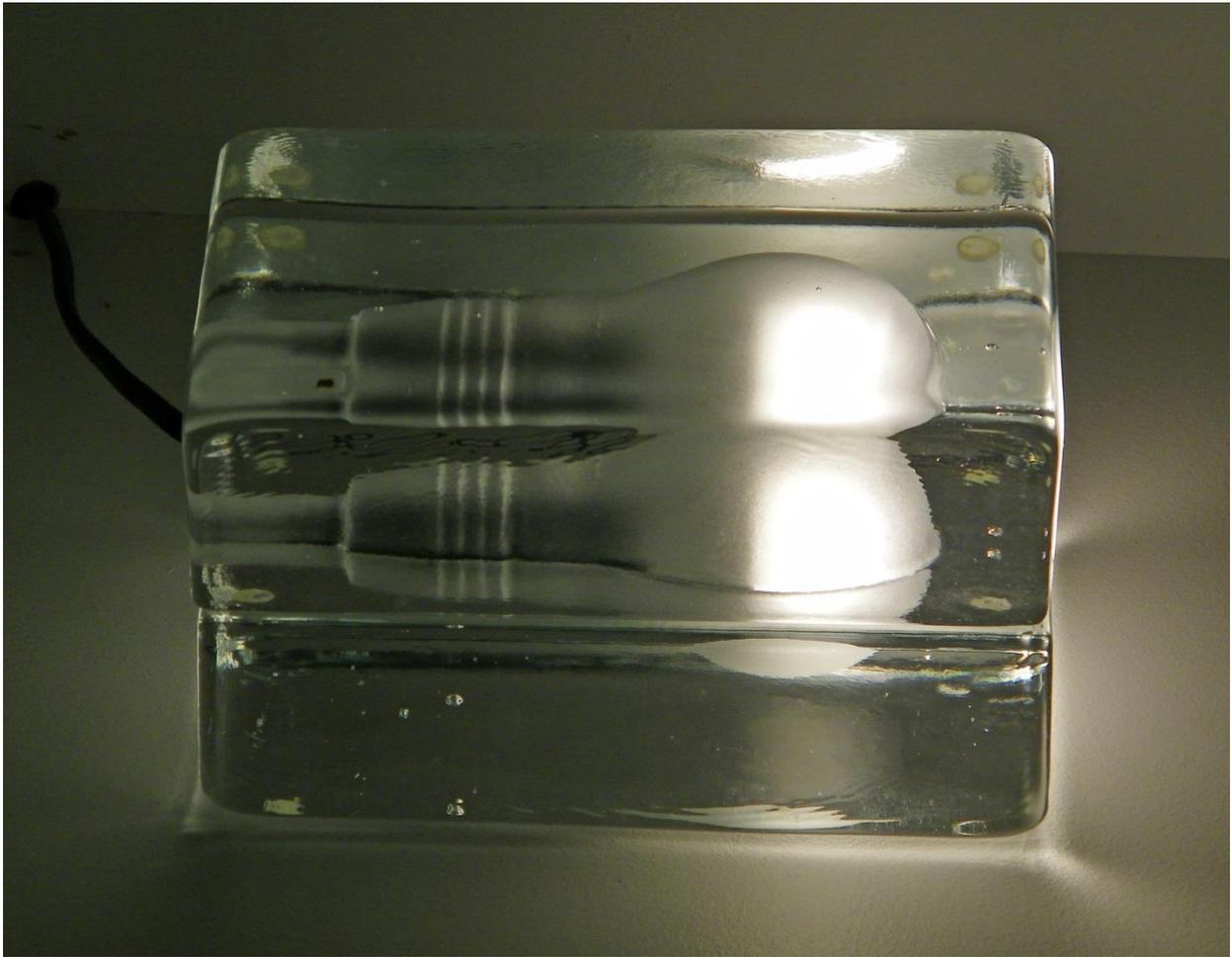
Finland is famous for design, and its Design Museum is famous for showcasing Finnish design. I don't think that it fully lived up to expectations, though. Some of the displays on design were certainly informative about the process, but for the rest I thought it was positioned more as an art museum than as a design museum.



Angry Birds was created in Finland by Rovio Entertainment.



Harri Koskinen's Block Lamp creation, both an example and the mold





Area around Helsinki Harbor, display at the Helsinki City Museum



The Kaisaniemi Botanic Garden



On display at the National Museum of Finland. Offerings of umbilical cords were left in the depressions of this rock in prehistoric times; I saw similar depressions used for similar reasons in the volcanic rock of Hawaii's Big Island.



Portraits of Finland's presidents also on display at the National Museum of Finland. I had such a strong feeling that the eyes of these portraits were following me around the room that I took a closer look at one of them. Soon it blinked. Then I noticed the others were also periodically blinking. Turns out that these are digital displays, not prints.



I took a boat tour around Helsinki Harbor in order to get a different perspective on the city and its many islands.

We passed the US Embassy.



The Finnish Navy. Well, not the entire Navy. But Navy boats were out patrolling the water in advance of the arrivals of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.



Helsinki Cathedral from the harbor tour.

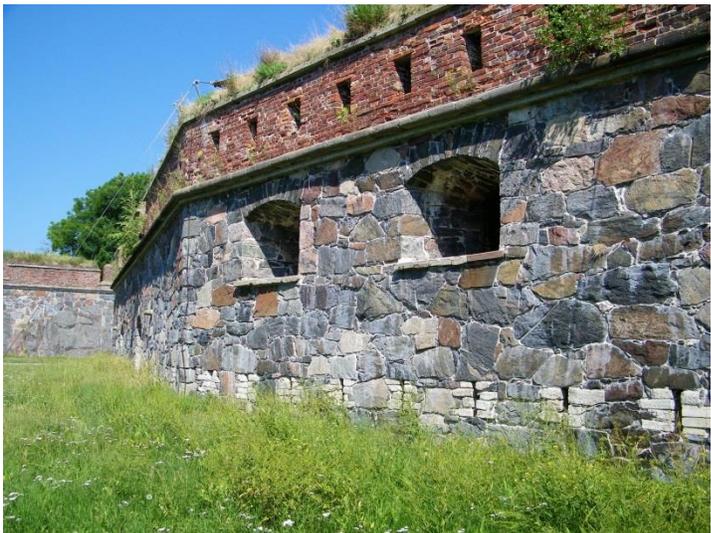


I took a ferry to the Fortress of Suomenlinna UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Swedish fortress built across several islands in Helsinki Harbor. The site features the fortifications, several museums, dining options, walking trails, and a small community of locals that live on the islands full time. The major islands are connected by bridges.

Suomenlinna Church, on Iso Mustasaari Island, originally built as an Eastern Orthodox church during the Russian era. Its dome today doubles as a lighthouse.



Dating back to 1750, the Suomenlinna dry dock on Susisaari Island is the oldest in Finland. It is still used today.



Some of the fortifications, also on Susisaari Island



Approaching the King's Gate on Kustaanmiekka Island



Built in 1754, the King's Gate was built as the main entrance to the fortress. It was built where Swedish King Adolf Frederick had been anchored when he came to Helsinki in 1752 to inspect the construction the fortress.



Preparations for the Trump-Putin Summit in Helsinki had a big impact on my visit to Helsinki. There were protests in advance of the summit, and much of the city center was closed the day of the summit – the harbor area was mostly inaccessible because the summit was being held at the presidential palace.



President Trump passes me en route to the meeting at the palace. He was the second national leader I saw on this trip. Later in the day, Melania Trump's motorcade passed me. Jealous?



The protests I saw were decidedly anti-Trump and anti-Putin, although I did see "Make America Great Again" hats on a couple tourists.

That said, lots of people lined President Trump's motorcade route – more people than have lined any previous presidential motorcade route ever – hoping to catch a glimpse of the American president.



Scenes from my day trip to Porvoo. That's Porvoo Cathedral on top of the hill. It was primarily built in the early 1400s although parts of it date back to the 1200s when Porvoo was established. It became a cathedral in 1723.



The Porvoo Cathedral's bell tower and the red Little Church



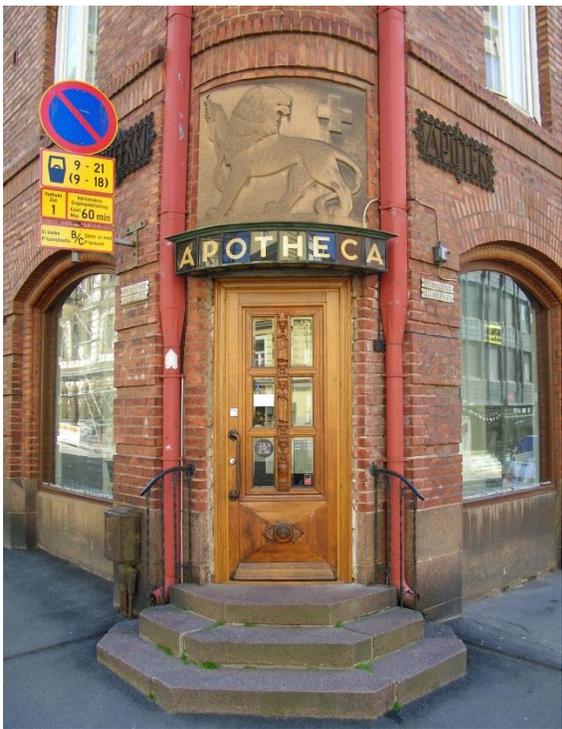
Site of the Porvoo Diet. And no, that wasn't some Finnish weight loss plan. The Porvoo Diet was a meeting of four key factions in Finland in 1809 after Russia took over Finland. The Diet affirmed both that Russian Tsar Alexander I was emperor and the new Grand Duke of Finland, as well as Finland's autonomy as a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire.



Wooden merchants warehouses line the river in Porvoo. These date back at least 300 years.



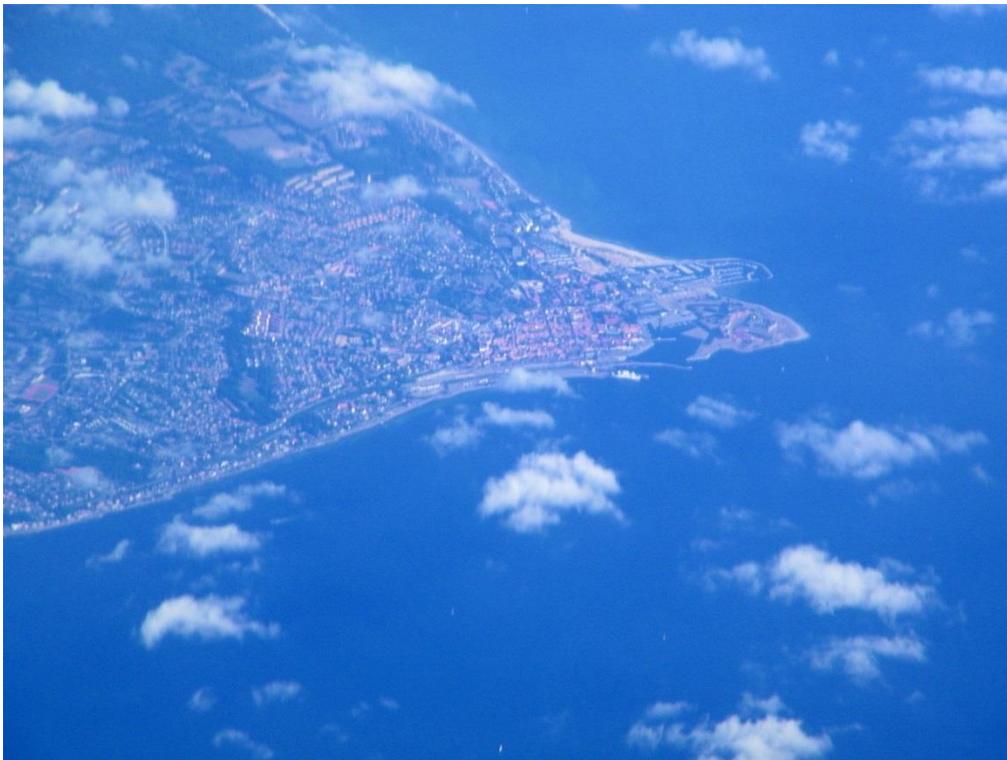
The post office (left) and some architectural detail (right) in Helsinki



A former drugstore (left) and the sculpture Lightbringer (right)



An interesting swirl in the Baltic Sea, seen on my flight out of Helsinki



Helsingør, Denmark, which I recognized from the air. I visited Helsingør when I was in Denmark in 2006. That castle at the tip of the peninsula (right) is Kronborg Castle, Shakespeare's setting for Hamlet.



Roskilde, Denmark, which I also visited in 2006. Roskilde Cathedral and the Viking Ship Museum are among the town's highlights, although neither is particularly visible from up here.



My trip from Helsinki to London was via Paris, making France technically the 8th country I visited on this trip (three were just for their airports). Here's a view of the Eiffel tower as we were landing.