



Finland's Romantic Lessons

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Please meet Eva Kiviranta from Visit Finland, our 29-year-old tour guide to romantic Finland. Eva loves her country and she makes a case that it is a great place to fall in love, and possibly even a better place to celebrate anniversaries because of its closeness to nature, its lack of pretensions, the laid-back nature of its people, and of course, the sauna. What better place and way to step out of the fast lanes to reflect on what really matters in life, especially including those we love the most?

Eva is willing to share with us her personal observations on Finnish attitudes toward romance, the differences between generational perspectives, Finnish social life, and especially wonderful places to visit and celebrate what we believe in.

Finland's history as a metaphor for romance

In many ways, the history of Finland as a country is a suitable metaphor for romance. Finland was formed on the rebound from another relationship when she achieved a reluctant and

sometimes turbulent divorce from Russia. As a matter of fact for a long time Finland was torn between two lovers, Sweden and Russia, both of which abused her when it suited their purposes. Neither of those relationships were anything resembling equal, and Finland learned a few lessons in negotiating, by playing one lover against the other, when what she really wanted was total freedom to go her own way. She wanted to be experienced for who she was, and not feel compelled to fill the role others assigned to her. She was happy to cooperate, but was quick to seize opportunities to free herself from unwelcome restraints.

Internal conflict

It wasn't always a simple, straightforward path Finland followed, and she has had mixed and conflicting feelings, even some self-destructive tendencies. As a matter of fact, for a short time blood was shed in civil war as she inflicted wounds on herself, as she had to choose how she wanted to use her new-found freedom.

Partners who refuse to move on

As countries go, Finland is a young divorcee and is reveling in her independence, especially this year, the anniversary of her divorce from Russia. During the last 100 years there have been repeated efforts by Russia to return to a dead relationship, and Finland sought to say no with just the right tone of voice, because her former partner, Russia, was prone to violence. It is a dance a lot of abused women have had to endure from former partners who can't seem to move on.

No more dependent relationships

Finland is open to new relationships and she fully intends to contribute,



Hyökkäys ("The Attack") by Finnish artist Eetu Isto, 1905. In the painting, the Russian doubleheaded eagle is attacking the maiden symbolizing Finland, tearing a law book from her hands. Immediately after the painting was finalized, it became the symbol of protest against Russia, spreading throughout Finland in thousands of prints.

to pay her own way, so to speak. She has no interest in new dependent relationships. However, because of her past bad relationships, it should come as no surprise that she wants to feel safe in a relationship, that security is important to her. Even though she is small, she wants to be treated with equal respect, and she feels that her track record speaks for itself, that she has earned that respect. After all, she has lifted herself from post-divorce poverty to wealth, which she shares



Most of Finland was a part of the Kingdom of Sweden from 1323 to the early 18th century, when Russia conquered Finland in the 1808–1809 war with Sweden. Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy. The Grand Duke was the Russian Emperor, whose representative in Finland was the Governor General. Finland ended the relationship on December 6, 1917 and became an independent nation after almost 600 years of dominance by others.

generously with her children and friends. She believes her success has been largely due to her diligence, industriousness, prudent management of her household and resources, and being alert to shrewd investment opportunities when her budget permitted.

Balancing security needs and tolerance for risk

Finland has learned the value of flexibility from her past experiences. There is risk in all human relationships, especially since different people grow in different directions and different speeds and subject to different

influences, and she has had to maintain a continual balance between her need for security with a tolerance for risk and a willingness to strike out in new directions, sometimes alone. Not that long ago Finland led the world in the use of cell phones, and Nokia was a global household word. Even today, Eva evinced surprise when I asked her if I could fax her something when we were experiencing issues with email. Her reply was, "Oh, we haven't used fax in Finland for years. That's an outdated technology."

Equality vs flexibility

Relationships may begin on the basis of equality as an intention and a framework, or world view and basic principles, but the dynamics of any given situation are often fluid and complex and require wisdom and give-and-take, and do not lend themselves to micro-management. Finland tries to engage her partners in dialogue to reach consensus, but she alone is responsible for her choices. She knows when she makes mistakes, she has to fix them.

Freedom is never guaranteed

Finland knows that liberty is never guaranteed, and though hard-won, can more easily be lost through seduction and unrealistic promises. Many a divorcee has found herself engaging in recidivistic behaviors, giving away their freedoms in exchange for utopian promises of relationship bliss without the effort or the values. Especially is this true when they have forgotten the sacrifices made to gain freedom in the beginning. Freedom is like money in the casino; when it is easily won, it is just as easily lost. A person whose money is greater than they are will certainly lose it; the same is true of liberty.

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No pretensions, irrational exuberance, or undignified ecstasy

Finland is a private country, not given to show or pretension. She is less concerned about what the neighbors think of her than what's really going on in her household. She is suspicious of people who are overly exuberant or ecstatically happy. She wonders what's wrong with those people; that they are detached from reality as the Finns have experienced it.

No-nonsense romance

Is Finland romantic? Yes, in a no-nonsense kind of way. They value honesty and credibility more highly than a rush to speculation about a new partnership. Finns are this way in their personal as well as their national life. When they tell you something good about themselves, they will often

immediately follow it with something they'd like to improve. Finnish men are not known for being voluble. Things should be expressed in as few words as possible.

There's the Finnish joke about the wife of 20 years complaining to her husband "Do you know how long it's been since you told me you loved me? His laconic reply was "I told you when we got married I loved you. If anything changes, you'll be the first to know."

Finnish women will occasionally complain about their husbands' reserved nature, and some Finnish men may wish their wives made more of an effort to present well in a fashionable sense.

Romance in the countryside

Eva Kiviranta tells us that Finns are basically a rural people and they are at their most comfortable in the forest;

that about 500,000 live in the Greater Helsinki area, but five million live in the country and smaller cities. Finland has over 500,000 summer cottages, which is one cottage for every 10 men, women, and children in the country. That is eloquent testimony to the draw of the wild for Finns.

The greatest concentration of population is in the south and southwest, in the Helsinki area. Eva grew up about 15 kilometers (9 miles) from Helsinki. She is the oldest of her siblings, a sister and brother, and hiking is her passion. Life growing up was about the outdoors, more so than books. She says she did not come from a literary family, and she remembers having to wait for some English language books. Her parents divorced when she was five years old, part of the overall divorce rate of about 50%. Eva just moved into her first, own home. She prefers the cultural advantages of Helsinki, which she says is a great city.

Finland's capital city of Helsinki—Helsinki Cathedral, on right, dominates the landscape.



Eva's story...

Like many of us, Eva got to appreciate her own culture even more from travel. She became an exchange student for one year at a Presbyterian College in Washington State. She says she was unprepared for the culture shock. She found herself in a tiny town where everyone knew everyone else, and she had to learn the value of small talk in a hurry. She was astonished that college classes began with a prayer. In Finland, most people belong to the Lutheran Church, which is the state church. In Finland, church schools are not about church.

Eva said her college year in America was like going to high school all over again. She was the only Finn in town, and she never had any visitors from home during that year. She felt like the weird kid in town. She was surprised at how many students in America volunteered for internships

because they were things they believed in. In Finland, most of those functions are state-run and organized and not a matter of passion or shared values; it was just how things were done. Eva was also surprised at the American passion for their jobs; she realized that here a job was frequently more than a job.

Eva said perhaps because she spoke English so well, she wasn't really considered an international student, so she never got international invites because she wasn't international enough. But she wasn't local either and no one reached out to her. Eva learned during a very long year what it felt like to be an outsider.

Eva always liked travel, and it was her dream to work in the industry. She wanted to apply for an internship



in a very exclusive Communications program in Finland that admitted only 30 students per year. She says she missed qualifying by ½ point. She doesn't like math and hates Excel spreadsheets. So today she is a journalist on the social media side, and she gets paid to talk about hiking, and to take tours into the Finnish countryside.

Grown kids

Eva says among her friends and associates, kids leave home between the ages of 18-20. Parents start subtly hinting it's time to leave home when you are 21. Most Finns want to live alone or with a partner. If you still have serial roommates at the age of 25 in Helsinki, it's considered odd.

Competitions and distinctions

She says Finland is known for quirky competitions, including swamp soccer, wife carrying, cell phone throwing, air guitar championships, winter (ice hole) swimming, and berry picking contests. Most of these are attended for the party that follows. In recent surveys Helsinki has been named the most honest city, and also for being the best city for getting to sex on the first date.

Cultural Influences

Eva says everyone is aware that the Finnish culture is subject to change. There are more mixed marriages now, and she has noticed for the first time

that people are appearing in prominent positions whose names are not Finnish. She says the Finns are welcoming but they don't want the core values of what makes them proud of Finland to change.

Where to go for romance?

Outdoors, of course. Finns, who are close to nature, are more likely to find partners in the outdoors as well. As modern life becomes increasingly stressful, Finland is a perfect place to take a time out and get off the grid.

By far the most popular romantic getaway during the winter months of say, January to April, are to rent a cabin and curl up in reindeer blankets in front of a roaring log fire, to a backdrop of crushing silence outdoors. Log cabins often come with outdoor hot tub and sauna, and walks and snow shoe hiking are great exercise. For those looking for something more active, Helsinki is a very special town with lots of cool bars and chic restaurants.

Romance is like everything else in Finland; it is less about events and

show, and more about being. It's not about shouting where you have been or hit and run touring, and more about soaking in the moment.

There are no rules or protocols to dating in Finland; you usually just go out with friends and acquaintances and get to know others over an extended period of time. There are fewer bold approaches than there might be in the U.S. and Finns probably don't arrive at "friendship" status as quickly as Americans will. Relationships in Finland are less Hollywood-style than in the U.S. The Tinder application is as popular in Finland as elsewhere with the younger crowd as an easy, faster way to connect, but maybe not for those looking for long-term relationships.

Romantic relationships of all kinds involve the fine art of diplomacy, and Finns historically know a lot about ice-breaking. They may be more cautious than some if they feel they are on thin ice. But when they have a mind to, they don't mind jumping right in. Sauna and sisu.