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

The spectacular Suomenlinna sea fortress

Even Sibylla 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 seashore 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 glistening 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 Morning on the Vistula 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 (Kapparaatie) 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 with 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 boletus (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 orange one from the vendsale 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 facade clearly inspired by the Royal Palace in Stockholm. The 13 onion domes of the red-brick 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.

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 5,07,000

Currency Euro (AUS$1=AUD.75)

Best time to visit: It depends what you’re looking for: 4-5 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: Flights to Helsinki (operated by Finnair 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 17 days. The city also has an excellent network of cycle paths.

Tourist Information: www.visitfinland.fi
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 ardent 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 splendidly 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 Alma 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 World War II. This 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, fulfills 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 fairy-tale-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”.

**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 1898, 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.royalavintolat.com

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

Späoken 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 Kamp’s Tennis Palace regularly appears on Finland’s “best bar” lists. www.shaker.fi