



Women's Guide to Helsinki

— ways and manners



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Moving to a new country means adapting to new customs, norms, and ways of life –and that can feel overwhelming.

This guide is created for women who are building a life in Helsinki, offering practical advice on everything from how to make friends and invite guests home to find a job, an apartment, or dress for winter.

With tips on living smart and economically, the guide helps women navigate daily life, feel confident, and create a fulfilling life in Helsinki.

While understanding local habits can help you feel at home, it's just as important to remember that you don't have to embrace every tradition. Newcomers bring fresh perspectives and ideas – enriching Helsinki's culture in return. Building a life in a new country is always a process of give and take.

Welcome!

Finland is a nation characterised by its Nordic welfare system and democratic values. The country has two official languages: Finnish and Swedish. According to the constitution, Finnish and Swedish are recognized as equal. Swedish is spoken as a mother tongue by 5.2% of the population. Integration of immigrants into society can occur in either language. We are happy that the current government program states that 5-10% of the immigrants should be integrated into Swedish. Notable historical figures among the Swedish-speaking Finns include Tove Jansson, the beloved creator of the Moomin characters and painter Helene Schjerfbeck, composer Jean Sibelius as well as contemporary figures such as actress Alma Pöysti and politicians Eva Biaudet and Li Andersson.

Feminism in Finland is thriving and continually evolving, although many people prefer to support gender equality without identifying themselves as feminists. Finnish women are often seen as successful and independent, while modern men are equally capable of braiding their daughters' hair and leading startup companies. However, achieving full equality remains a gradual process. Currently, one of three women in Finland has experienced domestic violence, and women's average earnings stand at approximately 84 percent of men's average income.

The Swedish-speaking Finns

Swedish-speaking Finns are a minority in Finland. The law guarantees public services provided by the state and bilingual municipalities like Helsinki in both Swedish and Finnish. This means, for instance that healthcare, education and social services should be provided in both languages. However, in practice, this is not always fulfilled—often due to ignorance rather than ideological differences. In Helsinki there are many kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools in Swedish. It is also possible to study at university level in Swedish in Helsinki.

The autonomous Åland Islands is an exception where Swedish is the only official language.

Typical Swedish-speaking Finns - top five

1. We speak Swedish but we are not Swedes. Many Swedish speaking Finns have some form of relationship to Sweden, our close neighbouring country. We have a 700 years of common history as a part of Sweden up 1809. There is, however, one thing that makes us frustrated: When Swedes speak to us in English.
2. Our Lucia tradition on the 13th of December may look strange. Lucia, dressed in white, with a crown of burning candles on her head and a red ribbon around her waist is a symbol of light and hope. Lucia was an Italian saint suffering for her faith. For most of us it's a cosy part of the Christmas preparations and creating atmosphere during the darkest time of the year.
3. Holy holiday - the sea is always near. Most Swedish speaking Finns have some kind of relationship with the sea. Many of us have our roots in the archipelago and the majority of the Swedish speaking Finns live along the Finnish coast. Going to the summer cottage is a very special thing for us and usually means going to a cottage somewhere close to water. We call our cottage "lande" (countryside), "stugan" (cottage) or "villan" (the villa) even if the villa is a simple shed. Chopping wood, picking mushrooms, taking a saunabath and generally living a very simple life, for a day or two or even for the whole summer is the best thing we know.
4. Have you been invited to a summer cottage? It's an honor to be invited, but you never know what to expect. It can be anything from a castle to a small shed without a water toilet. You are very welcome to ask a lot of questions before you decide whether you are going. Should I bring a sleeping bag? Are we going to take a sauna bath? Are we going there by boat? What are the sleeping arrangements? Should I bring food? Keep in mind that especially mid June and July are the main holiday months.
5. Where to find us in Helsinki? Swedish-speaking Finns might be hard to find because we blend in easily among Finnish-speaking Finns. To ensure you will meet one of us, join an arts and crafts course at the institute Arbis,

go to a service home at Folkhälsan, join Marthaförbundet, our political party The Swedish People's party of Finland SFP or its women's organisation Svenska Kvinnoförbundet. We are also keen on singing in choirs as Lyran, Muntra musikanter and Akademen, downhill skiing in Swinghill as well as sailing and belonging to NJK/HSS. We enjoy theatre at Svenska Teatern or Lilla Teatern, and love handball and scouting.

The core of Finnish culture and people

Finnish people - Finnish people are known for their honesty, integrity, and respect for personal space. They value equality and have a strong sense of social responsibility. We are learning small talk, but we usually get straight to the point.

Work-life balance means - Finland is known for promoting a healthy work-life balance, with shorter working hours and generous vacation policies compared to many other countries.

Sauna is the only religion in Finland! Naked and as often as possible—it's a favourite free-time activity. Even meetings can be held in the sauna!

Social equality and welfare – have you ever heard the phrase, “Finland is the happiest country in the world”? Finland is leading the way in solving homelessness and has achieved great results so far. The welfare system is accessible to everyone on equal grounds. Kindergarten is free for those with a low income, schools are free for everyone and even the universities. Municipal healthcare is affordable and accessible. There is also the option of private healthcare, which is more expensive. In Finland private healthcare is included in occupational healthcare, paid by employers.

Greetings are an important part of socialising. A firm handshake, eye contact and a warm smile work wonders. And people are usually quite casual, it is common to address people by their first name, even in formal settings.

Quietness – it is such a big part of the culture that at first, you may find it strange, but later, you will appreciate it. Have you ever been on a metro train where no one says a word?

Personal space – everyone has one but Finns go the extra mile. Finns were already one step ahead during the pandemic when keeping a safe distance was the rule.

Coffee – did you know that Finnish people consume most coffee per capita in the world? Offering coffee when someone comes for a visit is a norm!

Invitation – when invited to someone's home, make sure only the people who actually were invited show up. It is important to know beforehand what the event is about and to act accordingly. When inviting people to your own home or to an event, make sure they know what the occasion is or the topic of the event.

Gift-giving is common on special occasions such as birthdays, holidays, housewarmings, and random visits. Finns appreciate thoughtful and practical gifts. Flowers, chocolates and wine are popular choices. But expensive gifts are not common. Gifts are usually opened right away in front of the giver.

Sisu is a unique Finnish concept, and Finns take great pride in it. It reflects their ability to overcome hardships and obstacles with a strong spirit, as well as their acceptance of both good and bad days.

Everything about nature, weather and seasons

Forest and outdoor activities – the land of a thousand lakes, wild animals, berries and northern lights. People spend a lot of time in nature.



Weather – always check the weather forecast before heading out. The weather can change quickly in Finland and snow, wind and rain can be brutal at times. Different layers such as cotton, wool and windproof on top are recommended when cold and/or windy. The choice between rubber boots and waterproof hiking shoes can be difficult.

Winter sports have a special place in Finnish culture. Because winter is so long one needs to find a hobby. It truly offers various opportunities to do all kinds of winter sports.

Everyman's right – in Finland, nature belongs to everyone, allowing people to roam freely in the outdoors. You can have a nap or pick berries anywhere in nature if you don't wander too close to a house or building.

Berries and mushrooms – late summer and autumn are peak seasons for many people heading into the forest to gather them.

Darkness vs. light – in winter, it gets dark early, with only around five hours of daylight (if you're lucky). In contrast, summer brings nearly endless daylight, with the sun barely setting at all.

Vitamin D – whether you believe it or not, it plays a crucial role in keeping your body healthy and helping you survive the dark winter. Finland is the country where you will learn how important sunlight is for your body. Parents are advised to give D-vitamin supplement to their children.

Ice swimming/winter dipping – also known as avantouinti in Finnish and vinterbad in Swedish. People actually make a hole in a frozen lake or sea and take a dip in the ice-cold water. It can be done just for fun but also brings countless benefits for your body and mind. Before getting started, you should follow a step-by-step guide and wear the proper outfit.

Food and celebrations

Common things we celebrate: The main celebrations in Finland are Christmas (24.12), New Year (31.12), Easter (date varies), Vappu and May 1st, Midsummer (third weekend in June), Crayfish parties (after July 22nd) and Independence Day (6.12). A fun fact: In Finland, holidays are usually celebrated on the eve. For example, Christmas is celebrated on December 24th. New and trending celebrations include Halloween, Valentine's Day, and Pride. November 6th is the "Swedish Day", acknowledging the Swedish language and history in Finland.

Children's birthdays are usually celebrated with small birthday parties at home, but things are currently changing. Nowadays children's parties might be arranged anywhere from huge action parks to craft workshops. Baby showers are also becoming more common in Finland. In the past, the birth of a child was celebrated with "varpajaiset," where the male side of the family would hold drinking parties.

Baby showers – yes, but in a different way. A new baby is celebrated after they are born. Usually, you wait until the family has had time to settle in a little and are ready to welcome you. We celebrate with a close circle of family and friends.

Alko – the place to buy alcohol in Finland. Some light drinks, beers and some wines (below 8% alcohol) can be found from supermarkets. Everything else has to be bought from Alko. Alcohol sales in stores stop at 9 PM.

Food – Finland is the land of rye bread! Potatoes and rye bread are common side dishes at Finnish meals. Lohikeitto (salmon soup) is a must-try dish for anyone integrating into Finnish culture.

Diets – It is widely accepted that people have lots of different diets. When eating at restaurants you can usually find a vegetarian option as well as lactose free and gluten free options. It is becoming easier to find vegan food options as well.

Dairy products – why are there so many different types of milk? There are countless different milk products on the shelves in stores, do your own research. Many people in Finland are lactose intolerant.

Holiday food – every major holiday or celebration has its own special food to be eaten on that day. Sometimes you might forget a celebration but grocery stores displaying these specific food items will often remind you of it.

How to get around?

Transportation – Helsinki offers plenty of options, including buses, trams, the metro, trains, light rail, and ferries. All of these are relatively or very safe options for women. When riding a blue city bus, you should enter from the front door and show your ticket. In an orange city bus, you can enter through any door, but remember to still buy a ticket! Use the HSL app for tickets and more information. Any service disruptions are always updated in the HSL app! You can also take a ferry to Suomenlinna or go island hopping in Espoo during the summer.

City bikes – don't walk in the bike line! Highly developed bike route networks can often be the fastest way to move around. City bikes, also known as Alepa bikes, are cheap and easy to use. The season is from April 1st to October 30th.

Car sharing – you can rent cars for short-term use through various companies. You can also rent directly from other people via applications when you need to transport something bigger.

Opening hours – in general, stores and businesses are open Monday to Friday from 9:00 or 10:00 AM to 8:00 PM, and on Saturdays from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM. Some places are closed on Sundays or have shorter opening hours. Some grocery stores are open 24/7.

Office hours – generally 8/9 AM until 4/5 PM. Municipality and government offices are typically open from Monday to Friday from 9:00 AM to 4:15 PM. Some of the public service centres close as early as 3:00 PM.

Need a ride? – Make sure you use a reliable taxi company. Regular taxis might be the most expensive option, but with other providers, always check the price beforehand. Taxis are usually very safe for women, but it's good to be aware of the risks.

Good to know

Family law – know your rights before marriage. If you're considering marrying a Finnish person, take time to learn about relevant laws, including divorce and child custody. A prenuptial agreement (avioehto/äktenskapsförord) can be a good idea.

Rental apartments – usually unfurnished. Apartments in Finland typically do not come furnished unless explicitly stated in the advertisement. You must choose your own electricity provider, get home insurance, and pay a security deposit (vuokravakuus/garantihya). All of these require a written contract.

Small kitchens – a common feature. Finnish apartments, especially rental units, often have compact kitchens or even just a kitchenette.

Recycling – a big deal in Finland. Recycling is taken seriously. Finns separate paper, cardboard, plastic, metal, glass, and organic waste. Hazardous waste, such as batteries, chemicals, used medical needles, and paint, must be disposed of properly at designated collection points.

Bottle recycling (Pantti/pant) – get money back for your empties. Don't throw away empty bottles! Finland has a deposit refund system, and you can return eligible bottles at collection points in most grocery stores. Look for the pantti logo to see if your bottle qualifies.

Job search – networking is key. Many job opportunities in Finland are not publicly advertised but are instead shared within professional networks. Prioritize networking as soon as you arrive. Free job support programs and events can help you tailor your CV to the Finnish job market. Be active, engage, and keep your LinkedIn profile updated—it plays an important role in job searching. (Read more under Reality Check – Job Search in Finland).

Trade unions – Finland is the land of unions! Joining a trade union offers numerous benefits, including workplace protections and free legal assistance in certain situations.

Loyalty cards – get discounts when shopping. Many grocery stores offer loyalty cards that can provide significant savings. Keep them handy while shopping!

Daycares – multiple language options. You can choose to enroll your child in a daycare (päiväkoti/dagis) that operates in Finnish, Swedish, or English. Daycare is an integrated part of the Finnish education system and is available to all children.

Student benefits – an essential part of student life. Student life in Finland comes with perks. Unicafe in Helsinki offers discounted meals for students, and other benefits include subsidized housing, healthcare, and various discounts. Student loans are also relatively easy to obtain.

Pet-friendly – Finland loves animals. It may seem like everyone in Helsinki has a dog! Dogs are allowed in some cafés and stores, but they must always be kept on a leash. You might even see people walking their cats on a leash!

Festivals and music – the heavy metal capital of the world! Finns love music, from heavy metal to classical. When summer arrives, people shake off their winter hibernation and head to numerous festivals.

MobilePay – more than just money transfers. MobilePay isn't just for

sending money to friends—you can also use it to pay at stores and restaurants. Some employers even provide benefits through the app.

Oodi – more than just a library. Oodi is a public library in Helsinki that offers much more than books. You can use computers, sew clothes, try 3D printing, book free meeting rooms, participate in a language café, play chess—the list goes on! There’s always something to do. And this applies to most other municipal libraries in Finland.

Wellbeing & Staying Alive

Domestic violence – help is available. Unfortunately, domestic violence is an issue in Finland, but support systems are in place. If you need help, you can reach out without fear of deportation. Check out Pääkaupungin Turvakoti for assistance.

LGBTQIA+ friendly – inclusive and supportive. Helsinki hosts Pride in June, and the event is widely supported. Highlights include the Pride Football Tournament, Pride Walk, and Pride Picnic. Same-sex marriage is legally recognized in Finland.

Free public healthcare – funded by taxes. Public healthcare is generally good, though wait times can be long. Some people prefer private healthcare for faster access. However, serious illnesses and injuries are always treated through the public system.

Mieli – free mental health support. Mieli is a national mental health organization in Finland that provides free guidance and assistance.

Winter clothes – layers, layers, layers! The key to staying warm in Finnish winters is layering. Always check the wind chill in addition to the temperature. Investing in high-quality outdoor clothing will make a huge difference.

Putkiremontti – water pipe renovations. If you own an apartment, this is

something to be aware of. Putkiremontti is a major renovation where an entire apartment building's water pipes are replaced. It can take up to a year, and residents must find alternative housing during the work. These renovations are expensive, so always check the condition of a building's pipes before buying an apartment.

Kierrätyskeskus – second-hand shopping heaven. Finns love reusing and recycling. Kierrätyskeskus (Recycling Centers) sell second-hand furniture, clothes, home appliances, bikes, and even construction materials at affordable prices. Also Kontti and Fida are good choices.

Tori.fi – the go-to marketplace for second-hand goods. Tori.fi is a great place to buy and sell used items, often better than Facebook Marketplace, which can be full of spam. However, local neighborhood Facebook groups can still be useful.

Helsinki Outlets – bargain shopping. A collection of outlet stores offering good deals. Conveniently located near Vantaa's IKEA.

IKEA – more than just furniture. Finns don't just go to IKEA for furniture—they go for the Swedish meatballs and cheap meals. Some families even visit just to eat!

K-group or S-group – this is the ultimate choice! Almost every grocery store in Finland belongs to either the K-Group or the S-Group. With a membership card, you get discounts when paying. K-group stores are for example K-Citymarket, K-Supermarket, K-Market and S-group stores are for example Alepa, Prisma, S-Market, Herkku.

It's complicated? -Social norms

"How are you?" – Expect an honest answer.

If you ask a Finn how they are doing, be prepared for a real response. We don't ask unless we genuinely have time to listen.

Wealth is not flaunted.

Showing off money is considered bragging. Wealth is displayed in subtle ways: wearing expensive but discreet brands, driving an old but high-quality car (like a Volvo), or owning a boat that may look worn but hints at island ownership.

Finnish honesty – no sugarcoating.

Finns are direct. If you ask for an opinion on your outfit, don't expect exaggerated compliments. We are also open about bodily topics like periods, menopause, and illnesses.

Social hierarchy – surprisingly flat.

In Finland, no one is considered too important to approach. Students can contact their professors directly, and employees can (theoretically) message their CEO. Office spaces often have no obvious hierarchy, making it hard to tell who the boss is.

Bonding through complaining.

"The best compliment you'll hear? This is so good, I can't even complain." Finns connect over shared frustrations.

Politics? Keep it private.

Asking someone who they voted for is considered intrusive. The right to a secret ballot is taken seriously. Non-Finnish citizens who have lived in Finland for at least two years can vote in municipal elections, but only Finnish citizens can vote in parliamentary and presidential elections.

Punctuality – always be on time.

Finns value punctuality. If an event says 19:00, it starts at 19:00. In some cases, there's a 15-minute academic quarter delay (akademiska kvarten), but don't assume it unless it's explicitly mentioned.

Finnish nudity – sauna culture.

Families and friends often bathe together in saunas, and workplaces organize saunailta (sauna evenings). Men and women usually take turns,

and people go in naked. If you prefer, a clean towel is fine. At public swimming pools, showering naked before entering is expected—except in some gyms and hotels where signs indicate otherwise.

Social media & children – respect privacy.

Do not take or post pictures of children without permission. Always ask before photographing kids at daycare, parks, or public spaces.

Small shops – silent and pressure-filled.

In tiny stores, you may feel like all attention is on you, and there is an unspoken pressure to buy something. Don't worry—browsing is allowed! You don't need to greet the staff, but it's polite to say thanks when leaving.

Bargaining – rarely done.

Negotiating prices is uncommon, except when buying a car, a Christmas tree, or making bulk purchases. Regular customers may eventually receive discounts from shop owners.

Finnish men are not “gentlemen” in a traditional sense.

Don't expect men to open doors or pull out chairs for women—Finnish society values independence. That said, everyone appreciates small acts of kindness, even if we might be shy.

Split or pay the check? Transfer money?

When you are invited to a dinner at a restaurant, you are expected to pay for your own food or split the check. It is okay to ask the restaurant for separate checks. Between friends, one person might pay the whole check, then you pay your share with an app.

Borrowing things – still a bit unusual.

Finns generally dislike feeling indebted, but attitudes are changing with the rise of the circular economy. Borrowing sugar from a neighbor might seem odd, but it's a great icebreaker—just remember to return the favor next time!

Greeting your neighbors – always say hello.

Even if it takes time, you'll eventually get a greeting back.

Invisible work – still an issue.

Some Finnish men consider grilling to be "housework" while leaving the mess for women to clean. Similarly, in workplaces, some employees always end up doing communal chores like washing dishes—this is called invisible work.

No "please," but plenty of "thank yous."

Finns rarely use the word please when asking for something but make up for it by saying thank you (kiitos/tack) multiple times afterward. You'll hear it when people leave a bus, a store, or a building.

We like to know what to expect.

If you invite someone over, let them know the details—Will there be food? What's the occasion? Who else is coming? Surprise guests can make us uncomfortable. If you're invited somewhere, don't bring extra people without asking first. Finnish homes are small, and there may not be enough chairs!

No business at social events.

Trying to sell something at a party or friendly gathering is a big no-no. Finns dislike feeling pressured into purchases. Be upfront about expectations.

Dating in Finland

Dating in Helsinki—and Finland in general—is straightforward. There are no rigid expectations regarding who should ask whom out. Women can confidently make the first move, and expressing sexual interest is not seen as taboo. Same-sex dating follows the same open-minded approach.

Some Finns are naturally shy, and for some, alcohol can make approaching someone easier. However, regardless of the situation, it is always okay to say no.

Despite Finland's relaxed and liberal dating culture, Finns tend to be loyal partners. It is not common to date multiple people at once. Because Finns generally avoid confrontation and sensitive discussions, exclusivity is often assumed rather than explicitly discussed—it usually becomes understood after consistently seeing each other for a couple of months.

The high cost of living, relatively equal wages between men and women, and high taxes mean that couples often move in together fairly early in the relationship, often for practical reasons.

There are no strict gender roles in Finnish relationships. Expenses are typically shared based on mutual agreements and what makes the most sense for each couple.

Meeting the family is not considered a big deal in Finland. In-laws do not have authority over their children's relationships, and Finnish parents generally do not expect their children to care for them in old age. As a result, parents invest less in their child's choice of a partner. Likewise, Finns do not automatically assume they will inherit anything from their parents. Extended family relationships tend to be relaxed, with few obligations or expectations.

Reality check -Getting a job in Helsinki

What are the possibilities in finding a job if you speak Swedish?

Sweden is the largest investor in the Finnish economy, and Finnish companies often expand to Sweden first when seeking growth. Finnish-Swedish companies like Fiskars, Fazer, and Moomin highly value Swedish-speaking employees. Additionally, international companies such as Kone and Hilti, which have offices in Sweden, also seek Swedish speakers in their workforce.

If you want to gain a competitive edge in the Finnish job market, knowing Swedish can be a valuable asset. While Swedish is an official language of Finland, the majority of Finns do not speak it fluently, making Swedish speakers highly sought after.

Getting a Job Without Speaking Finnish

Finding office work in Finland can be challenging, as Finns are highly educated, industrious, and skilled. It's not uncommon for individuals with a master's degree to work in roles that don't match their education level. However, there are in-demand jobs in fields such as care work, construction, and hospitality, which typically do not require fluent Finnish skills to get started.

For foreigners, it's common to begin in an internship and work your way up from there. Gaining experience as a volunteer is also a good route. Employers also value candidates who study Finnish or pursue a degree at a Finnish university.

There is racism and negative attitudes

Sadly, Finland has been ranked among the more challenging countries in Europe for foreigners, especially for those who are not white. Only 10% of Finland's population is diverse, compared to Sweden's 25%. However, attitudes toward migrants are improving, particularly among younger generations who are more exposed to international exchanges, social media, and the ease of travel. Additionally, Finland's rapidly aging population has made the country increasingly dependent on immigrants to maintain the services of its welfare state.

Mentorship Programs: What Are They?

Mentorship programs for foreigners are available through non-profit

organizations such as Startup Refugees, The Shortcut, and Women in Tech, to name a few. These programs aim to help highly educated immigrants integrate into the workforce with the support of a mentor from the same field.

Roles

In Finland, there is a distinction between private and professional roles. For example, if you meet a doctor at a social event, it's not appropriate to ask about your personal medical concerns. Additionally, asking friends or family for favors, such as helping your child get a job, is often viewed as nepotism.

Freelancer Stuff: Entrepreneur-Light for Writing Invoices

Many immigrants in Finland become self-employed or start their own businesses due to challenges in entering the labor market. There are services available where you can use freelance invoicing companies to operate as a small business owner. These services handle your invoicing and taxes for a small service fee of around 5-6% per invoice.



What are your thoughts on everyday life, culture, customs, and manners in Finland as a woman? Please let us know.

<https://sornas.kvinnoforbundet.fi/>



Svenska Kvinnoförbundet i Sörnäs is the women's organisation behind this guide and the meeting point Women's Café in English.

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