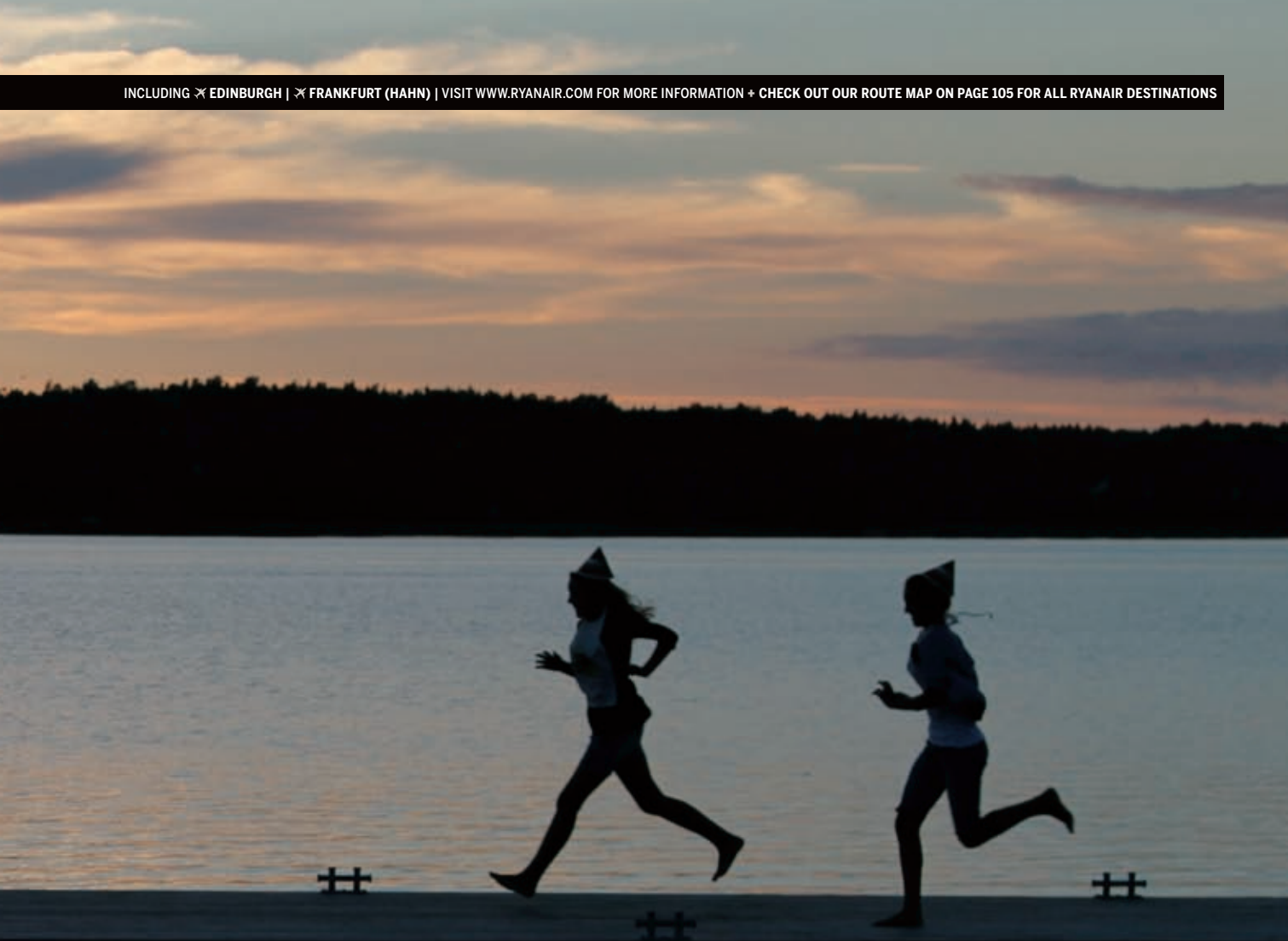




FINN-TASTIC TRIP | FLY TO LAPPEENRANTA FROM ✕ BRUSSELS (CHARLEROI) | ✕ DUSSELDORF (WEEZE) | FLY TO TAMPERE FROM NINE DESTINATIONS.

THE FINNISH LINE

You've heard of its saunas, Nordic walking and vast lakes, but what is it that makes Finland such an exciting place to be? Words and photography by *The Rough Guide to Finland* author **Roger Norum**



“W”

“We prefer that you are close,” rasps Virpi in her deadpan voice, its pitch some two octaves below the norm for mammals. I am already holding my assigned tango partner as near as humanly possible without having to inquire about conjugal rights. Not proximate enough for a professional Finnish tango instructor, apparently. “Stand clooooooose to her,” Virpi booms, this time kneading her palms into the smalls of our backs and compressing our bodies together.

It’s nearly midnight on a balmy

summer’s evening and, thanks to the latitude of the Finnish lake district, nearly broad daylight outside. The wooden pavilion just north of Tampere is brimming with Finns of all shapes and sizes striding about the dance floor, each holding a partner tightly and gazing into the other’s eyes.

Any Finn will tell you that they are among the shyest and most reserved people in Europe, so I’m happily surprised to see that here they have such facility for intimate physicality in public. The country I’ve discovered

is also one of the most wonderfully idiosyncratic nations on the planet, offering enough quirk and absurdity for a lifetime of Monty Python sketches.

There are world championships organised annually in brilliantly random sports such as wife carrying, hay mowing, crowbar walking and mobile phone throwing. Then there are The Dudesons, Finland’s most popular export after Santa and a cross between *Jackass* and *South Park*; and Aki Kaurismäki, an absurdist cinema director ▶



whose Grand Prix winner at Cannes a few years ago was *Mies vailla Menneisyttä* (“*The Man Without a Past*”) a beautiful, Kafka-esque film with all of about five lines of dialogue in it.

Then there are the Finnish people themselves: a proud, pithy and percipient people whose aversion to small talk and affinity for the awkward moment is rivalled only by their remarkable ability to drink several times their body weight in grain alcohol in an evening’s sitting.

I’ve come to the western Finnish countryside to get a handle on what exactly is going on over in Finland, and how it came to be such a bizarrely wonderful country. Tango seemed as good a place as any to start.

Unlike the sensuous sounds of the

Argentine version, the Finnish tango is darker and much more solemn, with lyrics that wax about love and loss; and deep, drawn-out sorrowful tones that evoke emotions of wistfulness, regret and a longing for a homeland. The growth of nostalgia and melancholy as Finnish cottage industries is largely a product of the country’s star-crossed history. Finland was haplessly tossed around for years as a political hot potato between Russia and Sweden, and lost a massive chunk of its eastern border to the Soviet Union following WWII. Rather appropriately, the most famous Finnish tango, *Satumaa* (meaning “Fairytale Land”), is a lament about a faraway place that can never be reached.

This uniquely Finnish sense of solitude and





THE FINNISH TANGO IS DARKER AND MUCH MORE SOLEMN, WITH LYRICS THAT WAX ABOUT LOVE AND LOSS

Hot stepper

- ◀ Arriving by boat at Crayfish Manor
- 👉 Doing the tango in a lakeside pavilion
- 👉 Art surprises you in downtown Tampere

yearning is succinctly expressed by *"kaiho"*, a notion rather similar to the Brazilian concept of *"saudade"*. Don't bother looking for an English language cognate to *kaiho*, though, since Finnish is completely unrelated to the Indo-European branch of languages and unlike any other tongue you're likely to have studied.

It can prove unfathomably difficult to learn to any level of proficiency, thanks to sentences that are stuffed with up to 15 case endings, and pronunciation that's full of unexpected sounds and rhythms. When a language has a variation on the number "29" that reads: *"kahdenneskikymmenenneksiyhdeksänneksi"*, you know you're in for a tough time.

No wonder, then, that the Finns' preferred mode of communication is a dance. Despite tango's doleful sentiment, it does provide a great venue for the otherwise-sheepish Finns to meet, woo and court each other. Frans Karki, winner of the 2005 Snow Tango

Championships (and an accountant by day), offers some insight into Finns' social habits. "Finns are very shy people," he says. "They're not very talkative. So, 50 years ago you couldn't find a woman. With tango, because the lady should say yes, you get the chance to share your feelings without talking. You can see if there's a connection between you. And if it works, you don't know – maybe one day you will marry that woman."

After tangoing myself out for the evening, I venture north to Koivuolahti Crayfish Manor (+358 44 592 9429, www.rapukartano.fi), a large log-cabin estate perched idyllically on one of Finland's 187,888 lakes; and one of the best spots to experience the autumn ritual of the crayfish feast.

I'm received by the Lord Crayfish himself, Pasi Heinonen, an affable and soft-spoken man who guides me through the fine art of disembowelling a crustacean with macabre aplomb. >



Taking a dip

👉 Cooling off after a stint in the sauna

Together, Pasi and I swiftly pluck out an intestine here, tear off a torso there, then sprinkle the bits of meat over a slice of crispy toast doused with dill and lemon mayonnaise. It is one of the more involved and memorable meals I've enjoyed in a while. But what to call dining at 2am: supper, dinner, breakfast?

Pasi's drink of choice is smoky, swampy dill schnapps, the hottest thing to hit rural Finland since "fisu", another inexplicably popular drink that blends Fisherman's Friend lozenges with Koskenkorva vodka.

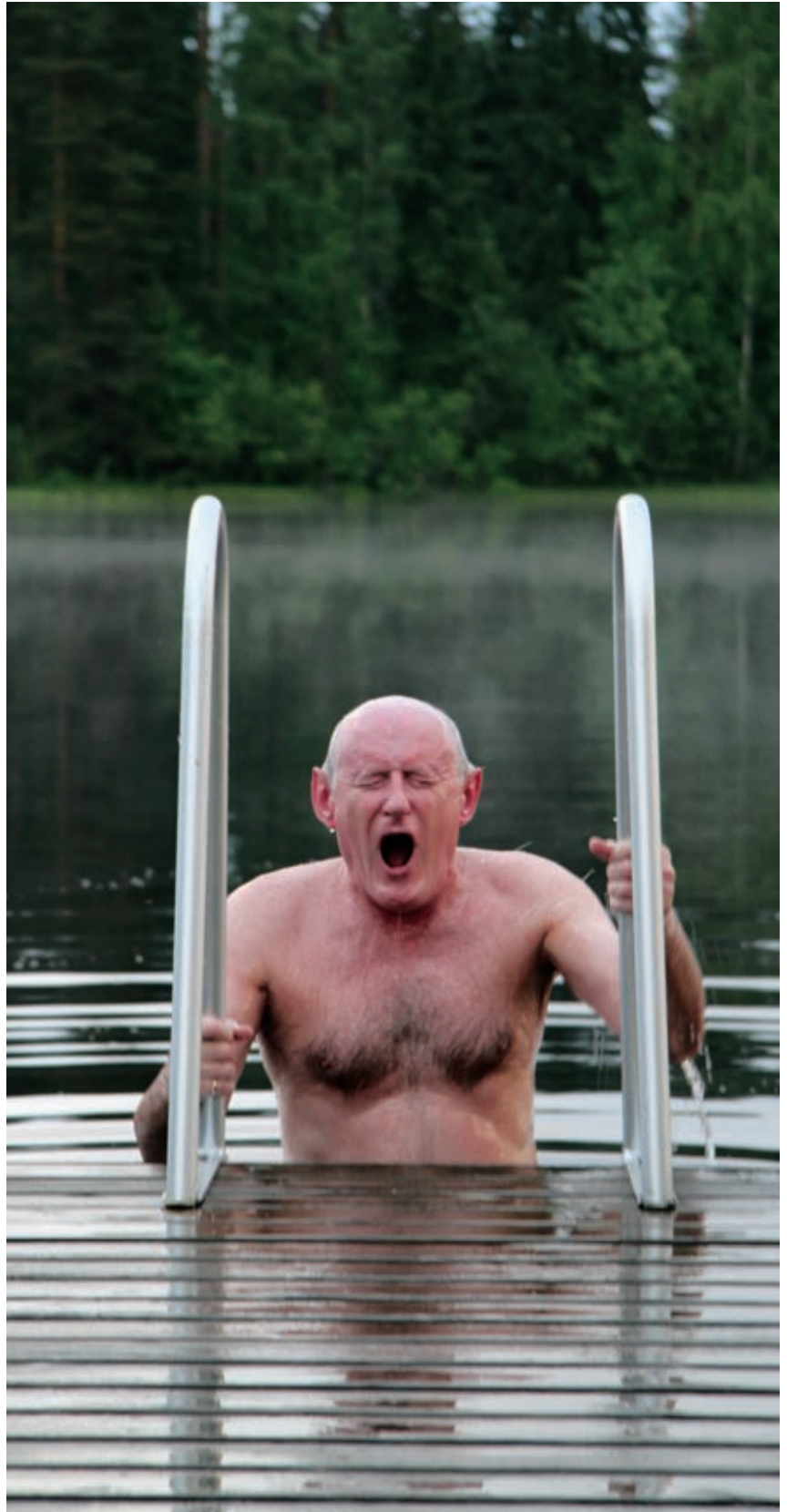
When I asked one Finn at the dinner table why his people seem to drink so much, his response was to stare at me blankly for a few moments in silence before lifting a shot glass to his lips and downing the contents. Then he poured another, and drank that one. It was 3am, the sun was out and the dead silence of the forest was pierced only by the odd chirp of a bird or cricket. It was vaguely uncanny, and I was half expecting a gag set of plastic chattering teeth to hop by me at any second.

**75% OF
FINNISH LAND
IS COVERED
IN FOREST,
AND ANOTHER
10% IS INLAND
WATER**

Sometimes, though, a bit of drink can be a good thing, such as when it facilitates you entering a unisex sauna at the crack of dawn, slopping peat mud onto several people you don't know, swatting them with birch twigs then jumping together into a freezing cold lake. Twice.

At Miinan Savusauna (318 Miharintie, Sasi, for booking contact the tourist office on +358 50 364 6052), a sauna in Hämeenkyrö, the self-flagellation ritual never really comes as a surprise – it stimulates blood circulation, and it also helps to wake you up in case you're actually in the middle of a David Lynchian dream.

Outside the sauna, a group of giddy speed-walkers have wrapped up warm and armed >





Time for walkies

☛ Hunting for forest cloudberrries with a Siberian husky

themselves with slender ski poles to traverse the blacktop. A regular visitor to the smoke sauna, Liisa Tyllilä of Hiking Travel, Hit Ky (+358 (0)40 063 6057, www.hikingtravelhit.fi) explains the virtues of Nordic walking, this strange-looking callisthenic activity we are witnessing. Nordic walking is possibly the most popular thing to reach Scandinavia since sliced herring, and by far the most invigorating way to propel yourself across the Finnish countryside. It's hardly a surprise that Finns have become the activity's biggest proponents: 75% of Finnish land is covered in forest, and another 10% is inland water.

Meanwhile, down at the waterside, someone has put on a tango CD. Liisa directs my eye towards a blonde girl standing at the dock, alone. "You know, your dance partner is waiting," she chuckles, winking at me. "And the good girls will not wait forever. Better go."

I know she's right, so I walk down to the dock and take the hand of the damsel in the corner. Luckily for her, the conviviality of the evening has loosened my initial barn dance rigor mortis into something a bit more limber. At that moment, it seemed to me that the paradox of Finnish history and of Frans Karki made sense. Perhaps to feel content and untroubled, Finns needed to appreciate heartache and disquiet. To be truly happy, maybe one had to be unhappy first.

It's a typical day in Finland, I presume. It's 4am. The sun is shining brightly, and the woods around us are alive with wildlife. The eight of us are stood at the dockside of a still, clear lake. We've all had far too much to drink. We are all covered in peat mud. And we're about as naked as we can be without being lewd. And then, as the accordion plays its first slow, woeful notes, we all begin to dance. ♡



Fast facts

› **GETTING THERE**

Tampere airport is located at Pirkkala, 18km south-west of the city centre. Ryanair flies to Tampere from Bremen, Edinburgh, Frankfurt (Hahn), Kaunas, London (Stansted), Malaga, Milan (Bergamo), Oslo (Rygge) and Riga. The journey into Tampere takes 25 minutes by bus, taxi or hire car. Hertz (www.hertz.com) provides special rates for Ryanair passengers.

› **THE CITY**

Leafy, cobbled Tampere (www.gotampere.fi or www.visitfinland.com) is Scandinavia's largest inland city. Set on the Tammerkoski rapids and enclosed by two gorgeous lakes, it's perfect for exploring Finland's lake district. For a great local restaurant, try Näsinneula (Särkänniemi Adventure Park, tel: +358 20 713 0234, www.sarkanniemi.fi), a revolving eaterie that towers over the city, offering excellent views as well as great soup, steak and seafood dishes.

› **STAYING THERE**

The 19-storey Sokos Hotel Iives (1 Hatanpaan Valtatie, tel: +358 20 123 4631, www.sokoshotels.com) is set by the city's rapids. With tidy, comfy rooms, the hotel offers excellent city views, close proximity to the main city sights, six restaurants, an indoor pool and free wi-fi.