

42 good reasons to be in Finland

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I consider anniversaries (and birthdays) generally meaningless, save for the fact that they trigger reflection. Last month marked my fifth year in Finland as a resident; I moved here on February 7, 1997, and, apart from a four-month break the following winter, stayed ever since. The recurrence prompted me a question: the same most Finns I meet ask me (strangely, not Italians, who may be too busy wondering how cold it can possibly get up here). The question is: why am I still here? What has kept me (and an ever-growing number of foreigners) in Finland for such a long time?

This article is an attempt for an answer, in the form of a simple list of good reasons to be in Finland. The list is subjective, biased and incomplete, and, given that the carnival time is here, should be read with a light heart.

As a homage to Douglas Adams' memory and to Mark King's talents, the number of good reasons to be in Finland that I have collected is 42. And, although 42 should be the answer to everything, and therefore I am not supposed to enlarge the list, I am too curious: why are you readers - Finns and foreigners alike - still here after all this time?

- 1) **Sauna** - the Finns have invented it and despite many imitations they're still the best at it.
- 2) **Suomirokki** (Finnish rock'n'roll) - "mun mummoni muni mun mammani, mun mammani muni mun": simply ingenious.
- 3) **Juhannus** (Midsummer) - a day when the whole country goes to the mökki (summer cottage) to grill sausages, drink beer, fight the mosquitoes, and in a few unlucky cases, drown in the lake. National spirit condensed!
- 4) **Nights** - bright, crispy and tempting in the summer; cold, dry and wrapping in the winter.
- 5) **Public transport** - irritatingly punctual (although drivers in Helsinki could smile more often).
- 6) **Snow** - its shapes have inspired architects like Aalto, its presence continues to amuse thousands of kids (and annoy as many drivers).
- 7) **Wednesday night** - the "pikkulauantai" ("Little Saturday") defeats all foreigners who try to go to work early on Thursdays, and makes them understand how superior Finns are at recovering from hangovers.
- 8) **Ferry boats** - a perfect way to combine avoiding tax with extreme partying. The boat to nowhere concept (a ferry that wanders in the middle of the sea for 20 hours just to go back to where it started from) is still unequalled in the whole world.
- 9) **Loska** (slush) - what would winter in Helsinki be without it? It has the outstanding capacity of forming puddles slightly longer than the average human step (Helsingin Sanomat).
- 10) **Sandals** - best when worn at work, especially in combination with black suit and tie.
- 11) **Tuparit** (housewarming party) - the Finnish housewarming parties are usually announced to neighbors by a handwritten note hung near the main door of the building. The note usually invites neighbors to join the party if they think it's too noisy!
- 12) **Lapland** - a truly wild region, (un)populated by the proud Sami people and by assorted fauna (thousands of reindeers, millions of mosquitoes and the occasional Norwegian seeking for cheap alcohol).
- 13) **Alko** - it was born as the retail chain of State monopoly for alcoholic beverages. In times of euro, globalization, and frequent ferries to Estonia the monopoly will soon be a thing of the past, but the Alko managers understood it long ago and created a pleasant environment with an outstanding selection.
- 14) **Hernekeitto** (pea and meat soup, usually eaten on Thursdays) and **perunalaatikko** (potato pudding) - Finnish gastronomy at its best.
- 15) **Pullonpalautus** - the biggest queues at Alko shops are not for buying wines, but for returning bottles. And at 10 cents a piece, it's worth the wait.
- 16) **Women** - the most beautiful are said to come from Turku, but certain foreign tourists do not seem to be particularly picky about the city.
- 17) **Walking on the frozen sea** - never has man felt so powerful (save for those unlucky ones who drown).
- 18) **V and W** - a country where these two letters are equivalent (and names are mixed accordingly in the phonebook) cannot be too normal.

- 19) **Wappu or Vappu** (May Day) - the biggest student party in Finland, where the Havis Amanda statue in Helsinki is the first to receive a graduate hat and the only one who can stand up properly the following day.
- 20) **Finnish** - a language that counts 15 case endings, has almost no prepositions, no future tense, and where "pencil" is translated as "lyijykynä" (pronounced: lew-you-kew-ner) deserves due respect.
- 21) **Silence** - in the countryside, in the sauna, on buses (at daytime), something we Southerners cannot simply conceive.
- 22) **Nokia** - was it not what brought us here in the first place?
- 23) **Design** - ubiquitous as mobile phones, it's what makes Finns sell mobile phones.
- 24) **Architects** - Saarinen and Aalto have been the greatest, every Finnish family man tries to be one when building the mökki.
- 26) **Mökki** (summer cottage) - the traditional summer house is built in wood near a lake and has the obligatory sauna. A place where Finns reconcile with the world during the summer.
- 25) **Jokamiehenoikeus** (Everyman's right) - a law allows anyone to walk in any property, even if private, provided that no disturbance or damage is done. What in other countries would cause serious social unrest is here considered perfectly normal.
- 27) **Coffee** - Finns are the keenest consumers in the world. And it's not as tasteless as in America!
- 28) **Taxes** - don't you also love boasting that you pay the highest taxes of Europe in front of your foreign friends?
- 29) **Noise** - during ice hockey matches (moderate), on charter flights to the Canary islands (high), on night buses back from the bars (extreme).
- 30) **Houses** - simple, cozy and warm (yes, even in the winter).
- 31) **The Helsinki-Vantaa airport** - the best in the world (IATA survey, 1999), and the only one where the baggage almost invariably comes in five minutes - try & see yourself.
- 32) **Lakes** - as many as 187 888, according to official counts; sometimes numbers say it all.
- 33) **Trust** - Finns trust other people so much that even Italians start to do the same!
- 34) **Queueing for a club** - so common that it's almost a way of living, especially in the winter.
- 35) **Järjestysmiehet** (bouncers) - the doormen deserve respect for the temperatures in which they have to work and for the customers they often have to face (or, in some cases, drag out).
- 36) **Beer** - oh, yes, and lots of it.
- 37) **Taxi drivers** - many of them are graduate students, most of them speak English and practically all of them accept credit cards for any amount. The fact that they are ludicrously expensive doesn't matter so much.
- 38) **Mobile phones** - nowhere else they are so ubiquitous, yet so discrete.
- 39) **Pussilakana** - the bag-like sheet that wraps the blanket is something so ingenious that even we Southern Europeans will copy it one day.
- 40) **The national anthem** - one of the few that still makes people cry.
- 41) **Outdoor queueing at the burger kiosk in 20 degrees frost at 4 am after a night out drinking** - no other population does it with such a relaxed style.
- 42) **Finns** - they have withstood a Russian invasion (November 1939 - March 1940), had the same president for 25 years (Urho Kaleva Kekkonen, from 1956 to 1981), won an ice-hockey world championship (in Sweden, against the home team, 1995) and got rid of the 1 and 2 cent coins (January 2002): an outstanding people!