

Pearl of the Baltic

Snap them in half. Suck the head, and then peel the meat out of the tail. In between, take shots of vodka and sing some rousing songs. No, this isn't happening in New Orleans. It's a crayfish party in Finland, a country known more for Nokia, saunas, racecar drivers and cutting edge design.

Late summer, though, is crayfish season in Finland and a time for groups to organize parties centered on the freshwater crustaceans. Whether held at a restaurant, in a back yard or on the beach, crayfish parties are a hit with locals as well as visitors.

One of the best places to host a crayfish party is at the Kulosaaren Casino, a 10-minute drive from the Helsinki city center. The venue is not a gaming facility, but a fine-dining restaurant popular for events. Large windows give way to sea views for groups of up to 550 seeking to sing into the night between shots of schnapps and away from the city lights of Helsinki.

YOUR SPOTLIGHT ON

Helsinki, Finland

BY JASON HENSEL

ALL POINTS CONSIDERED

Finland's capital, Helsinki, has emerged during the last couple of decades as a dependable and popular meetings and incentives destination. According to the Helsinki City Tourist & Convention Bureau, the city hosted 68 international congresses last year, with an economic impact of €23.4 million. This year, Finland shares the Presidency of the Council of the European Union seat. With such international attention, Helsinki is sure to grow more popular within the meetings industry.

Finns (as the country's citizens are known) are punctual and driven, which makes for smooth event planning as well

as a sense of security that what is said will get done *will* get done. Most facilities have one contact person handling everything from room booking to catering to entertainment, so the hoops planners often jump through are minimized, leaving time for extracurricular group activity planning.

Popular group attractions include the Market Square, the Temppeliaukio Rock Church, the Sibelius Monument, the Helsinki Cathedral, the Finnish National Gallery, the Helsinki Zoo and the Suomenlinna Sea Fortress.

The city is easily navigated by foot and infused with a youthful energy. English is widely spoken and pleasant surprises wait

around every corner in a city that honors its past while building its future.

HISTORICAL HELSINKI

Founded in 1550 by Swedish King Gustav Vasa, Helsinki came into its own in the 1800s and today mixes eastern and western influences in everything from architecture to food. Helsinki is ripe with a variety of options for groups seeking to delve into the historical side of the city.

Located near the Hakaniemi market, the Helsinki Congress Paasitorni is a member of the Historic Conference Centres of Europe. Built in 1908, the building was once the home of Helsinki's workmen's association. Today, it houses several floors of meeting facilities, including the Restaurant Paasisali and a congress hall for up to 800.

The Palace of Nobility—designed by architect Georg Theodor Chiewitz—opened in 1862 and features 357 coats of

arms on the walls of its main hall. A red carpet leads up staircases to the hall, which plays host to events of up to 300. The palace staff must approve every event proposed, and planners should be aware that the hall is offered as is—catering and other setups must be provided by event organizers.

The Suomenlinna Sea Fortress—built in the 1700s as a Swedish defense against Russia—has been occupied by Swedes and Russians over the years since its construction, and today is a living museum and a member of UNESCO's World Heritage List. The island fortress offers plenty of room for functions, whether they are theme parties or group dinners at Restaurant Walhalla, which can accommodate up to 300.

CONTEMPORARY CONGRESS CENTERS

Even with a valuable historical infrastructure, Helsinki can't rely solely on its past to attract groups. Keeping its eye on the future has caused developers to build some remarkable venues and stunning architectural wonders.

Finlandia Hall—designed by famed architect Alvar Aalto—opened in 1971, with a congress wing completed in 1975. A strikingly constructed building, the hall plays host to approximately 1,000 events per year and can accommodate up to 5,000. In 2009, a new music hall will open adjacent to the facility. Plans are also under way for parking to be moved underground and for the sea to be moved next to the hall.

The Marina Congress Center plays host to 350 events a year and can accommodate up to 600 in its Plenary Hall, which has six translation rooms for international sessions. The center also has 11 meeting

Helsinki By the Numbers

Rooms: 7,000

Prominent Meeting Facilities: Helsinki Fair Centre (468,230 square feet), Finlandia Hall (64,580 square feet), Cable Factory (43,060 square feet), Wanh Satama (43,060 square feet), Scandic Continental Helsinki (22,710 square feet), Scandic Marina Congress Center (17,550 square feet), Design Museum (16,040 square feet), Suomenlinna Conference and Banquet Facilities (16,040 square feet), Restaurant Sipuli (15,050 square feet), Palace Hotel (12,270 square feet), Hilton Helsinki Kalastajatorppa (11,410 square feet), Helsinki Congress Paasitorni (10,760 square feet), Sokos Hotel Presi-

dentti (10,440 square feet), Hotel Arthur (9,150 square feet), Radisson SAS Royal Hotel Helsinki (7,750 square feet), Crown Plaza Helsinki (7,440 square feet), Katajanokan Kasino (5,810 square feet), Sports Museum of Finland (5,810 square feet), Hilton Helsinki Strand (4,520 square feet), Hotel Seurahuone Helsinki (4,520 square feet), Hotel Kämp (3,440 square feet), The Macbeth Hall (4,310 square feet), Radisson SAS Seaside Hotel Helsinki (3,980 square feet), Radisson SAS Plaza Hotel Helsinki (3,880 square feet), Bonnie's Canadian Club (3,550 square feet), G18 (3,340 square feet), Hotel Klaus K (1,370 square feet)

What's New in Helsinki

- The 137-room **Hotel Klaus K** opened in November. The boutique hotel features three theme restaurants, four styles of guest rooms and 1,370 square feet of function space.
- One of Finland's leading hotel chains, **Palace**, recently signed a letter of intent to build Helsinki's second lifestyle hotel with 100 guest rooms in the city center in 2007.
- Featuring 35 extended-stay rooms with kitchenettes, the 140-room **Palace Hotel Sellos** opened in January in Espoo, on the outskirts of Helsinki.
- The 152-room **Sokos Hotel Tornii**, where the day spa Escape will soon open, recently completed a refurbishment that captures the stepped-up form of Art Deco called Suprematism, the dominant art movement at the time the hotel was opened in 1931.
- A third **Hilton** in the Helsinki region will open in autumn 2007 with 244 guest rooms at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. The Hilton will offer a covered pathway to the international terminal, restaurant facilities for up to 700, a ballroom, 10 convertible meeting rooms and a gym.
- **Hotel Kämp**, located on Helsinki's Esplanade, earned Starwood Hotels & Resorts' Luxury Collection Hotel of the Year 2005 award. The distinction joins Kämp's other impressive forms of recognition: becoming a member of *Conde Nast Traveler's* Gold List, *Travel + Leisure's* "Top 500 Best Hotels in the World"—for three consecutive years—and the *Forbes.com* 2005 list of the "World's Best Hotel Bars."
- The Skytrax 2006 World Airport Awards—the world's premier recognition of quality for the world airport industry—placed **Helsinki-Vantaa** airport as the best for security processing.

Know Before You Go

Airport: Helsinki-Vantaa airport is a 25-minute drive from the city center. It is served by several international carriers, such as Air Canada, Air France, American Airlines, British Airways, Delta Airlines, Finnair, Icelandair, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Lufthansa, SAS Scandinavian Airlines and United Airlines.

Currency: Euro

Electric Appliances: 220 V (230V), 50 Hz

Emergencies: Dial 112 for all emergencies

Local Time: Eastern Europe Time Zone, GMT +2 hours

Pharmacy: Look for the sign "Apteekki"

Public Transportation: Bus, metro, taxi, tram and local trains

Tipping: Tips are welcome but not required

Getting Started

Finnish Tourist Board North America
www.visitfinland.com/na

Helsinki City Tourist & Convention Bureau
www.visithelsinki.fi

Visit Finland
www.visitfinland.com

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Kappeli—located in Helsinki's Esplanade Park—offers a Scandinavian menu, a cafe and a bar in a stunning glass building.

rooms and a restaurant that can accommodate up to 60.

As Finland's largest conference venue, the Helsinki Fair Centre plays host to more than 1 million visitors a year. The center has 40 meeting rooms, six exhibition halls and 11 restaurants and can accommodate up to 10,000 for events.

The 238-room Hilton Helsinki Kalastajatorppa—a 10-minute drive from the city center—offers hospitality and convention services in a resort setting. The hotel's Conference & Event Centre can accommodate up to 1,200, and eight meeting rooms are available for small gatherings. The hotel also offers access by boat and a private park area for events.

CULINARY OPTIONS

Food & Wine magazine recently declared Helsinki "Europe's new Design Capital," since Finland is world-renowned for its beautiful designs. While it's hard to argue against that distinction, it's harder to debate where to eat at night in such a cosmopolitan city as Helsinki. Several varieties of dishes are available for every type of gourmand.

G.W. Sundmans—located by the marketplace and ranked in the *Michelin Guide*—features Scandinavian and French-

Dutch cuisine. In addition to the restaurant, it houses an auditorium for up to 60, two meeting rooms and a wine cellar available for groups of up to 20.

Fishmarket specializes in...wait for it...fish. Reservations are recommended for this charming, below-the-street restaurant located near the marketplace. A private meeting/dining room is available for groups. Above the restaurant is Sasso, a chic Italian restaurant that offers private areas for group functions.

Kappeli is located in Helsinki's Esplanade Park and offers a Scandinavian menu. A cafe and a bar complete this stunning glass venue, where groups are more than welcome.

On the other end of the Esplanade Park is Teatteri—a stylish complex next to the Swedish Theatre. Several venues exist within the building, such as a restaurant, a bar, a lounge and a club. Groups can rent the club's outdoor terrace until 10 p.m. for functions.

For a great terrace city view (and for some after dinner cocktails), visit the Ateljee Bar located at the Sokos Hotel Tornio on the 14th floor.

DAY TRIP: PORVOO

Porvoo is Finland's second-oldest city

and is a 45-minute drive from Helsinki. It is also accessible by a three-hour boat ride on the *J.L. Runeberg*, which is a popular group activity. Located on the famed King's Road, the city was founded in the 1300s. Walking tours of Old Porvoo are extremely popular with groups. The much-visited Porvoo Cathedral was burnt halfway down this past spring and is currently closed to groups during its reconstruction.

Just outside of Porvoo is Hotel Haikko Manor, Spa and Conference Center. This one-stop venue offers facilities for up to 400, several spa options and a restaurant. Groups can arrive at the manor by boat and have functions on the lawn before retiring to their rooms or to selected spa treatments. One popular treatment is the Super Cold Cryo. Visitors—dressed in swimsuits, mittens, felt shoes and ear warmers—walk through three rooms, each one colder than the last. The final room is -110 Celsius (-166 Fahrenheit), and visitors stay in it for one to three minutes. Upon completion, a certificate is awarded to each person. **TMP**

JASON HENSEL is associate editor - destinations for *The Meeting Professional*.



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