

Frozen Thrills

Who says winter can't be fun? We dive under the ice in Finland to find a world of adventure.



WORDS STUART FORSTER | **PHOTOGRAPHS** STUART FORSTER & VISIT FINLAND

A flurry of snow and ice surrounds me. The Arctic wind whips my red cheeks, rosy from both the sub-zero temperature and the adrenaline rush. My body trembles, with nothing between my bare skin and the cold.

Last minute doubts are starting to kick in as I jog down the steps leading towards the ice-pool in Lake Pyhäjärvi at Nokia, 10 miles (16km) west of Tampere. The name of the small town is, of course, recognized throughout the world for its well-known telecommunications giant.

Hundreds of spectators are standing on the pool embankment watching the Finnish Winter Swimming Championships, cheering on the participants. Indeed, winter swimming is a popular activity in Finland, with almost 800 swimmers participating in these annual competitions. Most are Finns but Russians, Latvians, a handful of Brits and a single New Zealander are also taking part in this year's race. Locals have been telling me it keeps them healthy and strengthens their immune system.

"Emerging from the pool following a winter swim is the best sensation in the world," says one of my local friends who swims in winter just for the fun of it.

Along with five other competitors, I'm taken into a tent next to the pool and the rules are explained, in Finnish then English. The key point that I have to remember is not to put my head under the surface of the water, which has a temperature of just over 33.8°F (1°C). It will mean disqualification, but more importantly, it also increases the risk of us passing out. Professional divers, I'm assured, sit waiting in dry suits in case of emergencies.

It's time to head outside for the race. My heart pumps louder than before, pounding like a drum roll. My awareness heightens as I realize that it is too late to back out. I clench my



JUST BACK FINLAND

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teeth to prepare for the numbing chill as I lower my foot into the water.

Yet the cold of the water clearly heightens my perception as I'm able to understand whatever Finnish is for "take your marks" before the buzzer sounds. The race is just 25 meters but this isn't like swimming in a standard pool; I have to concentrate, forcing my arms to pull through the strokes and my legs to kick. Even though the contest takes just a matter of seconds I can hardly feel my arms and legs as I approach the finishing mark.

Breathing harder than usual, I climb out of the pool and a tingling feeling ricochets through my body like low voltage electric shocks. Perhaps it's the adrenaline rush or the sense of achievement, but a renewed energy

quickly replaces the electric bolts.

Stomping Tampere

Over the next few days, I learn that winter doesn't necessarily keep the Finnish indoors. To seek out more of Finland's winter pursuits, I head to Tampere, the lively university city 106 miles (170km) north west of the capital, Helsinki.

With over 215,000 residents, Tampere is the biggest inland city in any of the Scandinavian or Nordic countries. It was founded as an industrial town on the isthmus between two lakes, Näsijärvi and Pyhäjärvi, which are now largely used for outdoor activities. Despite drastic urban development, backcountry



White beauty: Snow surrounds me at Tampere (top left); swimming in winter (top right); modern snowshoes.



adventures can still be found in the outskirts of the city.

I join an outdoor adventure tour guide, Liisa, by the shore of Lake Näsijärvi, where she selects a pair of snowshoes for me. Looking down at the ice and the fissures that run deep beneath its surface, I tap to see how thin the layer of ice actually is. “Don’t worry, the lake will hold your weight,” she assures me.

The snow shoes’ teeth grip tightly onto the surface, which makes moving around surprisingly straightforward. I’m impressed by how quickly we can move with these snowshoes, which are shaped more like squat skies than the tennis rackets you see in cartoons. No wonder it’s a hit amongst the locals –snowshoeing makes for an excellent workout and gets you soaking up nature.

In the middle of the frozen lake, we pause to chat with a tall, white-haired man fishing through small holes bored into the ice. He sees that I’m fascinated and shows me how easy it is to burrow a hole using nothing more than a five-foot-long handdrill. It takes him less than a

minute before water gushes upwards through the threads of the drill. He then hooks a catch as I watch. He learnt this trick from his father, who had picked it up from his grandfather. The tradition has been passed on for generations - and from what we can see - it hasn’t changed much in the past few decades. With the sky gray and a dusting of snow on the lake’s icy surface, we move on, leaving the fisherman to his solitude.

Back on land, we tramp over white powdery snow, to get to a wooden hut ensconced within a thick pine forest. After working up quite an appetite, we find ourselves at a wooden hut, and Liisa invites us to enter.

Inside, fat pork sausages grill over a wood-fuelled fire that wafts the faint fragrance of pine. We lean over the crackling logs to warm ourselves and

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Liisa heats a pot of coffee over the fire. My face flushes hot as the low flames exorcize the cold and the coffee warms me from within. We chat and unwind after a day of action out in the cold. The Finns, as I learn, sure know how to pamper their guests.

Rally Driving

Before heading home, I have one more challenge awaiting in Tampere: rally driving at the Motor Space circuit. Ice covers the meandering track, set on a clearing among pine trees. This is the most challenging time to race on the circuit, which is open throughout the year.

Popular among bachelor parties and corporate groups, it offers curious revelers the chance to race the rear-wheel drive Volvos with manual gearshifts. What might be team building to some is just a session of mechanized fun for me. Dressed in blue racing overalls and a helmet, I take on the driver’s seat in the bare interior, stripped down to the essentials to reduce weight. I’m immediately fired up and ready for the challenge.



Ice Action: from participating in the Finnish Winter Swimming Championships (opp page); to rally driving at the Motor Space Circuit (top left). and fishing on a frozen lake (bottom left)



Walking on Ice: snowshoeing is a great way to explore Tampere's backcountry.

Despite the Arctic conditions, I'm leaving Finland with a warm feeling and blood-rushing sensation.

Other FINLAND Adventures

Finland Ice Marathon

The **Finland Ice Marathon**, held on Lake Kallavesi at Kuopio every February, is a series of ice skating activities for people of all ages and abilities. It culminates in a 124-mile (200-km) skating event. The 2013 event will be held from 22 to 25 February.

Cruise on an Icebreaker

Slice through the ice onboard the **Finnish icebreaker Sampo**, which offers winter cruises in the Gulf of Bothania, departing from Kemi. Guests can even take a dip in the icy water, dressed in warm impermeable survival suits. The cruise runs from 21 December to 13 April.

Watch the Northern Lights in Lapland

Head all the way up north to Harriniva, 143 miles (230 km) above the Arctic Circle. **Aurora Zone's Northern Lights Quest tour** includes a variety of day time activities to ensure you see the best of Lapland, with huskies, reindeer and snowmobiles all on the agenda. Most importantly are the evening activities which give you the best opportunities of seeing the Northern Lights.

I channel my enthusiasm by thrusting the accelerator, making good time on the first half of the track. Keeping to the racing line, I feel in control and want to inject even more speed, but as I come out of the last corner I hit the gas and the car spirals out of control. Despite desperately turning the wheel to regain command of the vehicle, I pirouette beyond 90 degrees and slam into the embankment of snow. Fortunately I'm safe and sound, but my heart is palpitating and my pride injured; I slam my palm against the steering wheel, frustrated that the race is over for me.

Despite the Arctic conditions, I'm leaving Finland with a warm feeling and blood-rushing sensation. The cold really isn't that intimidating after all. Maybe I need to go and cool off with a swim? **WJ**

Essential INFORMATION

When to Go

To make the most of a winter trip to the Tampere region, visiting in spring (March/April) and autumn (September/October) is recommended. Snow and ice are still abundant but the average daytime temperature rises from its freezing midwinter low to above 0°C, meaning you can enjoy getting out and about without feeling too chilly. Additionally, the days once again become longer, with enough hours of daylight to spend time out in the countryside. During the fall months of September and October, activities such as Nordic walking, trekking, fishing, and even mushroom picking are popular.

Getting There

Tampere-Pirkkala Airport (TMP) is the main gateway into the region. It is 9 miles (13 km) from Tampere's city center and served by flights operated by AirBaltic, SAS, Finnair and Ryanair.

There are no direct flights from the United States to Tampere but connections are available via Helsinki and Stockholm. Budget airline Ryanair flies from London Stansted to Tampere

and one-way fares are available from €40.74 (US\$51). The journey takes about three hours.

An airport bus (line number 61) runs between the city and Tampere-Pirkkala Airport. The journey takes approximately 40 minutes.

Getting around

Tampere itself is a relatively compact city and it's relatively easy to walk between the main sights. Public transport is efficient and buses are an option for traveling to local points of interest. Taxi ranks are dotted around the city. Locals usually call and order taxis (tel. +358 (0) 100 4131, www.taksitamper.fi) rather than hail them on the streets. Coaches and trains run between Tampere and other Finnish cities and car rentals are available at the airport.

Accommodation

For views over the city center, stay on the upper floors of the 19-story **Sokos Hotel Ilves**, which has 336 luxurious rooms. Room rates start from €118 (US\$145).

The **Hotelli Ville** is a self-service hotel about 1.5km from the city center. The

rate for a single room starts at €32 (US\$39).

The **Tampere Dream Hostel** is centrally-located, well-designed and was named Finland's Hostel of the Year in 2010 and 2011. A bed in the 16-bed dorm costs €22 (US\$27) per night.

Cost of travel

The currency used in Finland is Euro (EUR), with the exchange rate currently at €1 to US\$1.3. Prices are relatively high in Tampere although there are easy ways to travel around the region on a budget. A standard restaurant meal costs around €20 (US\$26), but you can find *mustamakkara* (black sausage) in the markets for just €2 (US\$2.6).

Packing

It's recommended to wear several layers of insulation, rather than heavy clothing. You'll need at least three layers of clothing, insulated hat, gloves and scarf. A fleece and waterproof jacket are also worthwhile. Walking boots with a good grip are also highly recommended.

Websites

Here are some helpful links:

[Lonely Planet Guide to Tampere](#)

[Visit Tampere](#)

[Visit Finland](#)

[Hiking in Finland](#)