

Facts: Finland

Architecture of the Embassy of Finland

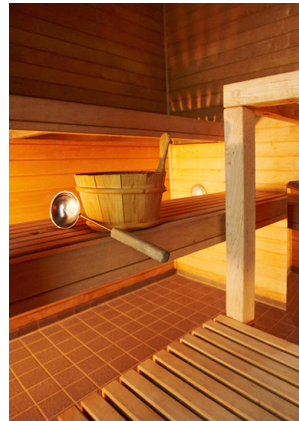
Larch wood, steel and light-coloured concrete

The Embassy of Finland borders to the east on the 230 m long copper band that encloses all of the Nordic Embassies.

The building was designed by the young Finnish architects Rauno Lehtinen, Pekka Mäki and Toni Peltola of Viiva arkkitehtuuri Oy. Its shape resembles a kantele, the age-old Finnish string instrument. The architecture is simple and austere and provides a dignified and timeless environment for the work of the embassy.

A central hall incorporates all floors, which can be reached by a wide stairway. All of the rooms offer natural daylight. Unusual for an embassy building are the two saunas and the fireplace room on the ground floor. Almost without exception, the furnishings are from Finland.

Following the overall concept of the Nordic Embassies, the materials are used in their pure form. The wood, glass, steel and light-coloured concrete are not surface-treated, which is shown to best advantage in the façade. On the plaza side the building is faced with high-format larch wood panels. In the course of time the wood will patinate to a silver-grey. The façade is also impressive after dark, when the interior lighting radiates warm light to the outside.



Flag



The flag was established by law on the 29th of May 1918, less than six months after Finland gained independence from Russia. The pattern and colours had already been decided on in 1870. The poet Zacharias Topelius chose the colours white and blue, symbolising the snow and the lakes of Finland.

As in other Nordic countries, it is customary for every single- and multiple-family house in Finland to have a flagpole in the yard. The flag is flown on official occasions and on set flag days. In apartment buildings and high-rise buildings the facility management is usually responsible for ensuring that the flag is flown on flag days. (Link to <http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=27078>) Displaying the flag is so popular that even some summer cottages also have a flagpole, and on non-flag days, some families hoist a triangular blue-and-white crossed pennant in order to show that the family is at home.

National Anthem

On 13 May 1848, the song *Vårt land* (Our Country) symbolically became the national anthem when Helsinki students sang it at a spring festival. The lyrics were written in Swedish by Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877), and the music was composed by German-born Friedrich Pacius (1809-1891). *Vårt land* soon became an expression of patriotism, especially after Paavo Cajander published *Maamme*, a Finnish translation of the song.

Many historians consider the 13th of May 1848 to be the day Finland was “born” because the students’ spring festival was the first time the idea of a Finnish identity was formulated. Frederik Cygnaeus, the leader of the students’ organization, ended his speech with the call “To Finland!” The flag the students designed for the festival, a lion with a laurel wreath on a white background, can be considered the first Finnish flag. Just as important for the idea of a Finnish national identity was “*Vårt land*”, the song in which hundreds of jubilant visitors joined in at the end of the spring celebration.

1. Oi maamme Suomi, synnyinmaa
Soi, sana kultainen!
Ei laaksoa ei kukkulaa,
ei vettä, rantaa rakkaampaa
kuin kotimaa tää pohjoinen,
maa kallis isien.

2. Sun kukoistukses kuorestaan
kerrankin puhkeaa
viel’ lempemme saa nousemaan
sun toivos, riemus loistossaan,
ja kerran laulus, synnyinmaa,
korkeemman kaiun saa.

Language

Finnish belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family and is thus related to Estonian and Hungarian. The oldest words are about 5000 years old and date back to the Finno-Ugric and Uralic era. It was not until the 19th century that Finnish was recognized as a civilized language.

Many Europeans find Finnish difficult to learn because it differs greatly from other European languages – both in grammar and vocabulary. Finnish words seldom show similarities to other European languages. For historical reasons, Finnish has numerous old loan words from Swedish and English, which are used relatively often.

The word order in Finnish is not strict and allows for many possible combinations.

The second official language in Finland is Swedish, and in the homeland areas where approximately 4500 Sami inhabitants live the three Sami languages are also recognized, of which Northern Sami is the most important. It is also the most widely spoken language in the Sami area, which extends over Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia. Skolt Sami is spoken in Finland and Russia; Inari Sami is the only Sami language that is exclusively spoken in Finland.

The majority of the almost 300,000 Finland Swedes (5.6 percent of the population) live in the coastal regions of Uusimaa, Turunmaa and Pohjanmaa. Over 12,000 Finland Swedes live in Finnish-speaking communities in other parts of Finland. The Åland Islands, a Swedish-speaking island group with 26,000 inhabitants, has autonomous status at the provincial level.

Mini Language Course in Finnish:

Good day – hyvää päivää

Good evening – hyvää iltaa

Hello – hei, moi, terve

Good-bye – hei, moi, hei hei or moi moi

Thank you – kiitos

Excuse me – anteeksi

National Holiday

The Finnish national day is the 6th of December, the date of the declaration of independence in 1917. Independence Day celebrations include patriotic rituals such as visiting war graves.

In the evening a festive reception takes place in the President's Palace, to which dignitaries and all kinds of celebrities are invited. The President's Reception is followed by the public with great interest, and the live broadcast of it on television regularly receives the highest viewing ratings of the year.

Christmas

Christmas is called Joulu in Finnish

Advent Season

In Finland the first “small Christmas parties”, called pikkujoulu in Finnish, take place long before Christmas. Companies, associations and other groups celebrate these parties with music, speeches, food, and glögi, the Finnish hot wine punch.

Houses and apartments are decorated for Advent; children hang up their Advent calendars; Christmas decorations are made, and Christmas cookies are baked. Carolers are also part of the standard programme of holiday festivities in the Advent season. On the 13th of December, the Swedish-speaking schools and families celebrate St. Lucia’s Day. The observance of St. Lucia’s Day originally came to Finland from Sweden. Lucia was a Sicilian maiden who defied her father by refusing to marry the man he had chosen for her. She suffered a martyr’s death.

At the heart of the festival is Lucia, a girl dressed in white wearing a crown of candles. In Helsinki a beautiful procession takes place in honour of the saint. Lucia competitions to elect a girl to wear the crown of candles and processions have become a tradition in many Finnish cities.

Christmas Eve

In contrast to many other countries, the 24th of December – Christmas Eve – is the most important holiday in Finland. The Christmas tree is brought in on Christmas Eve at the latest and often decorated by the children. Christmas trees used to have real candles, but now almost all are electric. There is a big star at the top of the tree, and the branches are adorned with sweets, elves, stars and also apples (an allusion to Adam and Eve). According to the Finnish calendar, Christmas Eve is the name day of Adam and Eve. For many people, the genuine Finnish Christmas decoration for the home is himmeli, the name of which comes from the word meaning heaven. It is a pyramid-shaped mobile made of straws.

Precisely at 12 o’clock noon the Christmas peace is announced for the whole country in the former Finnish capital of Turku. At nightfall people visit the cemetery to place lights on the graves of their loved ones. The sea of candles glistening in the snow under the dark blue sky is like a sight from a fairytale.

Other Finnish Christmas customs include the Christmas sauna, the preparation of Christmas dishes, and the leisurely enjoyment of traditional Christmas fare such as pickled herring, red beet salad (rosolli), salmon, roe, potato, carrot and rutabaga casseroles, as well as Christmas ham, plum compote and gingerbread.

Joulupukki, the Finnish Santa Claus or Father Christmas, his wife Muori and the many elves that have different tasks play a special role in Finnish Christmas culture. They all live in Lapland on the mountain Korvatunturi. The highlight of Christmas Eve is when Santa knocks on the door. The first question he asks is „Are there any well-behaved children here?“ Of course, without exception all of the children are well behaved, and they all receive presents.

Christmas Holidays

On the first day of Christmas people usually spend time with their families. Many attend a church service in the morning. The books brought by Santa are read and the leftovers from the Christmas Eve dinner are eaten. The second day of Christmas, in the Christian church the day dedicated to St. Stephen, is called Tapani in Finnish. People meet for merry get-togethers or a Tapani dance in restaurants.

The third Christian holiday during the Christmas season is Epiphany on the 6th of January. It marks the end of the Christmas season. The Christmas decorations are put back in their box until the next Christmas.

More information can be found at: www.virtual.finland.fi/xmas/

Easter

Easter is called Pääsiäinen in Finnish

In good time before Easter, Finnish children sow rye grass seeds in pots. Pussy willow branches are a traditional Easter decoration dating back to earlier times, and birch twigs are put in vases where they soon start budding. Today, tulips, lilies, and daffodils are flown in from continental Europe, but that does not mean that Finns did not have Easter 'flowers' in former times. These were made by hand, out of tissue paper and dyed feathers. This tradition is still alive in Finland, and nowadays children make this Easter decoration in school.

Along with chickens, chicks, and coloured eggs, the rabbit is part of the traditional Easter decoration. However, the Easter bunny that hides Easter eggs is only known in very few regions in Finland. The northern part of the country is still covered with snow!

On Palm Sunday, little girls with sooty faces and scarves tied around their heads can be seen walking around in their neighbourhoods and villages. They carry broomsticks, coffeepots and hold bunches of decorated pussy willow branches. The little Easter witches go from door to door, chanting traditional rhymes and blessings in return for coins and sweets. This custom combines the Western pagan belief in witches and the tradition of the Eastern Church of blessing by waving willow branches. This custom of symbolic waving with decorated willow branches and wishing prosperity originates from earlier times in Eastern Finland and is mainly an Orthodox tradition.

Officially, 86 per cent of Finns belong to the Evangelical-Lutheran church and about one percent to the Russian-Orthodox church. In recent decades, the Lutheran majority has adopted some elements of Orthodox Easter traditions. Therefore all Finns have become acquainted with night services and processions.

The oldest and no doubt the most unique traditional Finnish Easter dish is mämmi, a thick dark brown porridge made of water and sweet rye malt. It is baked in a slow oven in cardboard boxes that look like the baskets made of birch bark that were used in former times. Nowadays, mämmi is a dessert served with cream or milk and sugar, but it was originally a Lenten dish. Lamb and pasha, a cream cheese dessert originally from neighbouring Russia, are popular Easter dishes in Finland.

Happy Easter in Finnish is Hyvää Pääsiäistä!

Summer

Summer usually begins in Southern Finland at the end of May and lasts until mid-September. On the south coast summer lasts a month longer than in the northern parts of the country. In the south and in the middle of Finland there are approximately 10-15 hot days with maximum temperatures above 25°C.

A phenomenon north of the Arctic Circle is the midnight sun. In the northernmost parts of the country the sun does not sink below the horizon for 73 nights, and often you have to wear sunglasses at night when driving a car. Even in southern Finland, the longest days of the year last almost 19 hours.

The most important of all summer festivities is the Midsummer night celebration on Juhannus (St. John's Day). The Midsummer night festivities are celebrated on the Saturday following June 19th. Everybody in Finland then moves from the cities to the countryside. The Finnish mökki (summer cottages), preferably remotely situated at the shore of a lake, are populated on the weekend. The Juhannus bonfires that are reflected in the lakes and rivers are part of the Midsummer night festivities. Guests are offered a rich variety of delicacies: Sausage of course, special Juhannus cheese, Finnish crepes with strawberry marmalade, smoked fish, and much more. Many Finns live the whole summer at their mökki (cottages). If weather permits, people spend as much time as possible outdoors. Meat and fish are grilled or smoked and served together with fresh vegetables, herbs and new potatoes. Of course, the sauna is in constant use all summer. The "summer Finn" jumps directly from the sauna into the water and swims a lap to cool off before continuing with the next sauna session.

The climax of the culinary summer is the 21st of July: the beginning of the crayfish season. Crayfish parties with family and friends are primarily held in Southern Finland and on the coast. Traditionally, steamed crayfish with slices of toast bread are served. Merry drinking songs are part of the fun.

There are hundreds of other celebrations and festivals throughout the country, such as the opera festival in Savonlinna, the Pori jazz festival, the tango market in Seinäjoki, as well as rock festivals and village festivals.

More information can be found at www.visitfinland.de and www.festivals.fi

Sports

The Finns love outdoor exercise and enjoy taking walks or going jogging. A newer trend is Nordic walking. This sport has its roots in the summer training of skiers and in American power walking.

During the winter, the Finns not only admire the achievements of ice hockey players and ski jumpers, they become active themselves. The most extreme discipline that can be pursued during the winter is ice swimming, and for quite some time there have even been ice-swimming contests. Taking a dip in an ice hole has long been part of the Finnish sauna culture. Ice swimming began to be a major fitness sport in the 1980s. Around 120,000 ice swimmers are currently organized in sports clubs or associations. Approximately an equal number go ice swimming from their holiday cottages or at resorts.

However, the official Finnish national sport is pesäpallo – pesis or Finnish baseball. The founding father of this sport is Lauri "Tahko" Pihkala, who developed the sport based on American baseball. Originally he conceived pesis as a military sport, as a physical exercise for the troops. In contrast to the American model, pesis is a much faster sport with more tactical possibilities.

Pesäpallo in Finland: www.pesis.fi

Pesäpallo in Germany: www.pesis.de