

Why Is Finland the World's Happiest Country? [C1]

Per l'ottavo anno di fila la Finlandia è tra i Paesi più felici del mondo. Il primato è dovuto a diversi fattori, come la sauna, importante luogo di socializzazione, e un forte Stato sociale che garantisce il benessere.

According to the World Happiness Report, the **cheeriest** country in the world is one nature-loving Nordic nation: Finland. On paper, it's not hard to see why. It's one of the world's least corrupt countries, built on a democracy and quick to give women the vote. Education, from **daycare** to university, is free. Crime is low, the water is clean, the air fresh and there are more saunas than cars. But is it **noticeably** a nice place to be? And can the Finns teach me (and the rest of the UK, which ranks 20th in the Happiness Report) anything about wellbeing in the land of forests and freedom? I start in Helsinki. With a population of just 630,000, this is a pocket-sized, but delightful capital city, **buzzing** with a Nordic foodie scene, a **clutch** of tech startups and its own design aesthetic, **all bathed** in up to nineteen hours a day of sunlight in the summer. Explored during those never-ending hours of sunshine on foot or bike, the city feels eminently **liveable**. But locals also know how **to make the best of** the depths of winter, warming up in **cosy** cafés over bowls of salmon soup or **carving** holes in the sea ice for a **dip**. And while 40 per cent of the capital is given over to green spaces, beyond Helsinki's city limits nature is abundant. The country is a **patchwork** of 190,000 **glassy** lakes and 76,000 islands, while the rest is 75 per cent forest. To the north is snowy **Lapland** but you don't have to go that far for wilderness. Wide open spaces are just minutes from the cities — you are never more than a ten-minute walk from a park or forest. Most Finns spend their holidays at traditional summer cabins, where **running water** is optional, but a wood-fired sauna and a **dip** in the lake are obligatory. And they think nature is so good for you that you can now get it **on prescription**. On the tiny, car-free island of Vartiosaari, just a minute's **solar-powered** ferry crossing from Helsinki, I meet Adela Pajunen. Adela **spearheaded** a new movement for Finnish doctors to **prescribe** time outside to their stressed-out patients — her nature-prescription model has been recognised globally for

its scientifically-proven effects. We follow the wellness trail she's created on the island, wandering through patches of wild bilberries as she points out valerian and meadowsweet and explains that every Finn knows how to forage safely for berries and mushrooms from early childhood.

Connecting with nature, she says, is her key to happiness. Hidden among the island pines is a sky-blue summer cabin where we join German-born Wolfgang Zellar for tea and foraged berries. Every Finnish resident I've asked has a different reason they're happy, although Wolfgang tells me that most of them think their status as the cheeriest people on earth isn't quite accurate. "A better definition would be contentment with your lot, satisfaction with how life is right now." Many locals, when I mention the Happiness Index, are quick to point out that their country is not perfect. Finns worry about the future of their welfare state, about climate change and remind me of the worryingly-long 830-mile land border with Russia. And there's a self-deprecating side to the Finns, who have a dark sense of humour. "Suffering makes one beautiful," says one Finnish proverb. We've had hygge (Danish cosiness) and lagom (Swedish contentment) but I've always liked sisu – a Finnish way of being defined as "stoic determination, tenacity of purpose and hardiness." Adela tells me that locals "Don't complain about the winter or the weather" as the skies open halfway through our walk, filling the air with the smell of wet forest.

Further east, in the region of Kotka-Hamina, wilderness guide Simo Peri and I carry a green canoe to the water. The Kymi river branches out like an antler and as we paddle upstream, dragonflies dot the surface and I keep an eye out for moose among the pines on the riverbank. Simo explains that we can paddle where we please thanks to the Jokaisenoikeudet or 'Everyman's Right', a law that gives everyone the freedom to use, roam and forage in Finland's forests and lakes. Back on the shore we hike through dense forest and over moss-strewn bedrock to reach Lake Kukuljärvi near the village Ruotsinpyhtää on Finland's southern coast. Simo cooks coffee and sausages at a traditional laavu — a wooden shelter with a fire pit open for everyone to use — I jump off a little jetty into the lake's depths, as cool and clear as a glass of water. Cold-water swimming ("In Finland we just call it swimming," shrugs Helsinki local Leena Karppinen) is a way of life rather than a trend here. Finns have known about the mental and

physical benefits of talviuinti (or ice swimming) for centuries. And in a country where lakes are frozen over from October until May, they think nothing of starting the day by **drilling** a hole in the ice for a **dip**. Perhaps it's because they can always warm up in the sauna afterwards. Wood-fired bathhouses are an ancient part of Finnish culture. Originally the space for washing one's body in a Finnish house, the sauna has evolved into a communal ritual for **stress relief** and socialising. Every Finnish embassy has a sauna, where international **diplomats** may be invited for casual meetings **in the nude**. And while most Finns have a sauna at home, big public bathhouses are **springing up** again across the country. On Lonna Island — a **tiny slip** of land just 150 metres long and only ten minutes by ferry from Helsinki — I share a traditional mixed sauna with locals of all ages, including heavily pregnant women and my own baby, Sylvie, who joins in for a few minutes and is smiled at by the locals. "She's Finnish now!" they say.

Published in The Guardian on 22 December 2024. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **antler** = corno
- **moose** = alce
- **shore** = riva
- **moss-strewn** = coperto di muschio
- **all bathed** = essere immerso
- **patches** = aree
- **your lot** = il destino che ti è toccato
- **shelter** = rifugio
- **fire pit** = focolare
- **wild bilberries** = mirtilli selvatici
- **berries** = bacche
- **I keep an eye out for** = tenere d'occhio
- **land border** = confine terrestre
- **clutch** = covata
- **glassy** = cristallini
- **trail** = percorso
- **meadowsweet** = olmaria
- **bedrock** = strato roccioso
- **wandering** = vagare
- **branches out** = diramarsi
- **daycare** = asilo nido
- **buzzing** = brulicare
- **solar-powered** = alimentato a energia solare
- **jetty** = molo
- **cheeriest** = più felice
- **dip** = tuffo
- **running water** = acqua corrente
- **cosy** = accogliente
- **springing up** = spuntare
- **hardiness** = resistenza
- **stress relief** = alleviare lo stress
- **to forage** = cercare cibo
- **upstream** = a monte

- **hike** = fare escursioni
- **to make the best of** = sfruttare al meglio
- **patchwork** = mosaico
- **prescribe** = prescrivere
- **carving** = fare un buco
- **Lapland** = Lapponia
- **halfway through our walk** = a metà della nostra camminata
- **noticeably** = visibilmente
- **in the nude** = nudi
- **welfare state** = Stato del benessere
- **complain** = lamentarsi
- **where we please** = dove ci pare
- **spearheaded** = guidare
- **dragonflies** = libellule
- **roam** = gironzolare
- **on prescription** = su prescrizione medica
- **self-deprecating** = autocritico
- **purpose** = scopo
- **drilling** = forare
- **tiny slip** = piccola striscia
- **liveable.** = vivibile
- **paddle** = remare
- **dot** = sparpagliarsi qua e là