

# The Frozen Wave in Finland

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There is a certain joy in challenging stereotypes and returning the gaze -- and I experience it on trips to those parts of the world where I am an absolute oddity.

An Indian (which is to say brown-skinned) lone woman with a camera and a notebook, dressed so that I could definitely not be mistaken for a business traveller, observing people and places with the leisurely indulgence of a writer and poet, I arrived in the Finnish capital Helsinki late one wintry night in early February, after a stretch of travelling in Spain, Ireland, and Denmark.

The nordic winter isn't a joke. The average temperature plummets to between minus 10 and minus 30 degrees celsius, there's often a biting wind, and little daylight. Snow blanketed everything around me as I stood outside the Vantaa airport waiting for a bus to take me into the imposing Rautatietori central station in town. An elderly Swedish couple caressed each other tenderly. A bulky Texan real-estate man, who had landed from the same plane, made small talk and asked me a few predictable questions - why was I travelling alone? was I married? I wonder if male globetrotters ever get asked questions like that. Avoiding the personal, though not discouraging conversation, I reflected, with spurious bravado, 'It isn't so cold here after all'. I don't know what I expected, but passing by a cafe called 'Hemingway' on the way to the city, I thought of Martha Gellhorn's words: if you can deal with the Finnish climate, you can deal with anything. 'There is so much snow here, pity there isn't a commercial use for it', a fellow passenger said. I peered at the inky montage of the fiercely chilly wind that blurred the white views outside, and imagined machines shovelling truckloads of snow into a big industrial plant that would digest and convert it into drinking water which could quench famine thirst elsewhere.

I was to sleep on the living room couch of an academic friend couple, intelligent and lively Finns - they enlightened me about aspects of Finnish history, in particular the complex identity of the Karelian people, divided between Finland and Russia. Over homemade potato and leek soup, salad leaves, and hard cheese slices on sour rye bread (I had turned vegetarian some time ago), we talked Scandinavian politics, the Right and Left, the rights, and what's left!

The next morning I woke to the angelus of the beautiful red Johannekserine church with its aquamarine metal roof and spires paled by the azure skies, and in the following days, set about exploring Helsinki, the only way I know to explore cities, like a flaneur, on foot. I keep a map with me in the bag but other than a rough sense of place, I let myself be guided by the streets - the sounds, chance sights, sheer instinct.

I did this for several days out of habit, only rarely getting onto a tram - but it is a mixed strategy in the numbing cold, while one gets amazing pictures and thoughts, the biggest drawbacks are the inability to take notes spontaneously and the possibility of slipping on the icy pavements! I have high tolerance for weather extremes, but not much spare cash for cashmere coats, so I would dress in stretchable denim trousers over 60 denier tights, at least two sweaters (one of alpaca wool) underneath a jacket, long woollen scarf wrapped

around the neck, two woolen caps, two socks, two gloves, and big brown leather boots that served me well. Nonetheless, I would feel the lazy cold wind (lazy, as the northern England saying goes, because it makes its way through you instead of around you) even under the rare clear skies that were blue enough to make a pair of sailor's trousers (that's another colloquialism I picked up in England)!

February the 5th is the day when Johann Ludvig Runeberg, a nineteenth century Finnish poet, was born. It is special because of the Runeberg's tart (a pastry confection that looks like a cylindrical muffin topped with jam) that is eaten to commemorate this. I dodged into a bookshop cafe and relished one with dark espresso; coffee is a great cure for many things. As I made my way across large empty squares washed white with snow, I spent hours in historic Museums and magnificent churches, cobblestone alleyways and tucked away cafes, workers' districts, tram yards.

I listened to Rasmus (not live in a concert). I was invited, along with my hosts, to a lavish dinner at the home of two intrepid guys who exchanged their engagement rings under the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. We talked about happiness in life. I collected photographs of street art -- though Helsinki is nowhere close to Christiania, Ljubljana, Berlin or London when it comes to how much visual street expression there is -- it is still possible to find random sketches, graffiti, stickers on lampposts that make interesting points on everything from capitalism to world peace. I tried stepping barefoot for a few seconds in the snow in a park one day.

I saw a frozen wave.

I have mostly lived in landlocked cities, cannot swim (I have a tremendous respect for people who can do things I haven't learnt to - like swim, play the flute, talk in Esperanto, write computer programmes), and I have a fascination for the ocean. The morning in Helsinki when I first saw a standstill sea, it was quite dramatic. The entire waterbody had frozen and it was a long endless white landscape. It had been on TV that the depth of ice had been tested by driving a 4x4 vehicle over it, so it was surely safe to frolic on the solid ground there. Families strolled, children played, someone motorbiked, on what would be roaring heaving water in a few months!

It was mesmerising to see a wave that had been stopped mid-movement, every crest of foam transformed, as if by a magic spell, into serrated icy edges. It glistened in the weak light of the sun, and cast a shadow - gray-blue on white; it was like witnessing sublimated movement.

Around the world, people carry a bit of Finland in their pockets - the Nokia phone. A Scandinavian liquor called Punsch has a derived origin from Panch or five in Hindi. I thought of how, like India, Finland could be described as being postcolonial, with regard to its complicated historical relationship with Russia and Sweden, and the Sami indigenous people of northern Finland. And while a large majority of people in Finland are Lutheran Christians, there are some of other faiths, including Jews and Muslims.

There is an astonishing diversity of architecture - from the self-conscious modernism of the Kiasma museum of contemporary art, to the romanticism of the National Museum and the Ateneum (buildings set around statues of famous warriors on horseback) which have illustrations of the Finnish national epic Kalevala by the famous painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela. There are examples of architecture and design by Aino and Alvar Aalto, and a ubiquitous presence of Marimekko design products. The Church in the Rock

(Temppeliaukion kirkko) is like a flying saucer made of stones. Since it was closed for renovation when I visited, I climbed up on the cupola roof and had a good look around. The Russian orthodox Uspenski cathedral is dim inside and dark, there are gold gilded icons and crosses and the smell of incense. What a contrast to the Lutheran cathedral (Tuomiokirkko) in the Senate square, or the Kallion Church (Kallion kirkko) in the workers' district, which are grand buildings - one white and majestic with pillars, steps, and the second with gritty tall brown tower - but both comparatively plain and functionalist inside, in keeping with the Lutheran tradition. Here I saw large organ pipes being reflected with precise clarity on the perfectly polished large piano tops, and many devout worshippers. A public artwork of gigantic metal organ pipes welded together in a park (Sibeliuksen puisto) also forms a monument to the Finnish composer Sibelius.

Each wandering day would begin in the late morning - there was light outside for a mere few hours in the winter - and finish at night. I chatted to old and young people (English is widely spoken in the city), took unexpected turnings, once finding myself near a place where the ferries left for Estonia. If I had not the visa restrictions, I might even have stepped on one! The days were generally clear and rain-free (I was told the weather had been miserably wet a week ago), though the snow was a constant.

One particular evening, I was especially distracted as I walked my way through some tall dry weeds by a frozen lake. It would be a shortcut to cross over it, but it wasn't advisable because it was rather out of the way and could have ice-cracks. I mulled over it, everything was a prophetic dreamlike blue in the surroundings. I recalled an older Finnish lady who told me how in her remote northern village where the winter is much harsher, her solitary neighbour committed suicide at the onset of previous spring. 'Why?' I had asked; if the man had lived through the bad winter, why kill himself in spring? 'He couldn't bear the light coming back', she said simply. Apparently, after the bleak and brutal winter under such isolated conditions, sometimes people find it difficult to adjust to the return of light and life. It was a cold depressive evening. I had written several pages of verse. I might have been a character in a Bergman film. Everyone I'd known, every book I'd read, every place I'd been, seemed suddenly infernal and false. I was not me.

There was a traffic hum in the distance behind me, sounding as a refrigerator in the night. The anemic moon was a cellophane wrapped shadow in the sky. I hesitated - noting that there was one diagonal track where some people had earlier crossed the deserted lake. Should I follow the beaten path and be safe, or should I just set out on the snow and see? On the other hand, wouldn't there be a greater chance of the ice cracking where it was already trod upon? I uprooted the tallest and widest weed stem I could find (it was almost my height) and set out making footprints of my own as I tramped through the snow reaching well above my ankles, testing it periodically with the weed. An hour or so later, I was back in town centre where fries tempted me near a McDonalds arch. A busker in the shopping arcade doorway played drums patiently with a humorous cardboard sign held aloft - 'credit card payments accepted'.

I'm terrible at timetables. I was to leave Finland in the evening from another city called Tampere; I had to make sure to get to the Helsinki station on time as the airport bus schedule was connected to the flight departures. That very morning, I impulsively decided to make a visit to the Suomenlinna fortress island, a ferry ride away from Helsinki. The ferries run infrequently in the winter.

The Finnish pronunciation is melodic; it lingers at places in a word, as the repeated n in Suomenlinna, literally the Castle of Finland - I was sure I could not forego the pleasure of

sampling a UNESCO World Heritage Site that sounded so delightful; plus it had a long military history and significance. From the Kauppatori market square to Suomenlinna, it is a short journey; less than half an hour. Yet what makes it especially fabulous in the winter is the ice-breaker ship that leads the way before the ferry. That gray day, I bought my ticket with euro coins from a machine, checked with the old bearded Polish captain about the timing, impressed upon him my need to make the return journey, and stood on the chilly deck, watching our ship gingerly follow the course cleared by the ice-breaker vessel which went cracking through the surface ahead. The orphaned slabs of ice bobbed up and down on the dark waters, and sea birds shrieked overhead. I was the only sightseer aboard.

Reaching the island, there was a light fuchsia pink building with a passage which led to the many structures, fortifications, bunkers, large cast metal bells, museums. There were cannon shaped railings and bridges over stilly frozen streams, transmitters and statues - everything in its coating of snow. I spent a long time wandering, taking pictures, and headed for the furthest opposite (from Helsinki) tip of the island. Clambering over wood, holding onto submerged stones, I did get to the place where land and sea were indistinguishably painted white as far as the eye could see. There were hardly any people about and I forgot to check my watch, or rather underestimated the amount of time it would take to come back to the ferry stand. When I abruptly realised how late I was, I hurried back.

But, have you ever tried running in an unfamiliar and uneven landscape with snow that reaches your knees? I was frantic. I knew I must get the ferry back to be able to get the bus back, to be able to get the plane back. I rushed, breathlessly running in my multiple layers of clothes, stopping now and again to ask for directions, something of a task given there was almost no one about. The landmarks by which I had navigated my way to the opposite edge of the island disappeared in hours. It was a struggle to remain oriented when everything around me was white. It was like being in a snow desert - all directions appeared blank. I ran and ran, my face turned red, and I sweated in the minus 15 degree temperature! At last, I found my way to where the ferry was, about to sail, I made it literally by a couple of seconds. The rows of plastic seats on the deck were dusted white and empty. I got on, panting. A deck hand smiled, saying, 'It's alright. You made it on board'. He was smoking, and offered me a cigarette. I was dizzy. Flushed and frozen at the same time, my face felt like burning leather. I was soon shivering again.

Growing up in India as a child, I read the tales of Akbar and Birbal - the Mughal emperor and his witty courtier - in one of which Akbar observes that no man can stand all night submerged in a lake in cold weather. Birbal finds him a poor fellow who does this for the prize offered by the emperor. After his feat, Akbar refuses him the prize when he says that he looked upon a distant palace light and derived imagined warmth from it. Birbal makes Akbar understand the error by trying to cook rice (a khichdi) by suspending a pot from a tall tree branch and lighting a tiny fire much below on the ground, and the poor fellow gets his deserved reward. Well, I learnt the wrong lesson at any rate, since on many frozen walks, I have imagined warm things like candle flames, roaring fireplaces, bonfires and derived real comfort from the thoughts.

That night, I did make it to the Tampere-Pirkkala airport, but the low-cost flight to London was delayed. I sat with an overpriced - even by Scandinavian standards - bag of crisps and a cup of tea without sugar and milk in the only cafe in the building and furiously wrote my impressions of the previous days.

It was snowing again as I left, and the propellers were being dusted by the powdery flakes. I was glad to have survived my rambling in the Finnish wintry weather, and enjoyed it enough to again be driving halfway across the circumference of Iceland from Reykjavik to Akureyri the next winter, celebrating my birthday being trapped in a blizzard near the Godefoss Falls (Waterfall of the Gods)! But that's another story.