

**Your On the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

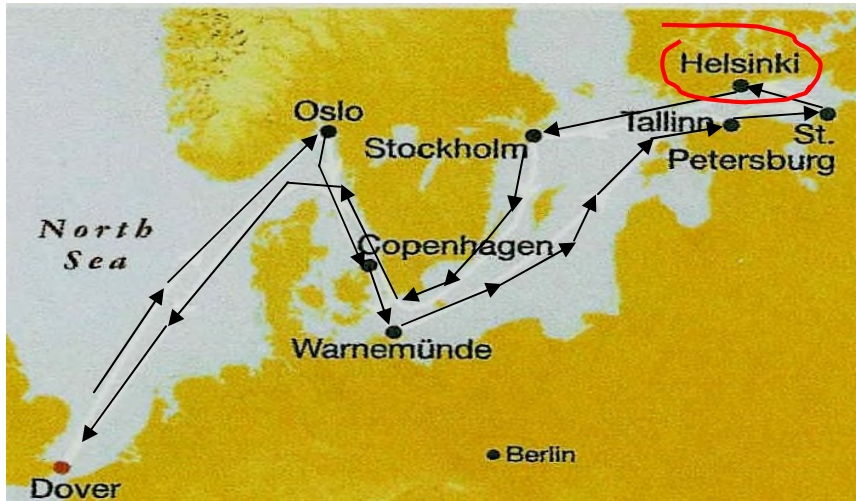
**The Baltic Sea Tour:  
Helsinki, Finland**

# The Baltic Sea Tour

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## Chapter 8: Helsinki, Finland



**August 10, 2008**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Before I recount the visit in Helsinki, let's seed an idea for your possible travel to this part of the world. Consider making your home base in Tallinn, Estonia. From this lovely city, you can board ferries to travel to St. Petersburg, Helsinki, and Stockholm. Tallinn Hotels and restaurants are less expensive than those in these other cities. Plus, Estonians are fond of Americans.

Which leads to a comment made by our Helsinki tour guide. After becoming acquainted with her, I asked the now routine question of what the local people thought of America. She came up with this answer:<sup>1</sup>

- "We love America.
- "Great. Why?"
- "Because Russia is our neighbor."
- "I don't follow."
- "Read about our history with Russia. It will explain what I mean."

For this trip, I had made it a point to read-up on Finland. For many years, it has lived under the shadow of the Russians, even as far back as Peter the Great's time. The shadow has often been a brutal one.

Her comment led me to think about the other European countries bordering Russia. Perhaps we could postulate a theory: *A country's affection for America grows in inverse proportion to that country's proximity to Russia.* I thought of Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Hungary, etc., all favorably disposed to America, and none too fond of Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes in this report are taken from my notes and digital camera.

I have not asked the Canadians or Mexicans about their view on this theory. The Mexicans must like us. They're trying to get in. The Canadians? They keep passing through our borders, but not just to get in. To get in and then get out. They like our cigarette prices and the sunny winter-time climates in Florida, California, and New Mexico.

### **Tour Guide's Insights**

We off-loaded from the ship and were met by a tour guide. She began with:

- "Hello, my name is not Helga. That will be your tour guide in Stockholm."
- I thought, *OK with me. She doesn't look like a Helga anyway.* I was expecting another Scandinavian joke about Swedes, Finns, Norwegians, and Danes---any of these combinations. But no, the yet unnamed guide offered no light fare.
- "I'll try to tell you about us. We're not very well known."
- I thought, *No wonder they are not very well known. She has yet to tell us who she is or who they are.* Without skipping a beat, she offered:
- "The shipyard you are in has been sold to the Koreans."
- "We Finns don't consider ourselves either of the West or the East. We have our own language. It is not from the Slavic or Romance languages. It is a Finno-Ugric language. Our street signs around Helsinki are Finno-Ugric."
- *Would you mind spelling that?"* (Later, I looked it up.)

From outward appearances, our yet-to-be-named guide had not completed Tour Guiding 101. But that was OK. She was a fountain of facts, and she spoke English without a hint of a Finno-Ugric accent. This latter facility is important to Americans. As I've mentioned before, Americans traveling in a foreign country complain that there are too many foreigners. At least this Finn spoke passable English, which would please us prosaic peasants across the pond.

We do not ask much of foreigners when we are in a foreign country: Just speak English and don't show us so many old buildings. If we wanted to see old buildings, we would take a tour of the downtowns of our eastern cities. By the way, how about some Big Macs in France.?You know, some decent food? I ask you, my fellow Americans, is that too much to ask of foreigners?

### **A Green City by the Sea**

Helsinki is known as the City of the Sea. It overlooks the Gulf of Finland and has countless gardens, streams, ponds, lakes, and parks. It reminds me of the skyline of Washington, DC because it has few high-rise buildings. Figure 1 provides a view of a part of Helsinki.<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the Korean-owned shipyards, much of the city that is contiguous to water consists of parks. Scores of islands containing residences border the city shorelines.

As with most of our stops, I wished we had had more time to walk around the central part of the city. And for this brief recount of our stay, we will first visit a remarkable building, the Temppeliaukio Church. Here, we were met by another guide, one more attuned to her job description, in that she revealed her name.

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<sup>2</sup> *Finland: Land of a Thousand Lakes*, Centro Stampa Editoriale, Sesto Fiorentino, (Fi), no date, 23.



### **TempPELLIAUKIO Church<sup>3</sup>**

Figure 2 (a) shows an aerial view of the TempPELLIAUKIO Church. It was built from 1939 to 1969. Our guide said the long construction time was because of the Winter War (1939-40) with the Soviets, and the heavy war reparations Finland had to pay for siding with Germany during WW II. Figure 2 (b) shows one side of the church, which is partially quarried into bedrock. The upper wall is made of quarried stone. The roof is a copper dome.

Figure 2(c) shows the inside of the church looking toward its front. We were told the church seats are filled mostly at the services with members of the TaivALLAHTI parish (Finnish speaking) and the Norra Svenska Forsamlingen parish (Swedish speaking). (Spellings furnished by tour guide.) One woman in our group asked where the Ugrics worshipped, and the guide told her that “Finnish” actually meant Finno-Ugric. Another woman asked:

- Woman, “I thought Finland was mostly Lutheran. Where do they worship?”
- Guide, “Both parishes belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Martin Luther is revered in this country. Of course, our former kings chose our religion for us.”
- Woman, “Evangelical Lutheran? In America, the...”
- The guide interrupted, “Yes I’ve studied America’s evangelicalism; it has many parishes, just like here! Luther believed God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and through the New Testament...”
- The guide then paused for a moment. She was affiliated with this church, and seemed to ponder if she should continue with this dialogue. “We must move on, but I would like to share one of Luther’s thoughts with you. He said, “Who loves not wine, woman, and song, remains a fool his whole life long.” “
- I thought, *My kind of evangelicalism!* as we moved to other parts of the church.

### **Sibelius Park**

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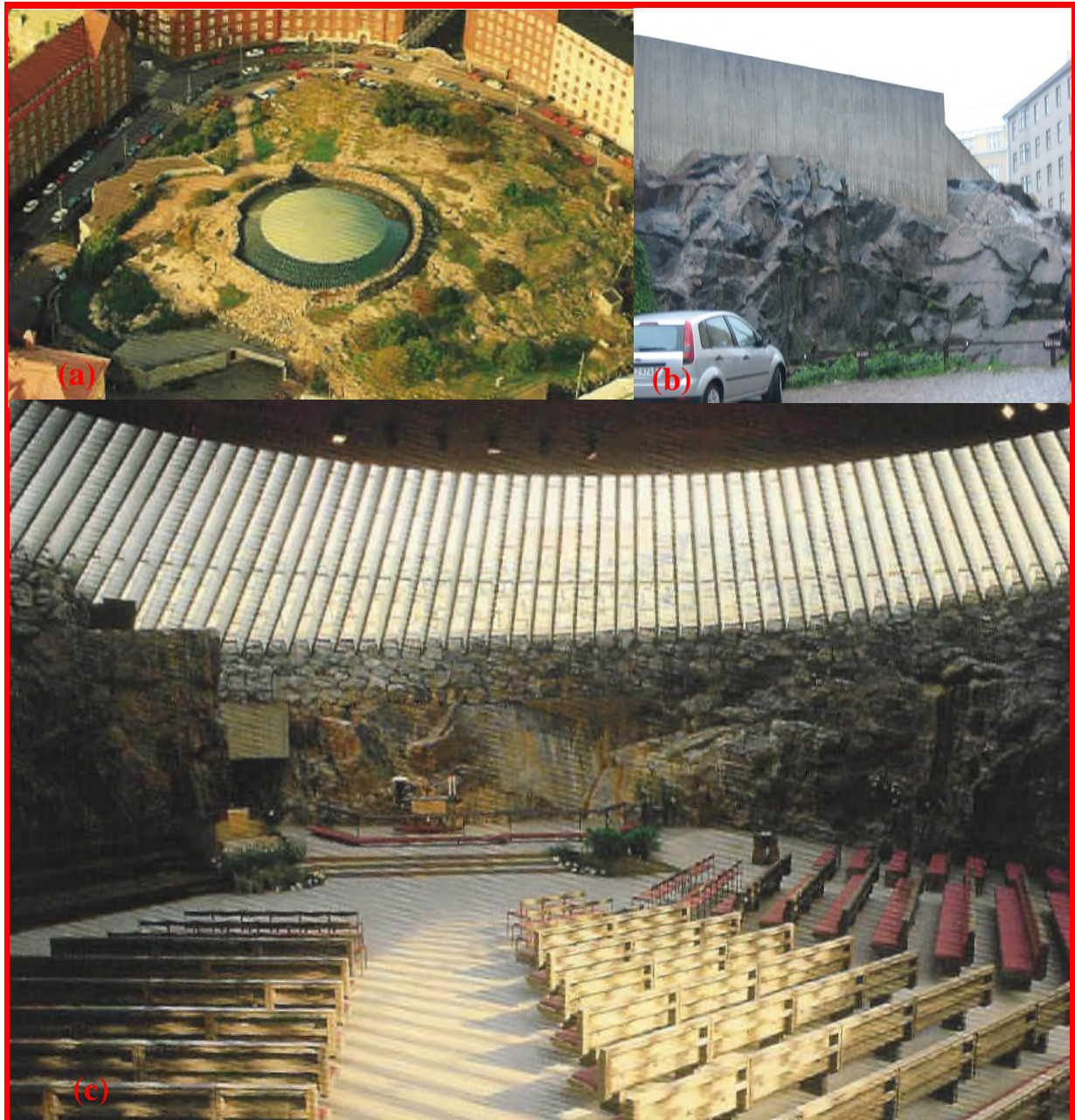
<sup>3</sup> Figures 35(a) and 35(c): Courtesy of Timo Suomalainen and Tuomo Suomalainen.

Our tour group spent a couple hours driving around the Helsinki harbor and its surrounding parks. We stopped at Sibelius Park, named after the famous composer, Jean Sibelius. I've listened to some of Sibelius' music, and I like it well enough. If I'm in a serious music mood, I lean toward Beethoven or Chopin, but Jean has his moments.

His most famous work is titled *Finlandia*. It is especially appreciated by people from Finland--- principally because of its name. Don't think so? OK, here is a short test:

How many people from Texas will say they don't like *The Yellow Rose of Texas*?  
How many people from Tennessee will say they don't like *The Tennessee Waltz*?  
How many people from New Mexico will say they don't like *Oh Fair New Mexico*?  
How many Marines will say they don't like *The Marine Corps Anthem*?  
Or sailors and *Anchors Aweigh*?  
Or New Yorkers and *New York, New York, it's a Wonderful Town*?  
Kentuckians and *My Old Kentucky Home*?  
Michael Vick and *Old Yeller*?





**Figure 2. Tempeliahaukio Church**

OK, I stretched the point with the last example---and send in your entry for this list---but the point is that most of us relate to music that can be personalized. Interesting eh? And the idea is completely irrelevant to most anything in life, and thus germane for this report.

Anyway, don't miss stopping at Sibelius Park. It's a large place with lots of space, plenty of water and trees, ducks, swans, and a couple of interesting sculptures, shown in Figure 3.

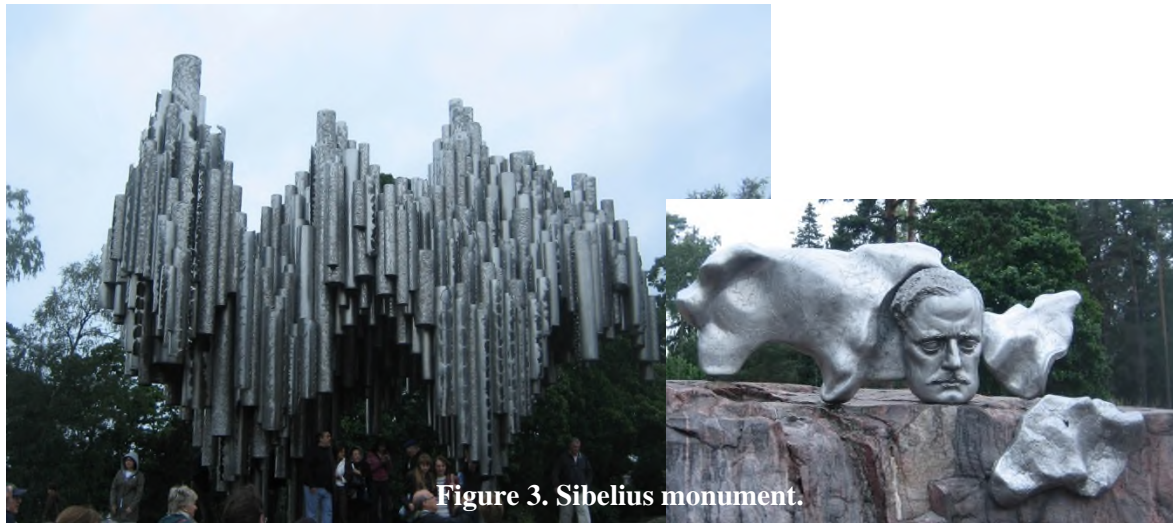


Figure 3. Sibelius monument.

We were now back with the guide who was still in the first chapter of Tour Guiding 101. She offered these thoughts about the Sibelius monument:

- “Sibelius’ *Finlandia* was banned by the Russians when they were in control here. The music raised too much patriotic pride.”
- “We call the monument, ‘countless pipes.’ When it was erected, there was lots of criticism. So, his head was added and put next to the pipes. Looks to me as if there are clouds coming from his head.”
- If you don’t like modern architecture, go see the ducks.”

True, there were lots of ducks milling-about. But I stayed around Jean’s head and took in the monument. I could see a duck’s head most anywhere in the world, but the head of Jean Sibelius was a different matter.

#### **Start Each Day with a Smile, and Get It Over With<sup>4</sup>**

After three hard hours of touring, our tour guide had yet to reveal her name or her teeth. The Finns are famous for their stoic natures. A couple years ago, I watched a documentary on the Finns’ social habits. One scene showed them at a dance; a Lawrence Welk kind of affair. As the couples fox-trotted around the floor, not one solitary person cracked a smile. At first, I assumed their frowns were attributed to dancing to Lawrence Welk music, but the commentator said that Finlanders were not known for their humor. Nonetheless, she told us the Finns love to Tango. And at least we don’t see them sporting the obsequious smiles displayed by professional tango dancers on TV. Come to think of it, a Finn would never make it as an American news commentator.

#### **The Russians are Coming...No, They’re Already Here!**

We spent some time in the area of Sibelius Park. The guide told us there was not much development because the President of Finland lives in the vicinity. She also said that many 19<sup>th</sup> century rich folks from St. Petersburg bought houses here. Some more of her observations:

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to W. C. Fields.



- Today, “A lot of Russians come from Moscow...it’s safe and secure. Helsinki is a very safe city. Our children go to school by themselves and take the public transit. Seven year olds travel alone on our transit.” *It’s impossible to imagine that a seven year old child could ride, say, a D.C. Metro Bus back-and-forth to his or her security-gated, dilapidated, filthy, dangerous school. Helsinki: Don’t advertise! You’ll end-up with a city full of perverts.*
- “Russians are welcome here and are buying properties. Some people are a little bit worried about that.”
- “Sweden and Russia had a war about every generation...mostly for our land.”
- “We don’t have rich ghettos or poor ghettos. Look around, you won’t see them here.” (I wondered if she had been to Cleveland.)
- “We don’t build badly, because you have to rebuild.”
- “We joined the EU in 1995, but our population is against joining NATO.”

Later, when we had a moment together, I asked the guide why Finland was against being a member of NATO. She responded it would put Finland in a delicate position with its neighbor Russia. She said the other reason was that the Finnish people wanted control over where they “send their boys to war.”

### **Tough Folks**

One thing became clear to your Reporter as we took in this city and its milieu, and as I learned about Finland’s history. The Finnish people are of tough fiber. Granted, they aren’t as tough as Americans because they don’t believe in laissez-faire capitalism. They’re too soft to accept underclass citizens and associated ghettos. Their socialistic ways would have Rush Limbaugh calling them socialistic wimps. But I venture so say Rush would not be in a rush to get into a confrontation with a Finn. But then, Rush’s confrontations are restricted to radio wave battles. He’s macho and combative...from afar.

A bit of history might be helpful: The Russo-Finnish War was fought between Finland and USSR in 1939 and 1940 because Finland would not reach an agreement on Soviet demands for some of its territory. For a while, the Russians were fought to a stand-still, but Finland lost the war and had to cede 16,172 square miles of their country. But during this battle, the Finnish inflicted far greater losses on the Russians than they suffered. Their use of combat ski patrols in the Finland mountains kept the Russians at bay for several months. The Russians won because they had more men to throw into the battle.



**Figure 4. The Flying Finn.**

Another example of the sturdy and robust Finn is Paavo Nurmi (1897-1973), a phenomenal runner and, like Sibelius, a Finnish hero. As we passed by the stadium where the 1952 Olympics were held, the guide called our attention to a statue of Nurmi (Figure 4). She gave us a brief summary of the “Flying Finn’s” career. He won two golds and one silver in the 1920 Olympics. But the topper was the 1924 Olympics in Paris. Even though Finnish officials prevented him from running the 10,000 meter race so other Finns could run (and a Finn runner won that gold medal), Nurmi still won five gold medals--all in distance running. He won the 1500- and 5000-meter races, which he ran on the same day!

Nurmi was given the honor of carrying the 1952 Olympic torch into the main stadium that is located just behind his statue shown in Figure 4.

Our guide informed us that Finland excels in many sports, such as running, skiing, and race car driving. “We are the best sports-loving nation in Europe; especially outdoor sports. Come to the parks after work, and you will see all of us are outdoors, doing sports. Our leaders have set up sports facilities, so most are free to all.”

No question, the Finns seem to be fit. As I walked around the city and checked-out the physiques of its citizens, I was certain I could not be in America. But in my country, I sense attitudes are changing about exercise, health, and eating. A wake-up call is to walk down a street in most any U.S. town or city and count the number of fat to non-fat people. I do this as a hobby whenever I travel. My anecdotal research reveals that America is one of the most overweight nations in the world. If you discount the skinny folks in California, I’d bet my love bars that America would tabulate has having the most obese population on earth.

Anyway, our guide was warming up. She posed a question: “When was Finland first awarded the Olympics?” All who answered said 1952. She informed us, “Incorrect, the answer is 1940, but they were cancelled because of the War.” She was on a roll! Tour Guiding 102 coming up.

### **Warming Up...Fire Sale on Icebreakers**

As we walked around a park next to the Gulf, the guide said:

- “For the first time in recorded history, the Baltic Sea did not freeze last winter...Almost no skiing last year.” (South Finland is located at about the same latitude as South Alaska.)
- “Our winters are getting shorter and shorter.”
- “We are thinking of selling our icebreakers but nobody wants them.”

Global warming? Sure, but what to do? Here are a few suggestions: Wait a few centuries for another Ice Age. Fix smoke stacks. Walk more. Do more research on belching cows. Re-name Iceland. Consider that the Arctic can now be called the Semi-Arctic, and melting glaciers are not all that cold to begin with. Besides, it's time Greenland earned its name.

If you happen to board the wrong airplane and end up in Europe, be sure to stop off in Helsinki to dance a tango with a Finn. You may even get a laugh---OK, a smile---out of the experience.

In more ways than one, the Finns are cool people.

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