

# My Visit to Finland Part 1

## Helsinki

Romana 06-27-2023

### Note

All pictures in this essay were taken by me, except those labeled *satellite* or *downloaded*. All my pictures are copyrighted.

### Background

When I sold my house in March 2021, I had enough money left over to travel to Finland, but the pandemic was still ongoing, so I had to shelve that idea. Also, I had no idea how I was going to do this. I had thought about renting a car and doing a planned itinerary, but I was leery of that idea. After my trip, I realized how bad this idea was.

### Why was this Special?

I wanted to show that someone who grew up autistic and had transitioned to become a trans-woman could manage such a trip. After all, my identity was legal and I had a valid passport in my legal name. I had almost 18 years experience living as a woman, and I had my Buddhist meditation practice to help me deal with inconvenient situations, of which there would be many. Lastly, I was two generations remote from Finnish immigrants. The only catch was that I was now 80 years old.

### I found a way

In November 2022, I contacted Kensington Tours to see if they could help me. After several iterations, the agent and I settled on a tour of the Lake Land region of Finland. My tour was to include hotels, train rides, a driver, and a guide. As a point of interest, my neighborhood in Auburn, Washington State is often called Lake Land.

I decided to leave Seatac Airport on May 9, 2023, flying with Iceland Air. I reserved a shuttle to and from the airport with Shuttle Wizard. So the planning began.

### My cats would be taken care of

I found a place to board my cats, Jake and Saphora, where they would have a little house to themselves.

### I started preparation

I got a photo backpack for my cameras and a small carry-on case. Then I put aside the majority of the planning for the days right before departure. I tend to procrastinate.

Jake got sick

I was leaving on a Tuesday. I had been watching Jake for several days after he developed a cough. On the Friday before departure, I took him to an emergency vet. The X-rays did not look good, but the diagnosis was confusing. Since he had had these bouts before, I decided to risk boarding him while I was in Finland and then take him to my vet. The decision turned out to be the correct one.

I had to get ready!

I put in a hold order on my mail. I decided to take my medium suitcase as luggage to be checked. Due to my age, it would be a lot easier to pull around than my full-sized suitcase. This meant that my packing had to be better planned. I purchased roaming credits from T-Mobile, but this turned out to be a bad idea. I should have purchased a phone card for Europe.

I put all my pills in a dispenser that sorted them by day. This way, I avoided hefty bottles and made sure my sleeping pills were included. If I could not sleep, I would be in trouble. I also threw in a backup wig.

When I first loaded up my photo backpack, it was way too heavy. My 50-400 mm lens was out of the question. I finally ended up packing two of my full-frame Sony DSLR's: one with a 20 mm wide angle and another with a 28-200 mm zoom lens. I decided I could not take the tripod that was in a side pocket. When I put in my tablet and laptop, the backpack was still heavy. Later, I would move the laptop to my carry-on.

On Monday, I dropped off the cats; my house seemed empty without them. I tried not to forget anything. I made sure my passport was where I could find it.



Departure Day

I decided to wear my Eddie Bauer dress with leggings on the plane. I had a sweater and a light jacket. In addition, I took only skirts and tops, but no pants..

I had to be at the airport three hours before departure. The Shuttle Wizard driver notified me he was coming, so I assembled my luggage at the end of my carport and set my alarm using my mobile phone. I got a message that he had arrived, but he was nowhere in sight. I reminded him that he was not at unit 82. He finally arrived, and I was on my way.

The Iceland Air desk was not yet open, so I waited with a crowd. Flight FI680 to Iceland was the only Iceland Air departure of the day. Finally they opened; I check my suitcase without any problem. I was pre-approved, so I got in that line. Still, they thoroughly frisked me, because I have replacement knees and

metal in my back. I could not get around this indignity! I took the shuttle train to the departure island



Finally, I boarded the Boeing 757-200. I had requested an aisle seat for all flights, and that was what I got. I was seated next to a heavy-set woman who had purchased two seats. After a long taxi, I was off to Iceland on a six-hour flight, where I would gain time because I was flying east.

#### Arrival in Iceland

So the plane landed at a D gate. There was boring fog outside. Nowhere in the information about Iceland Air does it talk about or even show one of their airport shuttle buses taking passengers to the main terminal. These buses are used because there is no fast way to get through the terminal itself. The bus was crowded!

A trip through customs was mandatory. I was asked why I was visiting Finland, so I explained because my grandparents had come from Finland. I was granted entry into the Schengen treaty region.

There was a long line for the women's restroom, as usual. I managed to get into a side restroom for older people. This is where I first observed for the first time that the toilet paper dispenser can be nowhere near the toilet. I would see this again.

It was a long walk to the C gate, where I was again bused to a D gate. A Boeing 737 with no television screens had substituted for the originally-scheduled plane. Flight FI342 to Helsinki would take over three hours.

#### Arrival in Finland

It was already May 10<sup>th</sup> when the plane began its descent. My seat was over a wing, but I got glimpses of the very green landscape punctuated by countless lakes. After landing, I followed the other passengers down one level to the baggage claim. Miraculously, after all the horror stories, my suitcase had arrived.

Upon exiting baggage claim to the main concourse, I got confused. Was this where I was to meet my driver? I did not see anyone. I started to wander. I think I wanted to find a bench to sit on, but there were none at all.

There were no signs posted for a help desk, so I tried calling a Kensington number. My phone did not work. I should have gone back, but I stayed on the wrong side of the concourse. Here I was in a foreign country totally confused, but I did not panic. I looked up hotel on my printed itinerary: Hotel Haven. I went to the taxi waiting area and hired a taxi take me to my hotel.



Stepping away from the taxi, I almost fell on my face. There were steps, and steps would be the rule in Finland, rather than the exception.



I got my hotel room and had the desk contact Kensington Tours. My keycard was required to reach the fourth floor. Later, my driver met me in the lobby. I could not explain why we did not meet. He told me that a guide would meet me in the morning for a tour of Helsinki. My Garmin Instinct watch died, even though it had a 24 day charge before I left. Going through all the time zones depleted the battery, and I had forgotten the proprietary charging cable.

When I returned to my room, I found I had no power. The front desk told me to insert my keycard in a slot on the wall, at which point all the power in the room became operational. Kensington Tours had left me a paper sack filled with food items, most of which I never had time to eat.

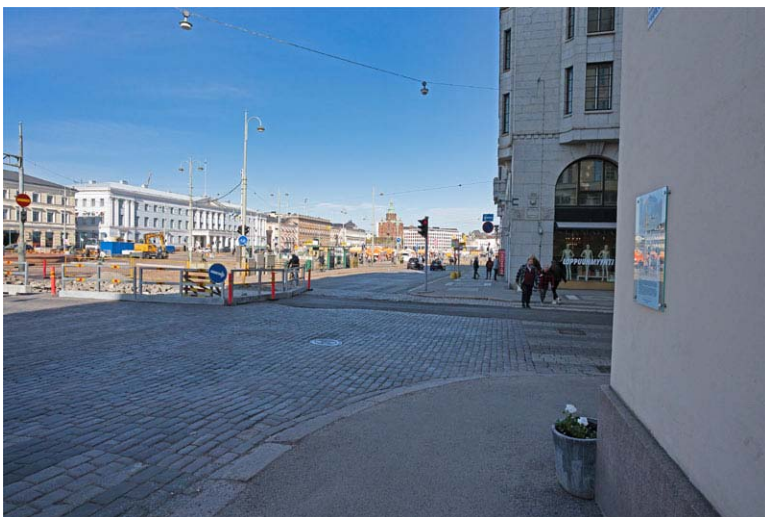


I stepped out and took pictures of downtown Helsinki. There was a lot of construction.





Free public restrooms were everywhere. Most were labeled WC for water closet.







At night in my room, I found out I had forgotten my shower sandals, so I had to carefully walk around on bare feet, which is tricky since I have Plantar fasciitis. The shower system was unfamiliar, with a high shower head and a wand. The wrong adjustment meant getting bathed in cold water from the high shower head.

### My Day In Helsinki

I had read my itinerary many times, but I did not realize was staying two nights. I learned this when I mistakenly tried to check out.

The free breakfast was great, but the second-floor path to its location in a neighboring building was not as well-marked as they claimed.

I met my guide in the lobby. He was a 37-year-old man who did not own a car. We would be on foot. In order to lighten my backpack, I stored my laptop with my other luggage.

The weather was unseasonably warm, so I did not have to wear leggings with my outfit.



We went down the steps to the back entrance of the hotel, which led to the docks and the waterfront. After walking a few hundred feet, I realized I needed a hat, so I purchased a grey cap from a nearby vendor that said *Finland* and had a colorful image of a reindeer. There was a lot of activity in the harbor.



I did not visit the Sky Wheel, which has specialty cabins like a sauna in one.

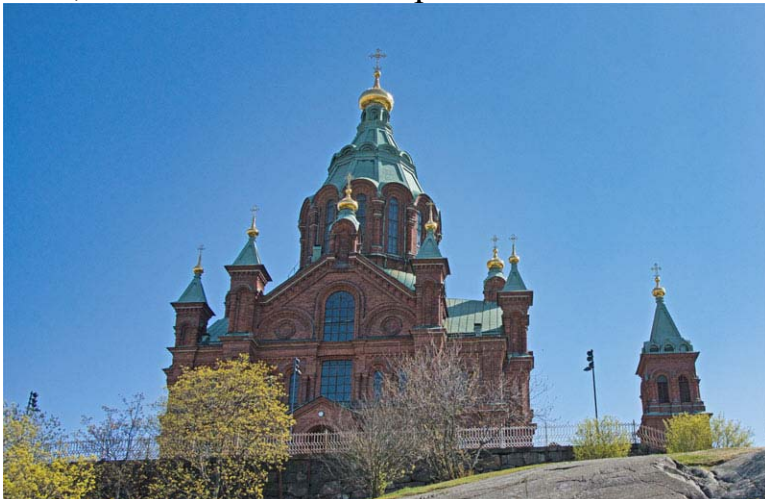


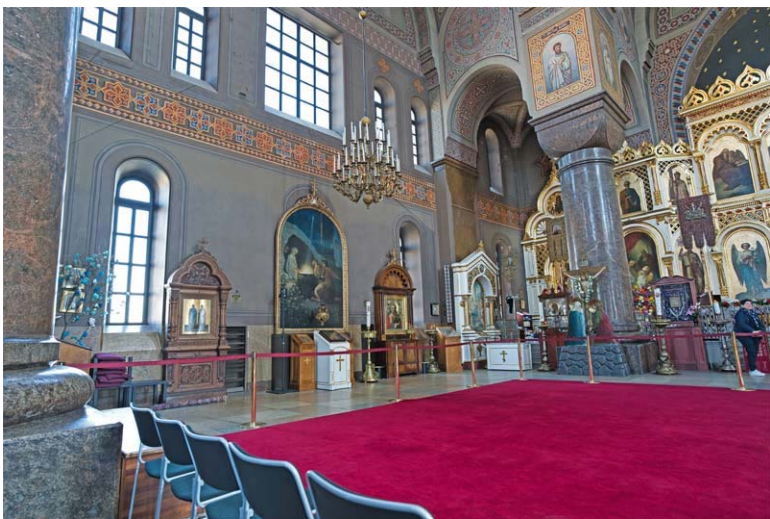
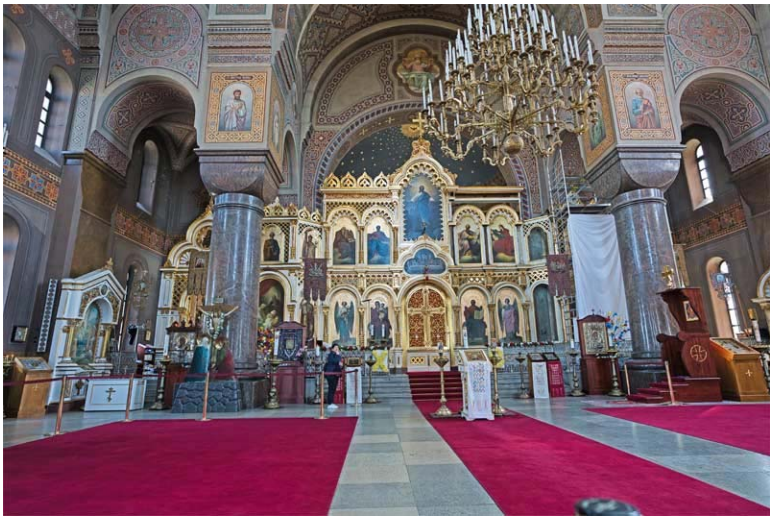




The old power plant will become a museum.

The next stop was the Uspenski Cathedral Hilltop center of the Finnish Orthodox faith. It had an ornate exterior and lavish interior decoration. As usual for Finland, there were a lot of steps climb. The church first opened in 1868.







We walked up a hill and around back of the Helsinki Cathedral, the towering icon of Finland with its green domes. The basement was spacious in its own right, and there was going to be a concert in the evening. Then we walked around the building to the main entrance. The inside was spacious. There was a service in session.

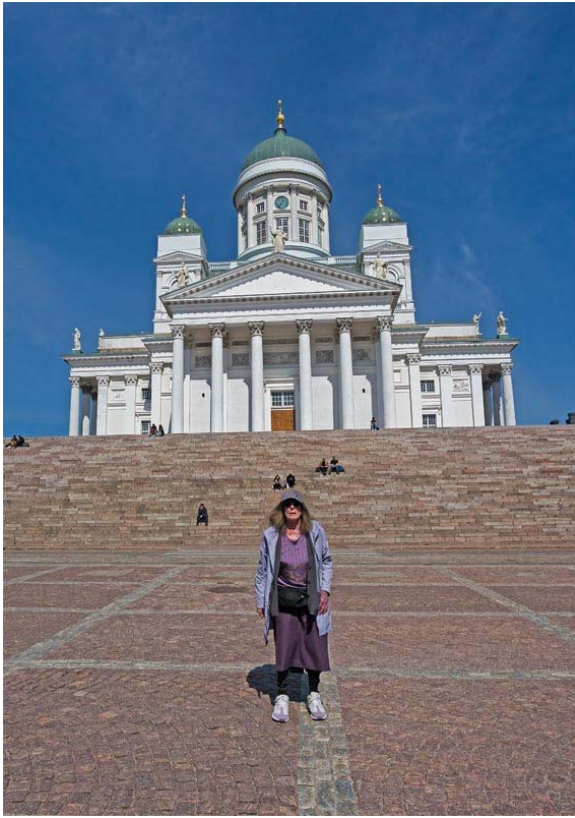


The church overlooked Senate Square, which was a public get-together place with neoclassical architecture in large public square with the cathedral, Government Palace and university.

. In the center of the square was a statue of Czar Alexander II. Though popular, he was eventually assassinated.

Off to one side, there was an ongoing political rally by concerned citizens. Finnish people make sure they don't lose rights when administrations change.







Next we went to the Helsinki Central Library Oodi. I was shown the multi-floor modern library, which had robot book carts. I saw the carts in action.



Getting my picture taken with the Helsinki Logo Sign was a must for any visitor.



The Vanha Kauppahalli food market was right behind hotel Haven. This traditional, 19th-century venue features shops and stalls offering unique Finnish specialties. I did not try the elk or bear meat. I used the unisex restroom in the facility. This was where my guide and I would part company for the time being. I had a bowl of salmon with noodles; then I returned to hotel room.







Back at my room, I sort of got my cell phone working when I turned on the roaming feature. It was still no good for making calls.

In the morning, I had the free breakfast. I judged that the wig I got last November had been consumed by frizzes, so I switched to the backup wig which was in better shape. I got a packet that had been left for me, but I did not recognize what a train ticket looked like, so I tossed the ticket aside. I packed and went down the lobby to wait for my driver. I set my cell phone on a table, when I should have been more careful.

My driver had a Mercedes van with Estonian license plates. He explained that cars were 30% cheaper in Estonia. My driver took me to the train station for my trip to Turku..



My seat was a deluxe, which meant there would be no one beside me. Suddenly, I realized I did not have a ticket, so my driver had to clear that up for me. Once the train began moving, I found out I had left my cell phone in the Haven lobby. There was nothing I could do about it until I reached Turku.