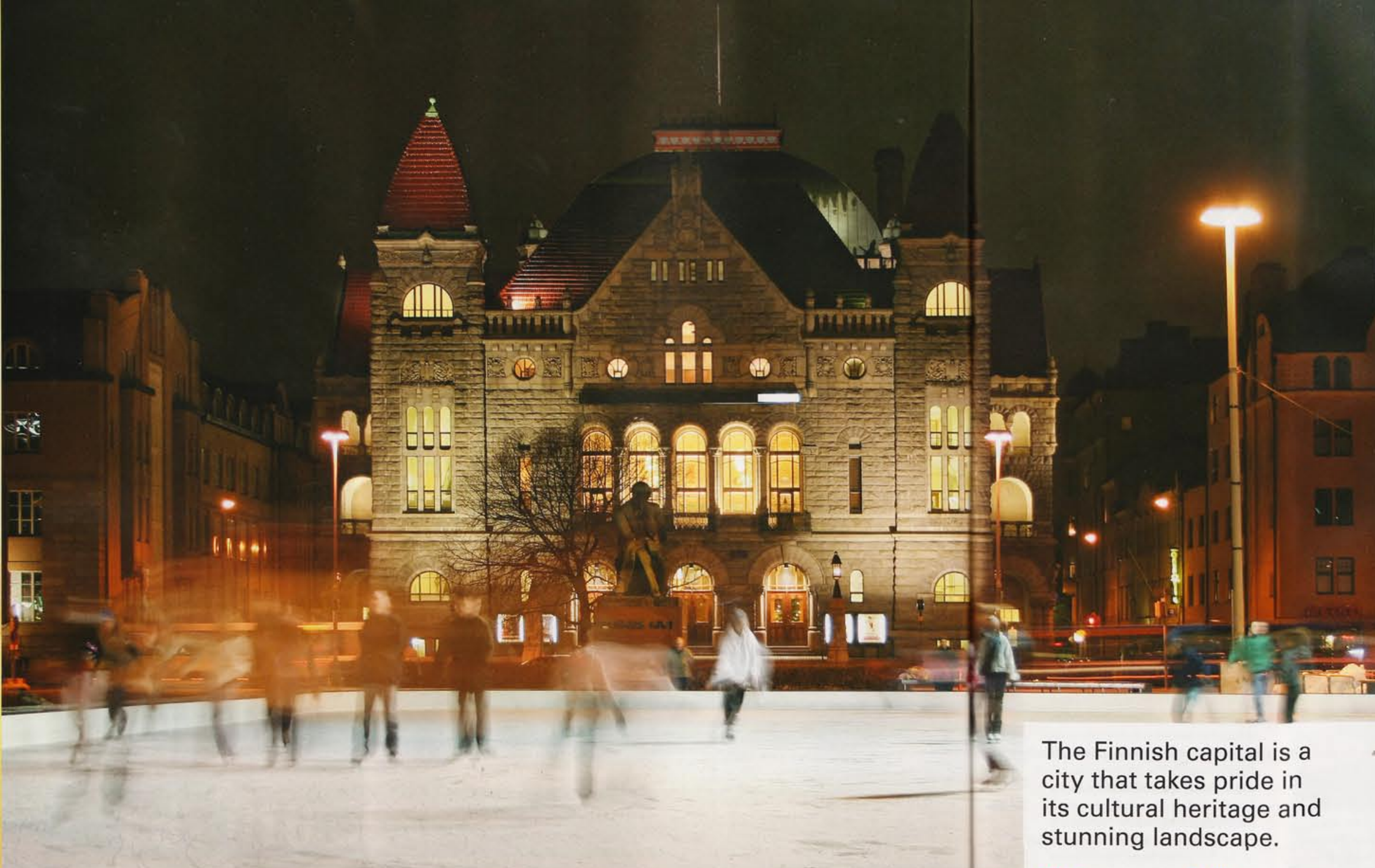


HELSINKI



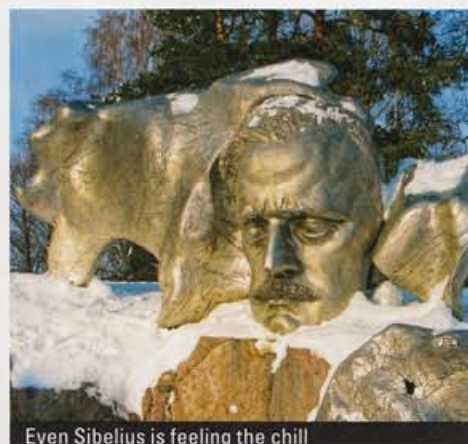
The Finnish capital is a city that takes pride in its cultural heritage and stunning landscape.

WORDS ALBERT EHRNRÖTH IMAGES SHUTTERSTOCK

Skating is a popular pastime in Helsinki over the chilly winter months, and you don't even need a rink – it's so cold in the depths of winter that even the sea freezes over!



The spectacular Suomenlinna sea fortress



Even Sibelius is feeling the chill



The Uspenski Cathedral cuts a stunning silhouette

The temperature is below zero, but the sky is navy blue. I am out for a stroll in Helsinki and soon I find myself along the seafront and decide to head out to the islands that form part of one of the most magnificent archipelagos in the world. And with the sea frozen solid, I can walk on water. The snow underfoot echoes my footsteps with a comforting crunch and, while the groaning of the ice is slightly daunting, the air is fresh

and the snowy landscape serene. A few minutes later I am rewarded with splendid views of the "White City's" skyline. What a perfect backdrop for a spiritual experience or a musical epiphany – particularly now that the soundtrack in my head has switched to Sibelius's *Lemminkäinen Suite*.

When I return (by boat) on a balmy summer evening six months later, I am in for a different treat. There is no hint of darkness, as between mid-June and early August the nights in Helsinki are "white", which means that the sun disappears below the horizon for only a brief instant.

It is easy to fall in love with this "daughter of the Baltic" at the height of summer. This time of year people gravitate towards the Market Square (Kauppatori) situated right next to the harbour, in the old part of the city. In June the market's most surprising delicacy is wild strawberries, then wild blueberries in July, to be supplanted later by tart-tasting cloudberries. During wet and warm summers there will be plenty of mushrooms on offer. The golden chanterelle and king bolete (the Finns are Italy's main supplier of porcini) are exquisite. If you love fish, and particularly caviar, you've reached paradise. Finns prefer the orangey roe from the vendace and burbot to the black variety from the sturgeon.

With your back facing the harbour you can't fail to notice the neo-classical Presidential Palace, the Russian Tsar's residence when he came to visit. A few doors down, the Swedish Embassy flaunts a neo-renaissance façade clearly inspired by the Royal Palace in Stockholm. The 13 onion domes of the red-bricked Uspenski Cathedral will already have caught your eye. Make the effort to climb the hill and marvel at the rich Byzantine-Slavonic interior adorned with icons. Typical Russian and Swedish architecture sit side by side, symbolising the schism in this country's identity, which eventually coalesced

DESTINATION FILE



Where Finland's capital is located on the southern coast of the country, on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, on the Baltic Sea.

Average Temperatures

During winter: -11°C to -4°C
During summer: 11°C to 21°C

Population 587,000

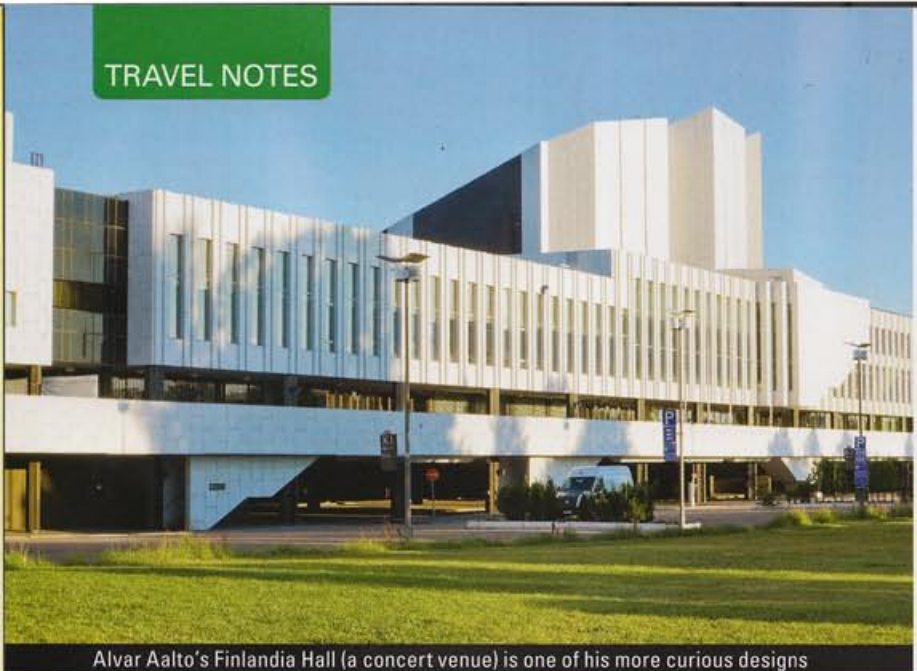
Currency Euro (AUS\$1=€0.75)

Best time to visit It depends what you're looking for in terms of your holiday. In winter it's all crunchy snow and the chance to walk on (frozen) water, or perhaps even a sighting of the Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis. In summer the sun barely sets, the city is in bloom and the landscape is transformed.

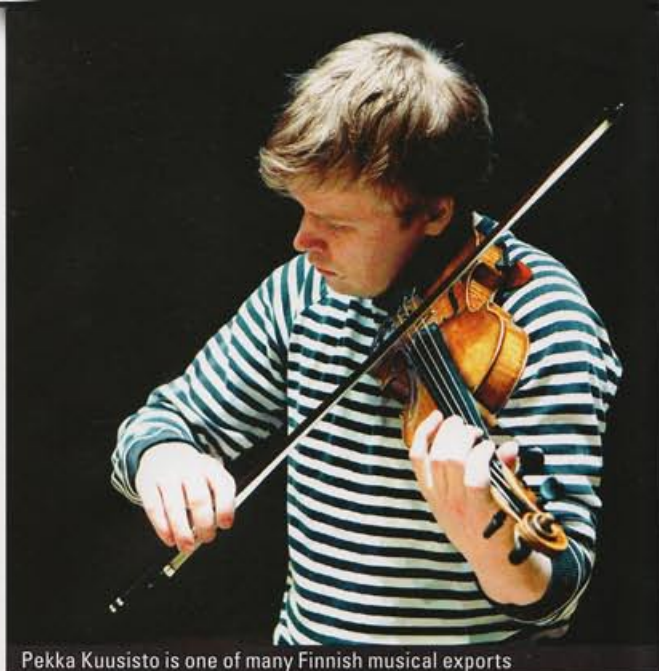
Getting there Finnair flights to Helsinki (operated by Qantas and Cathay Pacific) stop in either Singapore or Hong Kong.

Getting around Helsinki's user-friendly public transport system means you can board trams, buses, the metro and even the ferry to Suomenlinna on a single ticket. These are valid for 1-7 days. The city also has an excellent network of cycle paths.

Tourist Information www.visithelsinki.fi



Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Hall (a concert venue) is one of his more curious designs



Pekka Kuusisto is one of many Finnish musical exports

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY FINNISH MUSICIANS?

What makes Finland produce such a disproportionate number of talented singers, musicians and conductors? This year alone in Australia sees concerts by pianist-composer Olli Mustonen, violinist-conductor Pekka Kuusisto, cellist Jan-Erik Gustafsson and violinist-conductor John Storgård.

The list of successful singers is almost as long, including Matti Salminen, Karita Mattila, Soile Isokoski and Juha Uusitalo (who will sing Wotan in the Melbourne Ring Cycle 2013). In Finland high culture is closely associated with national identity, and arts education is seen as a meaningful part of the national curriculum. Music education for pre-school children is systematic and the respect accorded to famous musicians also helps encourage the young pursue a career in music. The highly selective Sibelius Academy is the only music university in Finland, and one of the largest of its kind in Europe. It also benefits from one of the world's leading teachers of conducting: Jorma Panula has taught every now-famous Finnish conductor, including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Osmo Vänska, Leif Segerstam, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Sakari Oramo and Mikko Franck.

into the amalgam that is Helsinki. I like to think Jean Sibelius's distinct musical style illustrates perfectly this fusion. Sibelius came from a Swedish-speaking background, was influenced musically by Tchaikovsky, and was an ardently patriotic Finn. To this day, Finland has two official languages – Finnish and Swedish – which is reflected in the bilingual street signs.

Finland was part of Sweden for hundreds of years, but the Russians took over in 1809. Three years later, Tsar Alexander I made Helsinki into the capital of a newly created Grand Duchy. The blindingly white Cathedral (Tuomiokirkko), completed in 1852, wouldn't look out of place in St Petersburg – and neither would the surrounding university and government buildings. Drop into the National Library, which boasts a splendid Empire-style interior unequalled in Finland.

For a less imposing notion of grandeur, wind down at Hotel Kämp on North Esplanadi. For a while this



was the favourite haunt of Sibelius and his artistic friends. Once, the maestro's wife Aino came looking for him here. She was wondering when he planned to come home, to which he retorted: "I am an artist, not a fortune teller". Today, Kämp is the pinnacle of old-world luxury, but if you crave some smart modernism just cross the park to the south side of the boulevard. Restaurant Savoy has, since the 1930s, been one of the flagships of Finnish gastronomy, and Alvar Aalto's interior design continues to exude pure Nordic coolness. Reserve a terrace table, which provides you with a fantastic rooftop view and a chance to experience the magic of a white night.

The highlight of a first visit to Helsinki is always going to be the maritime fortress Suomenlinna, a 20-minute ferry ride from Market Square. Reserve at least half a day for the whole trip – or more in summer, when concerts and theatre performances are held in the evening. The Swedes built the maritime stronghold in 1748, across eight

rocky islands, as a defence against the Russians. Sixty years later the Swedish commander surrendered, without much resistance, to the Russians. An Anglo-French fleet bombarded the fort in 1855 during the Crimean war, causing extensive damage. There are many historical buildings, fortifications and museums, as well as a submarine that saw action during WWII. The sturdy-looking church steeple doubles, curiously, as a lighthouse.

A good national art museum should give an insight into the soul of a country. Ateneum, built in national romantic style across the road from the imposing Central Railway Station, fulfils that educational role. A highlights tour will give you a very good idea why nature is key to so much Finnish music. The paintings based on the national epic *Kalevala* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela are essential viewing for Sibelius enthusiasts, particularly because the artist was a drinking buddy of the composer. Note the fairytale-like character of the works – not wholly at odds with the composer's own interpretation of the saga.

Within walking distance is the hip contemporary art museum Kiasma, which stood at complete odds with its surroundings when built in 1998. Over the last decade, however, other new buildings have mushroomed in the vicinity and architect Steven Holl's "sculpturesque" concept is more acceptable. Kiasma's temporary exhibitions deliver the goods, but the interior is still an incomplete aesthetic success. But feel free to ignore my comments and remember Sibelius's words: "No statue has ever been raised in honour of a critic".

ARMCHAIR GUIDE Helsinki



CULTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

Finnish National Opera celebrates its centenary this year. This month you could see either *Carmen* or *Götterdämmerung*.

Ateneum Art Museum is a must on the visual arts front, especially the works of national treasures Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Albert Edelfelt and Helene Schjerfbeck.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma is home to post-1960 Finnish and foreign art, and also has a theatre for live performance, screenings and lectures.

Helsinki Music Centre is due to open this month.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

Suomenlinna Sea Fortress, founded in 1748, is probably the city's number one tourist attraction. In the summer months there are concerts on the island, and there's good food all year round.

Uspenski Orthodox Cathedral, which was completed in 1868, is the largest orthodox church in Western Europe. Entry is free.

Esplanade Park in the heart of Helsinki is a popular chill-out spot. It's also home to a range of special events throughout the year, including concerts.

FOOD & DRINK

Hotel Kämp is not just a hotel, it also has three top restaurants (including Japanese and traditional Finnish). www.hotelkamp.com

Restaurant Savoy has been a fine dining hotspot for decades, and is still a class act today. www.royalravintolat.com

Suomenlinna Brewery Restaurant offers traditional beer and a range of tasty seasonal delicacies. www.suomenlinna.fi

Spärakoff pub tram gets the novelty vote – it's a travelling pub that does circuits of the city. Great for the thirsty tourist!

Shaker cocktail bar in Kamppi's Tennis Palace regularly appears on Finland's "best bar" lists. www.shaker.fi

