

June 4, 2020

I still need some more distraction so today I want to tell you about the parks of Helsinki, Finland, the farthest I have ever travelled and the farthest north I have ever been. I have been there 2 times both close to the mid-summer holidays that fall on June 21 and continue unofficially for a few weeks.

The city of Helsinki is actually built on 315 islands and is at the tip of a large peninsula that extends into the Bay of Finland with a large port for cargo but especially cruise ships, large and small as tourism is a major industry in Finland.

From about now through mid-July it is daylight around the clock. The nights are not full bright but have kind of a smoky haze as the angle of the sun highlights the particulate matter in the air.

There is a large lake in the center of the city with a walking/running path of about a mile and a half that follows the contours of the land so there are some rather steep inclines of declines for an average walker/runner.

One side of the lake has park like areas for lounging, listening to music and drama, lectures and recitals, the national concert hall, a very fine restaurant, play areas for kids, and winter play areas for skating and sledding and those kinds of activities.

The other side is a neighborhood of eclectic cottages high on hills that overlook the lake. Most of Helsinki residents as in all Scandinavian cities live in large concrete or brick apartment buildings positioned on the perimeter of the block with open spaces between the sides where there are zillions of clothes lines, picnic areas, playgrounds, seating areas, and little kid space, with no big kid playgrounds as big kids play sports in purpose built areas without fans, parents, or other people just watching.

Every building has enormous and complicated laundry areas with huge clothesline areas for indoor winter drying. I could never figure out the reservation system so I would go to a laundromat.

Most of Helsinki water, hot and cold, is recycled from power plants that produce electricity that is stored in huge underground lakes and used for hot

and cold water as well as heating. No one has their own furnace, air conditioning, or hot water tank because of this elaborate system of heat and cooling exchanges throughout the city.

The cemeteries in Helsinki are awesome, intentionally laid out not simply as graveyards but as destinations for contemplation and reflection on the mysteries of life and the mysteries of death still in these days when even fewer Fin's claim religious belief or practice than Americans.

One Jewish cemetery holds graves that date to the 19th century when Finland was a Grand Duchy of Russia. One of the tiny islands that had been in past times the site of an asylum for the insane, as they were commonly called, holds a Jewish cemetery, a Muslim cemetery, several Christian cemeteries of various denominations, and a municipal cemetery.

There is a large park that runs through much of the city that holds the very modern buildings of the University of Finland mixed with small little summer sleeping cottages, very common in Scandinavian urban areas, allotment gardens, really small farms for growing vegetables and flowers, and incredibly landscaped areas with native plants, water features, and natural rock formations for sitting and walking, socializing, and gazing at the beauty of the earth and sky which is what I did a lot of when I visited.

In 1952 Helsinki hosted the Winter Olympics and that left behind a very large park like area with paths and gardens and resting spots scattered among the various winter sports venues created for the Olympics.

Helsinki has an extensive tram system with trams just wide enough for one person and extensive bus and train systems that efficiently get you around the city and suburban areas.

The national museum of art was the first museum in the world to purchase and display a painting by Vincent Van Gogh.

There is one shopping mall in the city with residential, retail, recreational, and commercial/profession spaces all mixed together.

Similar to other cities in Europe the best grocery shopping is done at a huge flagship department store, Stockmann, has hundreds of kinds of cured and

smoked salmon, picture perfect fruits and vegetables that you never touch until you get them home, a flower market the likes of which I have never seen, and everything else you could ever imagine.

The state-controlled liquor stores offer very, very expensive wine, beer, above 6%, and spirits as the taxes on alcohol are huge owing to the high rates of alcoholism and alcohol abuse and car and snow mobile crashes that exist because of the long cold winters, at least that is the story.

There are very few Catholics in Helsinki, but the cathedral and Vatican embassy and cathedral residence are in a single-family neighborhood of homes the likes of which you cannot imagine that are situated in another huge park that adjoins the Bay of Finland just beyond the busy port areas for tourist cruise ships.