

# Finland and Estonia Travelogue 2026

## Day 0 – Before We Go

Steve and I are off for a big adventure to try to see the Northern Lights. While much of the country has been able to step outside their back door to see this incredible phenomenon, we're going to have to travel way inside the Arctic Circle in order to check off this bucket list item.

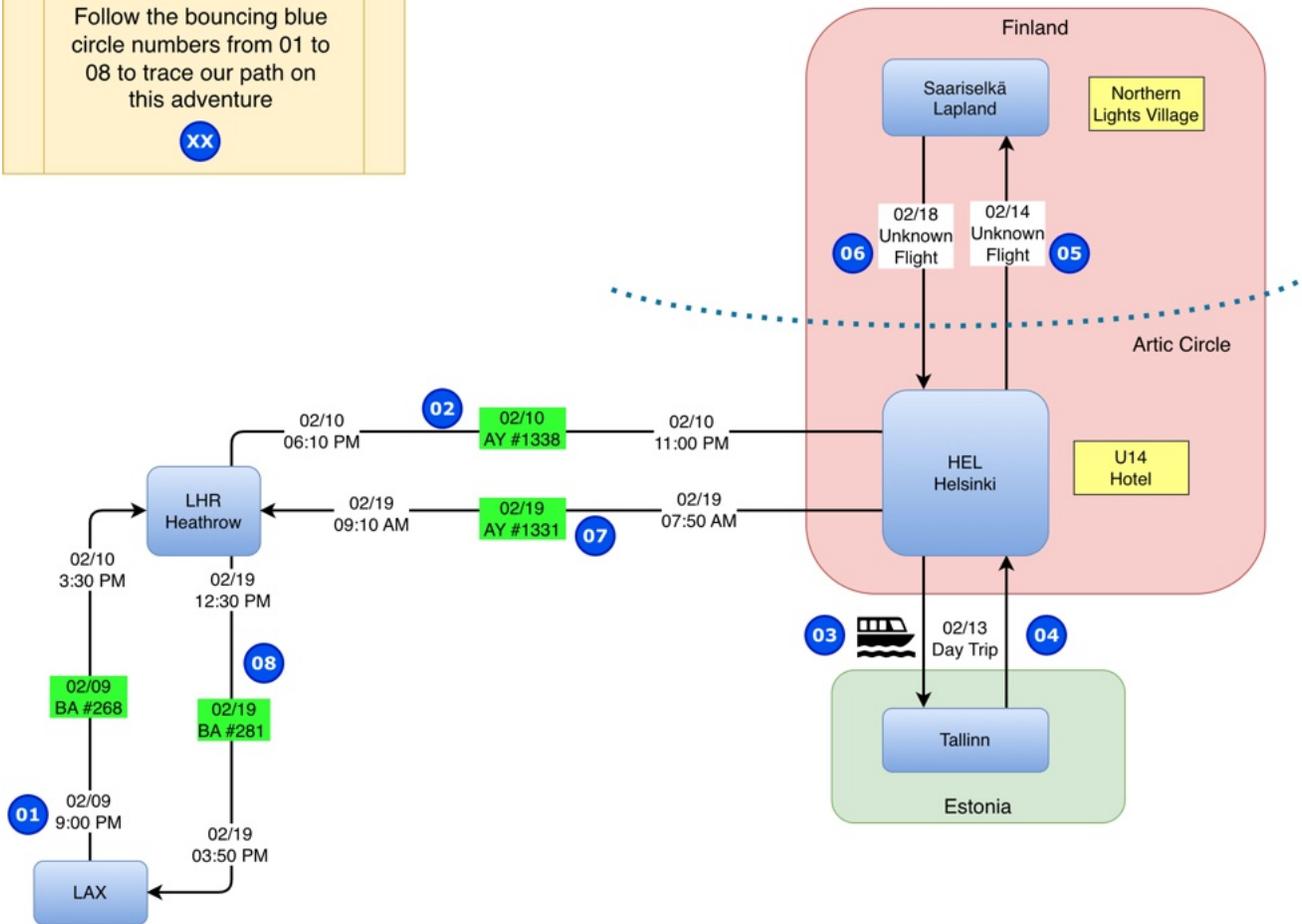
The ever-helpful attached diagram will allow you to trace our path day by day, see our flight numbers, and know what hotels we're staying at. On the second page, I've included emergency phone numbers for our travel agency and the hotels, as well as a pretty map showing where we're going. I illustrate what I mean by "way inside the Arctic Circle" by showing you how we barely stepped over the circle in Iceland and how far up Lapland is inside the circle. It also illustrates how close we'll be to Russia 🤨

With any luck, I'll be able to do a travelogue on this trip. If you would like to opt out of receiving this and future travelogues, please say so — no feelings will be hurt!

Stay safe while we're gone, and wish us luck to see the aurora borealis!

Allison & Steve

Follow the bouncing blue circle numbers from 01 to 08 to trace our path on this adventure



## Days 1-3 – Traveling

I promise to be day-challenged to hold with tradition on my travelogues, so consider "days 1-3" to be an estimate at this point. It's hard to pin down because we left our house at 6:30 PM on Monday night and arrived in Finland at 11 PM on Tuesday, but I'm writing this on Wednesday. So maybe this is days 1 and 3 with no 2 at all? Who can say?

We had the luxury of traveling from LA to London on an Airbus A380, which is a massive double-decker aircraft, and we got the Upper Deck. How cool is that?





Our flight from London to Helsinki wasn't luxurious at all, but at least that made it hard to sleep on our last leg, so we arrived suitably exhausted to sleep through the night. Steve almost fell asleep on the first reindeer he found in the airport.



We woke up at 8 AM and went for a walk as it started to snow! I know many of you experience this on the regular, but we haven't been in snowfall since we went to Paris with Dean and Suzanne in 2018 (<https://www.podfeet.com/travelogues/Travelogue-Paris-2018.pdf>)



We went on a quick walk to the Helsinki Cathedral, which was pretty cool. The statue is of some dude named Alexander II. Not sure what he has to do with the cathedral. I even read the plaque on it, and it said, "The statue speaks to you." So ... \\_(ツ)\_/



The bay appears to be partially frozen. I'm pretty sure the red ship you see is a bar!



Look! Another cathedral! This one is called the Uspenski Cathedral:



The real fun began when we met up with Timo Kurvi, a fan of my podcast whom we'd never met before. He was born in Detroit, Michigan (as was I), and moved to Finland 30 years ago. We spent the better part of the day walking the city with him. His first stop was the library, which we thought was an odd choice until we got there. This ship-like structure is made of wood! Now, the "bow" of the ship is on the right for future reference.



This library is not like any I've seen before. One floor has sewing machines, 3D printers, and musical instruments you can rent! Here's the laser cutting lab:



The top floor is for the actual books. This is where you see all of the glass at the top, and it was really cool. We walked all the way out to the "bow". It was scary to look down!



A less unsettling view. This floor is filled with areas to sit and read and study and just relax.



They do NOT, however, allow downhill skiing.



After all this walking, it was time for some coffee and pastries. I know, Tom, I always say I don't like food pictures, but look how HUGE they were! Timo said these were like Mardi Gras pastries - the ones you eat to fatten yourself up before Lent.



It was a laptop-free cafe!



And now, for something completely different, a statue to a poet. This is Johan Ludvig Runeberg.



When we were at the cafe, Timo told us the story of the Winter War when the Soviets took over Finland. As we walked back, we just happened to find a very interesting tribute to that war.



Inside the spheres are photos from the war that you can see through the circular windows:



Here's a zoom in on one photo. I asked why there was a photo of a bottle of Coke. Timo explained that it wasn't Coke, it was the original Molotov cocktail named after Vyacheslav Molotov, who was the Soviet Union's Minister of Foreign Affairs under Joseph Stalin.



And then we saw a robot delivering stuff on the snowy street.



After our adventure with Timo for the day, we came back to the hotel and napped **hard**. Woke up in time to start this letter, and then go down to the hotel restaurant to meet our fellow UCLA travelers. Did I mention we're traveling with UCLA again?

Had a lovely evening meeting new and interesting people, had a couple of glasses of wine from different regions of Europe (sorry, Bill, don't remember what they were), and a golden beet salad with truffles that I wanted to write a song about. Seriously, it was beets. And it was delicious.

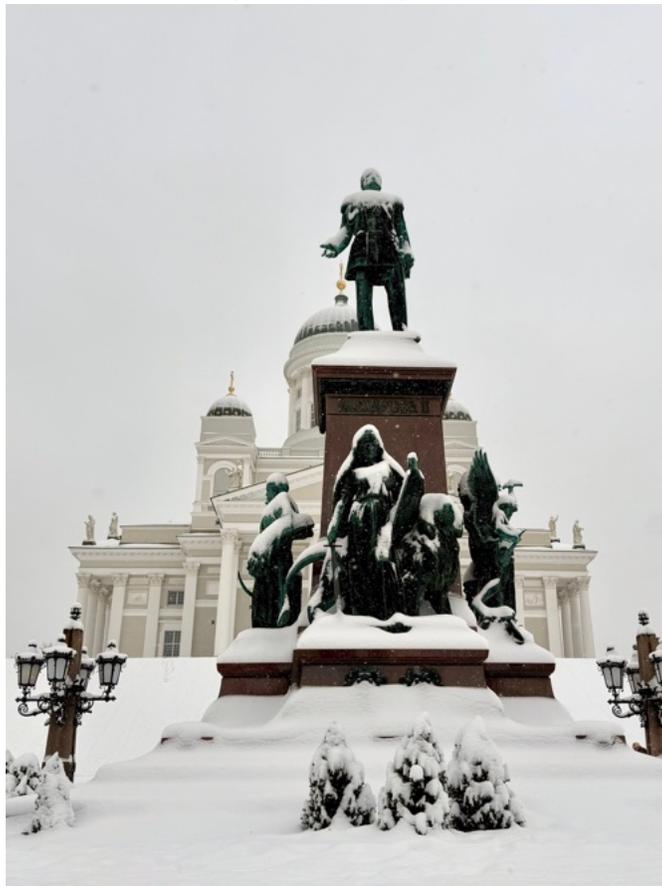
Time to call it a night.

## Day 4 – Helsinki

As you may recall (it was only a day ago, people), we spent our first day in Finland toodling around with our new friend Timo. We've now met up with our UCLA tour group, and we're starting to get to know the folks on the trip. We had a nice, leisurely start where we hopped on a bus to tour the city of Helsinki with an official guide.

The first stop was the Helsinki Cathedral. Wait ... isn't that where we went yesterday? Yeah, but since it was with a group of ~20 folks and we had an *agenda*, we weren't allowed to climb the steps and go inside. We did hear some history where the guide explained who that statue out front was. Remember ol' Alex II, whose statue "talked to you"? Evidently, he was in a line of Alexes, most of whom appear to have been assassinated, some lost out because of those pesky Bolsheviks, Finland was part of Russia ... and I lost track of which one Alex II was. Evidently, he was one of the good ones.

But look - more snow on him today, so totally different from yesterday.



As we drove through the city, the knowledgeable guide spouted facts, some of which I listened to. I heard her say that the city of Helsinki is carbon neutral as of last year. I thought that was awesome, but you know me, "trust but verify". I looked it up, and the goal is 85% by 2030. If you've ever met me, you know that I had to ask her about this. She had an answer immediately — she meant that the *city* functions are carbon neutral, but that the other industries needed to follow. Oh well, progress takes time.

We went to the Helsinki train station, which is normally a big treat. When we were outside, the guide talked about these dudes. She said they were kind of a metaphor for Finnish men. She recited the joke normally attributed to introverts. You know the Finnish man likes you because instead of looking at his shoes when he talks to you, he looks at your shoes.



Unfortunately, the train station itself wasn't all that interesting. It was under construction, so even talking was difficult with all of the sounds of the machinery. At least they had a Burger King (at which we did not eat) ...



Timo had warned us that Helsinki wasn't a very historic city, but this kind of cemented that to us.

After the train station, our guide took us to ... the library. Yeah, the really cool wood one that Timo took us to yesterday.

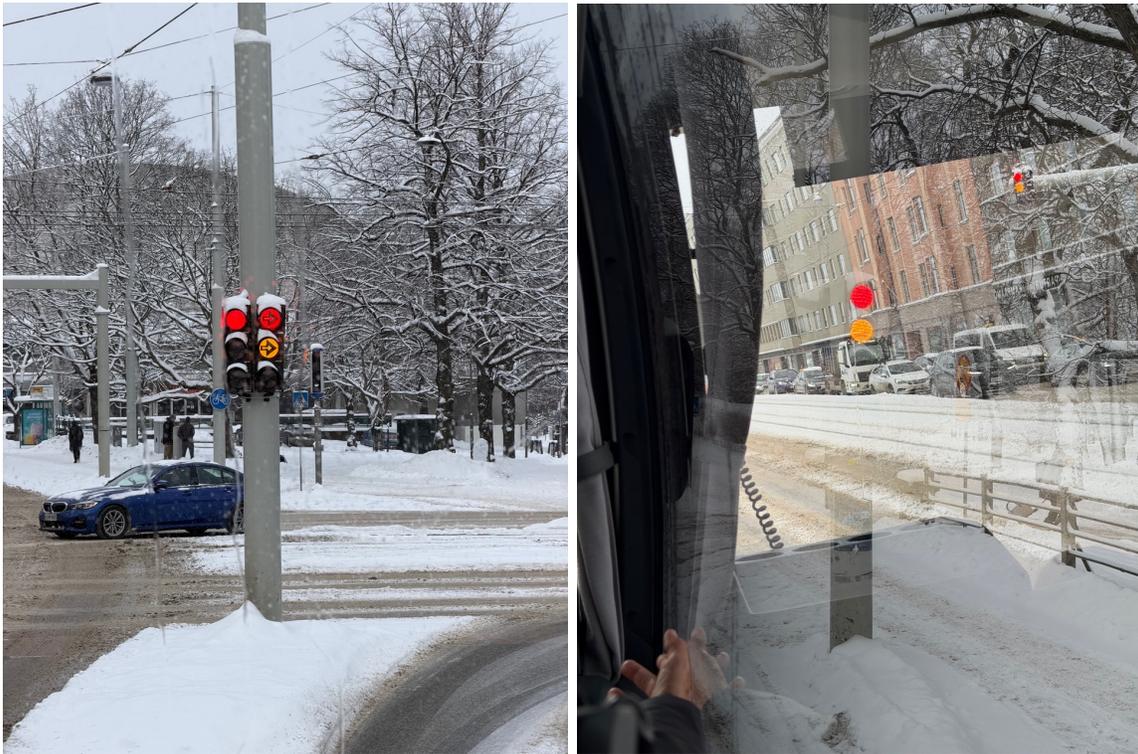
Steve did get a completely different angle of the Library from the bow:



As we drove around the city, Steve observed something really interesting. Where we live, a traffic light starts green for go, yellow for caution (but it's ok to go through the intersection), to red, and then the cycle starts over. In Finland, it's a little bit different. It's still green, yellow, red, but after red, there's a very short period where the yellow light comes on with the red before it turns green.

My guess is that it's telling you not to jump to full speed right away when the light turns green, just in case someone decides to run the red light in the other direction. This light has an arrow, but you can see what we mean.

The second photo has no value other than to say, "Weird, isn't it?" Steve was trying to capture the red and yellow at the same time out of the right window, and he got an odd reflection effect. You can see the red and yellow lights, but the entire light fixture has completely disappeared!



It continued to snow, which made the forest really pretty.



On Timo's suggestion, we had lunch at a new restaurant called Rue Madame:



That little pest Tom was so happy I posted a food photo yesterday that he demanded a photo of beer today. Steve really had no choice but to try out a Riviera IPA (6/5% ABV, Linz and Nolan - and Steve did not do that heady pour, the server did).



The ceviche was extraordinary (but I refuse to show you how pretty it was), but I will show you how pretty the wine glasses were with this partial outline of a woman's face in red. If you're wondering, that's a Crémant de Bourgogne, from Léonce Bocquet. Think champagne, but not from the region where you can call it champagne.



One observation of the Finnish people is that they just don't keep their cars very clean.



It was suggested (I apologize that I can't remember by whom) that we should make tiny snowmen. That didn't happen, and it's best illustrated by my attempt at a snowball thrown at Steve. This is not a snowball exploding on me — it's a snowball exploding as I attempt to throw it as Steve.



After the bus tour, we were given a short break, but then we were told they'd scheduled a lecture on the importance of saunas to the Finnish people. It turns out you can take a nap instead of attending the lecture and still get to go on the sauna adventure!

The lot of us piled into a bus and went down the road 10 minutes or so to Löyll Sauna.



Inside, we "enjoyed" four different saunas of different sizes and different levels of heat torture. They were hot as you'd expect, but then some genius (locals, am I right?) would throw water on the hot rocks, and in a wave, your skin would be on fire.

You all know I'll do anything I'm dared to do, so I got out of one of the saunas and went outside (it was about 15°F out there), walked barefoot down the pathway just for the privilege of lowering myself from a ladder with frozen steps into a hole they'd carved into the frozen Balkan Sea.

Note that I'm wearing my UCLA badge for the comedy.



It was fun, but my feet didn't even start to stop hurting for a good ten minutes as they heated back up.

We all survived, and Steve even went with me out on that frozen path to get to the sauna that had a view of the harbor. Until they fried our ears off and we had to leave. (Some new friends whose names we've yet to learn).



Dinner back at the hotel with our friend Hilda (with whom we went to Iceland and Antarctica), and some lovely Tanqueray with Thomas Henry tonic.

Tomorrow is a long day to the historic city of Tallinn in Estonia, so I'd best get to bed!

## Day 5 – Estonia

Two points of order before we continue following your intrepid followers.

Steve noticed that I missed a few words telling the (bad) joke about introverts (also known as Fins). You know the Finnish man likes you because instead of looking at his shoes when he talks to you, he looks at your shoes. I told you it was a bad joke but he thought you'd appreciate it, so blame him if you don't!

Second point of order - it was Pat who requested a snow man be built out of the snow here, but as I demonstrated, the snow is too powdery to even pack a snowball.

This particular tour gets on the road at quite a civilized time (so far), with a departure of 9:15 AM, but it's going to go quite late into the evening. After a nice breakfast, we jumped on a shuttle bus to the Port of Helsinki to board the ferry to Tallinn.

Steve insisted that we take this touristy photo before we boarded:



I called it a "ferry", but the Megastar would more appropriately be called a cruise ship. It can carry 1000 people and a lot of cars - it's HUGE. Here's a side view showing all I could see out the window before we boarded.



And the ambiance of the interior.



The view out the windows makes me think of two things: the water the people on the Titanic were forced jump into, and the exact water I voluntarily climbed into last night in my bathing suit!



When we arrived in Tallinn, we were met by the lovely Cristin, our Estonian guide. You would have loved her — intelligent, factual, droll, and pretended to be exhausted by telling us things. To give you an idea of why I loved her, her closing remarks were exactly the way I explain trips to you. At the end she said, “What are you going to tell your friends about what I’ve told you today?” Before waiting for an answer, she said, “It’s cold. 1500s stuff. Russia, Sweden. Czars and emperors.” She was awesome.

At one point she said that it's hard to tell what's ancient in Tallinn and what's Disneyland. We were walking through an archway in a wall, and she said the wall was super old but the archway was cut through the wall last year. Steve asked about the material of a particular spire because it was so shiny. She explained that it was copper, but it hadn't get gotten the patina yet because it was only a few years old. She pointed to the roof in the foreground on the same building that was tinged with green and told us that was the ancient part.

Here's Veru Gates. I can't tell you whether they're old or Disneyland. I also can't explain why there's a guy in a parrot suit marching back and forth between the towers.



Our first order of business was to find lunch. We chose a Ukrainian restaurant called Odessa to show our support. We had a delightful soup called Cappucino, which wasn't coffee at all - it was creamed chestnut soup. Before we got our food, the waiter brought over shots of vodka with horseradish. That sounds weird, and it kinda was, but we managed to enjoy the weird. Steve and I shared a Pööris Märzen 5.8% Pöide Estonian craft beer. If you know what that means, you're welcome. It tasted like a brown ale to me. Instead of food or beer pics, here's the view out the window.



Walking through the streets of Tallinn felt like walking back in time.



The pink building on the left is the Russian Consulate which will become more interesting in the next photo.



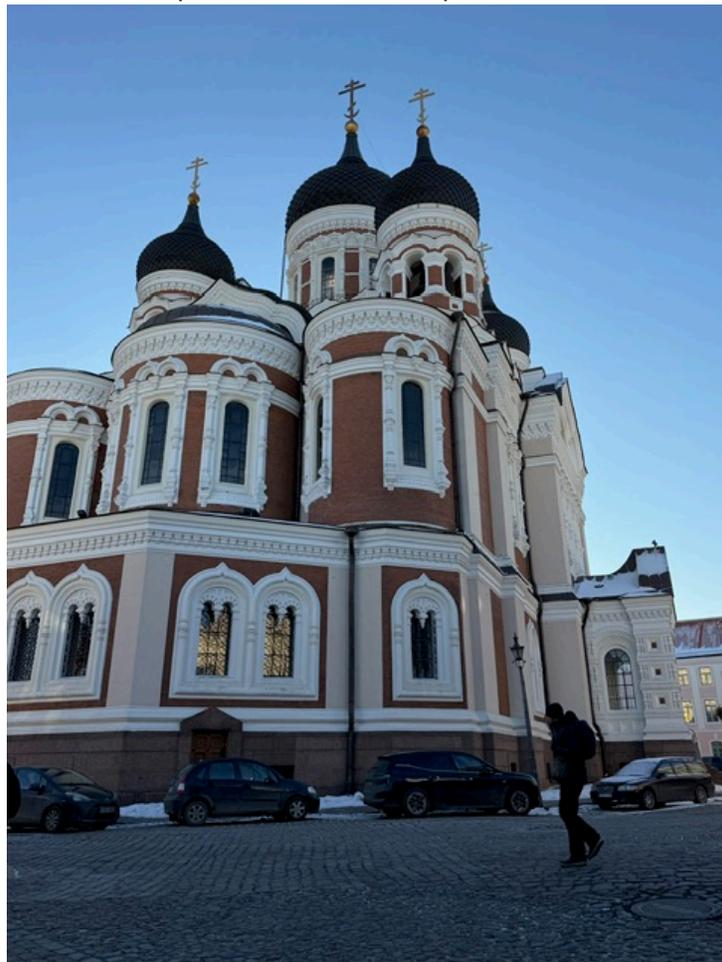
There's a fence in front of it they call "the wall of opinion". You can see it's covered with images and posters about the war and how Navalny was murdered. Sobering to say the least. The people of Estonia feel the tragedy of what's happening to Ukraine at a very basic level as it could be them soon.



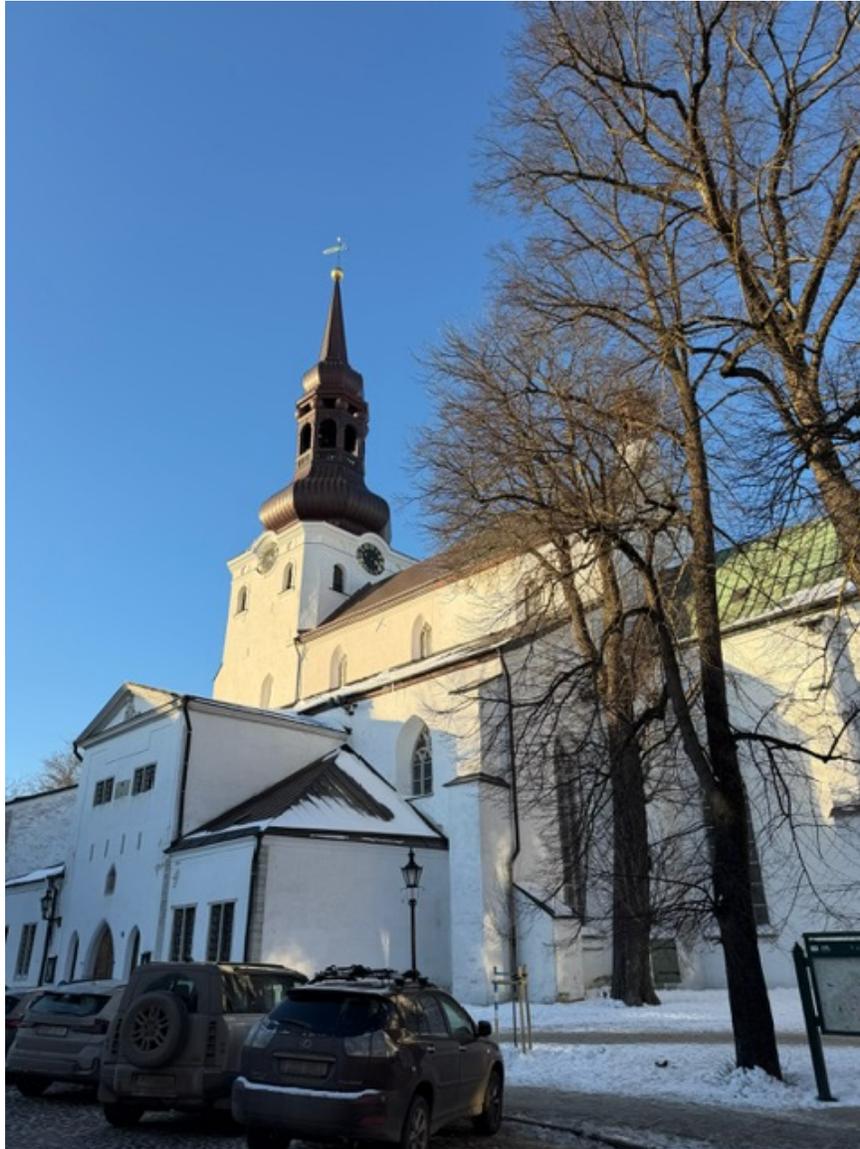
Let's literally cleanse our palates with a photo of a local sweets shop. Cristin asked us to guess what the bar under the window is for. The answer was, "for children." She finally elaborated and explained they wanted little kids to be able to stand on the bar, see through the window, and then say, "Mommy, Daddy, PUHLEEEEEASE can I have some?"



The most striking structure is Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Don't get too excited, there's a way cooler photo coming up later.



This is the building (MIGHT be Saint Mary's Cathedral) with the shiny ball on top of the shiny spire that Steve asked about. We learned it was just recently made out of copper. You can see the roof on the right that has the classic patina of old copper.



Remember Cristin mentioned that it was cold? It was 14°F. For a pair of California kids who walked their dog Kepler to the beach and back in shorts and t-shirts the day before the trip, that's COLD. But when the wind kicked up, we really felt the bone-chilling cold. We climbed a bit of a hill to see the view of the city, but it was so windy we just had time to snap a quick pic and run to shelter.



This giant creepy monk was right where she talked about some things being Disneyland. There appeared to be no cultural significance other than to give the feeling that area was haunted.

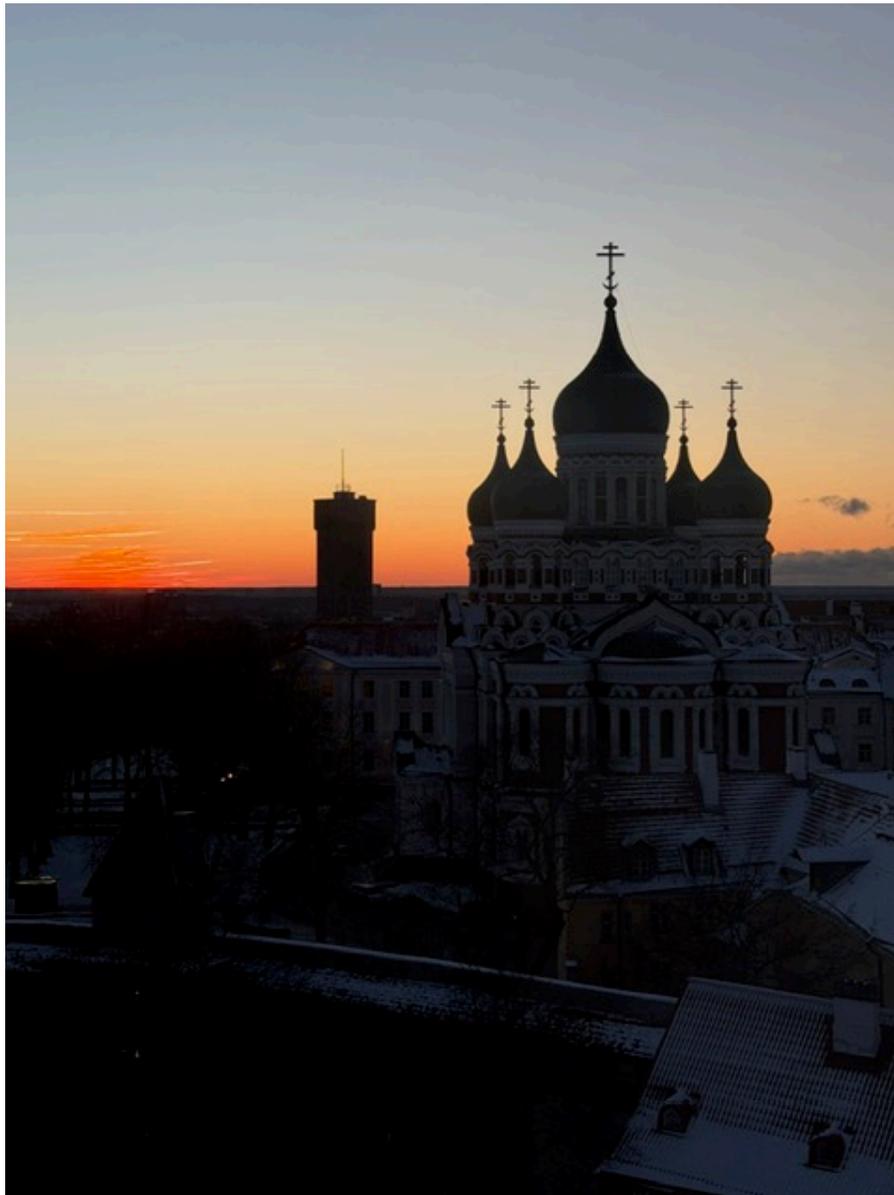


When it came time to bid the lovely Cristin adieu at the end of our 2-hour Tallinn tour, it was the coldest we'd been all day. I'd been seeing signs for something called Glögg, which is a hard spiced cider. Think mulled wine. We beelined it to the first cafe offering Glögg and it was absolute heaven. Just holding the glass was heaven, the warm wine combined with an actual warm room was fabulous. You can see that I haven't even taken off my coat and scarf yet as I tried to warm up. While we were there we finally broke out the air-activated glove and boot warmers Bill suggested we buy. After a bit of time, we felt strong enough to weather that bitter cold again.



Cristin had told us about an old church that was now a museum, and it held two very important things: heat and toilets. But seriously, it had a very tall tower you could go up in to get a good view of the city. We paid our 15 euro each and

took the elevator up - we were not disappointed. The sun was just setting behind Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral.



We stayed as long as we could, trying to time our return to the Veru Gates to leave us as little time as possible in the cold waiting for the rest of the folks to arrive for our trip back. As we went through the main square, we had to stop to admire the Christmas trees all lit up. We know it's halfway through February, but we also knew that Lindsay and Nikki have probably started playing Christmas songs for next Christmas already!



We'll end on a selfie as we left the lovely town of Tallinn.



Tomorrow we leave for Lapland to the village of Saariselkä bright and early. Probably won't be too much adventure till we go snowshoeing at 8PM. Hope I can keep up the pace on these letters but even if I'm delayed, you know there'll be one for every day.

## Day 6 Saariselkä – Snowshoeing & Northern Lights

Since everyone in the States is still asleep at the time of this writing, we have no corrections. I expect that we'll have extra tomorrow as a result.

We took a bus to the airport and then flew into Ivalo, about 1.5 hours flying time. Back on another bus for a gorgeous drive through snow-laden forests.



We checked into the Northern Lights Village in Saariselkä. From what I've been told, you drag out that first syllable because of the two A's, and the a with the umlaut is pronounced "ah". There may be a test at the end.



This is our home for the next 4 nights! When you go on an adventure hoping to see the Northern Lights, you have to think of it as "buying a chance". We have an app from the Village that will actually alert us in the middle of the night if the Aurora are visible. From what I was reading, it uses cameras to detect the phenomenon and then triggers the alerts. The app says that the chances are good for tonight, poor for tomorrow night, but great for the last two nights. Everyone, cross their fingers, toes, and eyes for us that we get to see them!



Inside cabin 14, it's positively magical.



This is the bed and view. Our guide, Charlotta, says we can just be lazy and watch the Northern Lights from bed (which sure sounds tempting), but she highly encourages us to keep our boots and snowsuits nearby to jump into and go enjoy it outside.





In our family, we talk about which are the best beers, and we all pretty much agree that the first beer at a new hotel is the best beer. So keeping with tradition, we raided the minibar. My romantic husband packed a silk rose all the way here to give to me on Valentine's Day, along with a lovely card. We're so cute it kinda makes you sick, doesn't it?

There was one problem, though. The beers weren't cold enough. I came up with a solution.



We were too lazy to go outside to get a photo of our cabin, but Steve captured this view of the cabin next door. Steve says they look like spaceships, and he likes space, so I'll humor him and go along with it.



I don't want to jinx things, but I could be very happy here even if we don't see the aurora.



After dinner, we went snowshoeing! They issued us a giant snow suit, plus boots, mittens, and even thick wool socks. Here we are all decked out for adventure.



The UCLA alumni group is not made up of spring chickens. At 67, I'd say we're on the mid to low end of ages for this particular group. And yet, all 19 of us went on what I will affectionately refer to as the "Death March" out into the darkness, up hills, stepping suddenly into deep snow as we were just getting our sea legs in these shoes. Looking at our snow shoes, they look positively svelte. But the bigger you are, the bigger the snowshoes. One of our party is around 6'7" tall, and his snowshoes were around three feet long! Really hard to maneuver nimbly in those things.

The death march (uphill) went on for about half an hour, and we were all sweating and taking off layers, even though it was -7°F outside. I even took my hat off and loosened my scarf. Steve and I regretted not looking to see if the Apple Watch had a snowshoe workout option.

Finally, we came out into a clearing with a teepee, or, as the Sámi (indigenous people of Finland) call it, a Kota. We stood in the clearing and marveled at the stars, from the Big Dipper to Cassiopeia to Pleiades to Orion to the brilliance of Jupiter. See the star cluster in this image? That's Pleiades! (The trees look a little like the Horsehead Nebula, don't they?)



Inside the Kota was a roaring fire, where they served us hot juice made up of some local berries, including something called cloud berries.



While we were roasting by the fire, one of the snowshoeing guides came in to tell us that the Northern Lights had started! We all rushed outside (as fast as you can rush out in a snowsuit with snowshoes on) and we saw what looked like a rather thick vertical grey cloud on the horizon. But modern phones have cameras that blend long-exposure images to see things that the naked eye cannot, particularly color in low light. This is our first photo of the Northern Lights:



We took a few more photos, but we soon had frozen fingers (you have to remove gloves to take the photos). Back to the roaring fire while they told us fanciful tales of what the indigenous people thought the Northern Lights meant. But then, darn it, our guide came in and said it's getting better. Out we went again.

Now, with the naked eye, we could see a giant "rainbow" of green. Here's the best shot of our snowshoe outing.



While that was cool, after we took a MUCH easier route down, turned in our snowshoes, and headed back to our domed cabin. We crawled under the covers just as the lights really heated up. Turns out we didn't need a death march at all — we could have just snuggled in bed to watch the show!





Tomorrow is more adventure!  
Finland Estonia Travelogue 2026

## Day 7 Saariselkä – Dogsledding!

Good morning from Lapland!



After the amazing Aurora last night, I slept straight through the night with no jetlag effects. Steve woke up a couple of times and continued to view the Northern Lights from our bed.

Our day got a relatively early start, with dogsledding scheduled for 9 AM. Now, most of you won't consider that early, but it takes a full half hour just to get *dressed!* Sock liners, then boot warmers stuck to those, and add thick socks. On the bottom half, add long underwear, and pants over those. On top, more long underwear, long-sleeved fleece over that, down jacket on top of that ... and *then* the snowsuit! The snowsuit has suspenders inside, which help hold the whole thing up high enough so the crotch isn't at your knees, and they let you take the

top half off indoors if you need to. There's a long zipper, and then snaps all the way up.

Next, we've got scarves, balaclavas, hats, and ear coverings. Finally, the hardest part, putting on the giant snow boots. Bending at the waist is nearly impossible, so we've only recently employed the strategy of lacing up each other's boots. Somehow, it's easier to kneel on the floor to help the other person than to do your own. I lied, that wasn't the last thing. We have glove liners, then hand warmers, then thin gloves, and finally mittens. Heck, it took me about half an hour just to describe the process.



Many people, when they do the dogsledding, only get to go 5 km due to extreme weather, but we had a beautiful, clear day, and it was "only" -11°F. We had instruction time to learn how to drive the dogsled, which was pretty

interesting. The passenger sits up front on a platform lined with comfy reindeer hide, while the driver stands on two runners on the back, holding onto a metal railing. Between the two runners is the "soft brake", which is a platform the driver steps on to just add some drag to slow the dogs down. There's also the "hard brake", which is a cross beam with downward spikes that you stand on with one or even both feet when you need a full stop.

The instructor also gave us guidance on how to lean into turns and how to leave enough space between you and the sled in front of you. She was quite cheerful and fun to learn from as she talked about how much the dogs want to run. As our friends Bill, Diane, and Ron experienced in Alaska, the dogs are Alaskan huskies, not Siberian huskies. The Alaskan ones are small, agile dogs with tons of crazy energy. They also don't overheat in the warmer -10°F to 0°F temperatures as the Siberian huskies do.

Steve took the first turn driving the dogs:



While I had the positively relaxing position up front. I enjoyed it up there so much that I briefly considered not swapping with him at the halfway point, but I knew I'd regret not getting to experience the fun of driving the sled.



Most of the ride was through the snow-laden forest, which just never gets old, but eventually we got above the tree line. At that point, the wind came up, and it got bitterly cold. We swapped places, and I took over.



The alert amongst you will have noticed that in an earlier shot I had on glasses, and that the glasses were pretty fogged up. The bad news is that it's not fog — it's fog that has turned to ice! I actually had to take my glasses off while Steve was driving because I couldn't see a darn thing!

We loved every single minute of this experience. It was exhilarating and exciting, and watching the differences between how the dogs handled the sled was fascinating. The views were all stunning, too.

After we finished the 10 km ride, they encouraged us to pet the dogs. Every one of them was lovely! You might also note in this photo that my hair is frozen!



We gratefully migrated into a fire-heated hut to warm our hands and drink more hot juice.



This is of our friend Meghan from UCLA Travel — I really liked watching the steam from her cup and her breath in the light.



Warmed by the hot juice while we learned more about the dogs, our guide, Charlotta, treated us to ginger snaps and a liqueur called Vana Tallinn made from "the finest spices" and "genuine rum". We couldn't decide who would have liked it more, Ron or Rico.



But the fun wasn't over. They let us go into a pen with three of the puppies! These adorable dogs were a little over a year old.



We walked about 10 minutes (in our giant snowsuits and boots) to the village of Saariselkä for lunch.



Californians (and others) will be glad to know this village of 700 residents has Lagunitas on tap!



Here I am demonstrating the utility of the suspenders inside the snowsuit, suitable for fine dining without overheating.



Our afternoon activity included a short trip to Kaunispää, which is the tallest point in Lapland. They have ski slopes here, and a spectacular view. While the temperature was only  $-2^{\circ}\text{F}$  here, the wind whipped up, and it was all we could do to send you a selfie from there before we raced back into the bus. We sacrifice for you, we really do.



We then drove to a place called Arctic Sky, which is a home owned (and built and designed) by a woman named Minna. It was an odd and yet wonderful experience. We sat in her kitchen/living room area while she served us warm beverages and snacks. But the snacks (and even the coffee) were unusual.

For example, the coffee was flavored with Finnish chaga, which is a highly nutritious byproduct of mushrooms that infect their birch trees.



One of the snacks was a tiny, crispy cup with some creamy stuff in it. I'm talking the size of a fingertip. The "bread" of the cup was made with birch bark, which they only recently figured out was edible. But she was quick to tell us it was only 1/4 birch flour in the recipe, because they also discovered that using more than 1/3 birch flour will sort of kill you. It's bad for your kidneys.

She went on for about two hours telling us about Finnish culture, how she met her husband, and how she left her day job of a very long commute and tough responsibilities, and built her home and other homes in the area with her husband. All of this story was building up to explaining why the Finnish people

have been measured to be the happiest people in the world by the [World Happiness Report](#).



The aurora is supposed to be good again tonight, but I think I've kept your attention for long enough for one day. Perhaps tomorrow's letter will include a few photos.

## Day 8 Inari – Reindeer Games

I was going to send a quick note to tell you that I wasn't going to send out an email because we closed the dinner and bar tonight. And then I looked at my watch, and it was 8:27 PM. FINE.

In my last installment, I described, in detail, the 128 layers of clothing we're wearing. I'm pleased to say that the #1 reaction to yesterday's letter was, "So how exactly do you pee?" Glad we're all practical here. The answer is that we don't. Up until today, we were never in our snowsuits for more than 2 hours, but today was a bit more challenging. I think we went 5 hours, but they warned us ahead of time and made us go right before getting into the snowsuits of doom.

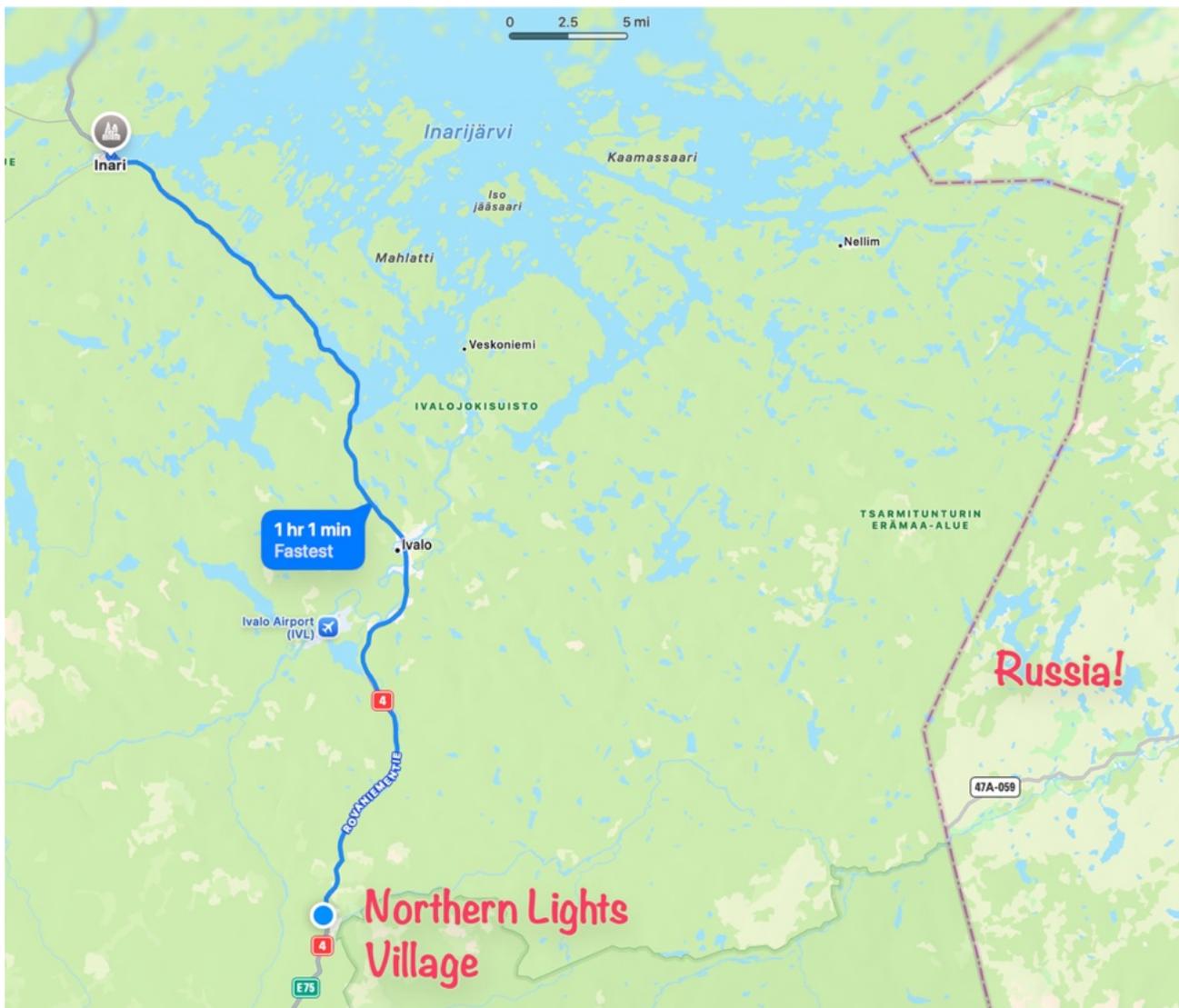
No one asked, but last night's gin was Kyrö Napue Gin from Finland, and yes, it was quite tasty.



This morning's sunrise was yet again magical, looking over the huts.



On to today's adventure. I've mentioned that we're in the Northern Lights Village. We drove up to Inari next to Lake Inari, which is HUGE, about 44 miles away.



From there, we split into two groups, where we did the same activities but swapped in order. The two activities were a visit to a reindeer farm and then the Siida Museum. Our group (the cool kids) went to the reindeer farm first.

The first thing to know is that "reindeer farm" is a very weird way to describe it. The reindeer in Lapland are free-ranging, and so they move around to new locations, incentivized by some grass feeding by the "farmer" in each new area. I'm going to make a dog's dinner of explaining everything we learned about managing reindeer, but I'll intersperse it with photos to keep you entertained.

We were transported in 6-person sleighs pulled by snowmobiles for about 30 minutes, including driving across a portion of the frozen Inari Lake.



When we arrived at the current location of the herd, we were completely surrounded by around 200 reindeer. It reminded me of when we went to Yellowstone with Diane and Bill and were surrounded by bison! Here's Steve with a few of his new reindeer friends.



The "farmer" is a man named Petri, who is evidently pretty famous in these parts. He explained to us how many reindeer there are in Lapland (it was a big number, way more than there are people). He talked about how they herd them, how the government controls the numbers, how when you're born you get a reindeer, and then more as you grow up, until you're a teenager and you own about 100 of them. It would be really neat if I retained the fascinating details of what he told us. But at least we took photos.



But then something amazing happened. A MOOSE decided to visit! This young female has taken to following the herd around. She's hiding behind a tree, so I hope you can spot her.



Petri made a fire in a snow pit for us, brewed some coffee and tea, and fed us "blueberry pie" he made himself, which was actually more like a fabulous coffee cake. While we feasted, Petri talked about the life of a reindeer farmer, explaining that there's a 4-year degree you can get in the subject, and his sons are both in that program. He said you don't have to do this if your parent does it, that it has to be in your heart.



On our way back across the lake ... at high noon!



The afternoon wasn't as exciting, but it was very interesting. We went to the Siida Museum, which is all about the Sámi people, who are the Indigenous Finns. There are 5 different Sámi cultures, and 3 different languages: Inari, Skolt, and North Sámi. They had been losing their language, but now there is a law that says if you're Sámi, you have the right to be taught in your native language, so schools support all 3 languages.

I can't do the museum justice, but they talked a lot about the clothing and had videos showing the Sámi wearing these clothes ... and in one of the videos was our reindeer farmer Petri, his dad, and his two boys! Here are some women's clothes that they were very enthusiastic about.



We then went to the "outdoor museum," which was a collection of houses of the Sámi people from a bunch of years ago ... it would be great if I could remember how old they were. But I do remember that one of the houses was Petri's grandfather's house. Told you he was famous!



I'm getting very sleepy as I'm writing the rest of this, so I don't promise any facts whatsoever (as though it was fact-filled so far). We did find an ice sculpture amphitheater that was pretty cool. That tiny person sitting in the amphitheater you see in the photo is Steve!



When we got back from our 9 hours of adventure, the lighting of the cabins, the trees, and the sky was breathtaking. These photos have not been edited in any way, no filters, no nothing. I'm just going to drop four of them in here...





And then there are the space ships...



Until next time ...

## Day 9 Saariselkä – Snowmobiling

I hope yesterday's letter made sense. I was sooo sleepy when I wrote it!

Alert reader Gary pointed out that while we've described a lot of detail about the trip and included photographic evidence of its wonder, we haven't talked about how it *smells*. Our first thought was that with the cold, it really doesn't smell like anything. For example, we don't smell the pine trees. But after he asked, we realized that there were smells. Like the smell of a husky pooping while running and pulling the sled in front of you. On the more pleasant side, walking into the Kota (the teepee-like structure), we were met with the sharp smell of wood smoke and the spicy smell of the hot berry juice. Today we went snowmobiling, and there were definite fumes from the motors. They dragged a little enclosed sled for children, and it was heated by diesel. I stuck my head in, and the smell was overpowering. So, let's just leave smell out of the stories, shall we?

We've sent a few of our photos of the aurora, but Steve captured something even cooler. He brought with him the DJI Osmo Pocket 3 Camera, which he uses to capture video of my interviews at trade shows. He brought it in hopes of getting a time-lapse video.

The first night we arrived, when we first saw the aurora while snowshoeing, we also saw them from the warmth of our cabin. Steve tried to set up his Pocket 3 to time-lapse mode, but before he could, the lights started going bananas, undulating across the sky at a rapid pace. I suggested he forget about a time-lapse and just start recording. I don't want to embed videos in the email, so Steve uploaded it to YouTube. It's less than 30 seconds long but it's AMAZING.

[Dynamic Aurora from Saariselka](#)

The next night, the lights weren't all that dramatic, but before we went to bed, he set up the Pocket 3 to do the time-lapse. It is also AMAZING, and is also less than 30 seconds!

[Aurora Timelapse from Saariselka](#)

Today is our last full day in Lapland, and it is a free day. We had a leisurely lie-in, only to discover that our glass dome was covered in snow!



No worries, this luxury cabin has a switch on the wall that, for 30 minutes, will heat up the windows till they're clear again.



We walked out to about 2 inches of new snow with a very light dusting continuing to come down.



Earlier on our trip, Pat asked me to build a snowman for her, and I said it couldn't be done because the snow is so cold and dry that it wouldn't pack together. Evidently, *somebody* proved me wrong.



When we went to go snowmobiling, we were quite worried we'd be freezing cold, especially our hands. We bundled up in our 286 layers, stepped outside, and discovered it was a balmy 8° F out! I am shocked to find that after just a week and a half away from balmy Southern California, I'm acclimated enough to actually think that feels pretty warm! Later, it climbed to 12°, and I took off my gloves! I think it's the 327 layers of clothing we were wearing. Bart always says there's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothing.



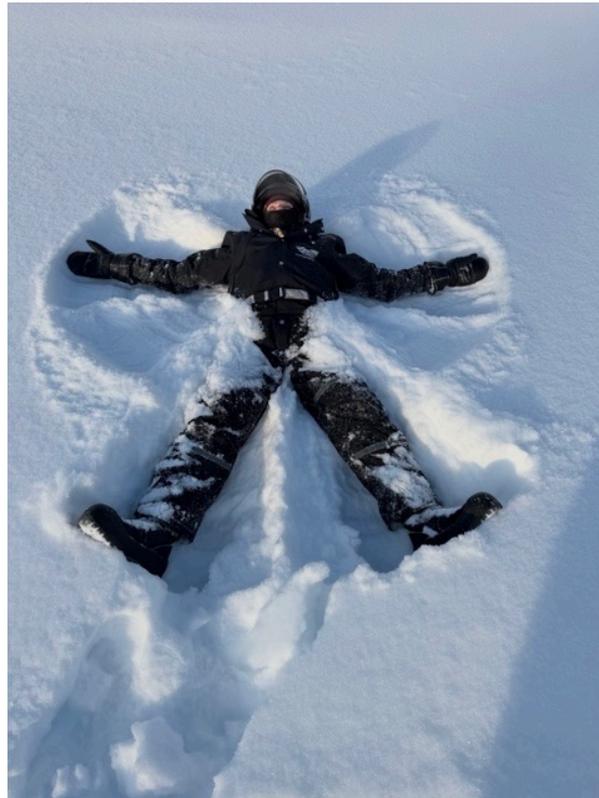
We had to wait a bit to get started, and while waiting, I discovered that the snowflakes were really crystallizing nicely right on the handlebar of the snowmobile.



The beginning of the drive was a bit slow, but as they saw all of us beginners didn't seem in danger of killing ourselves, they let us really take off on the straightaways. We drove up the mountain (a hill really, at 1437 feet) to Kaunispää, where we'd been before, but this time we walked to the other side of the peak, where the ski lifts were.



We drove across a frozen lake, which was a bit surreal to me. You see, when I was 7 years old, my parents bought our boat from the widow of a guy who had been riding his snowmobile on Lake Michigan. They found a hole with a half-submerged snowmobile, but they never found him. After that, we stopped in an area of really deep snow, and Steve and I took advantage of it. I felt the need to do a snow angel:



And I caught Steve midair as he threw himself into the snowbank!



Oddly, none of our fellow travelers did any of this. Party poopers.

Look how gorgeous the trees are!



I was trying to think of a better way to describe them than snow-laden, and I decided that they look like tempura broccolini, except white.

Remember how worried we were that we would be cold on the snowmobiles? Well, these geniuses thought it would help to put not one, but two glove warmers into each glove/mitten combo. Guess what? The only problem we had was that our hands were **burning hot!**



When we got back, we had more free time, so I went for a walk around the Northern Lights Village and found more tempura broccolini for you.





Tonight we have our farewell dinner at a nearby restaurant that specializes in reindeer. We know that sounds terrible, but reindeer are to Finns as cows are to us in the U.S.

We have an early morning tomorrow, when we fly from Ivalo back to Helsinki, where we'll stay one night at the airport hotel and then go back home. Not sure much adventure will happen tomorrow, but I'll definitely be doing a wrap-up letter with some observations.

It will be sad to leave this magical place — we're really going to miss the beauty.

## Day 10 – Helsinki (again)

In our last message, I said I wasn't sure I'd have anything interesting to say about our travel from Saariselkä to Helsinki, but it turned out to be a pretty fun day. It was so fun that we collapsed at 8:30 PM, so I didn't get any time to write.

Baggage out at 6:15 AM. I think Cabin 14 looks a little sad that we're leaving her.



We took a bus to the Ivalo Airport, Haircare, and Tire Center.



For a country where the temperature is bitterly cold, you would think it would have occurred to them to have a jetway to the plane ...

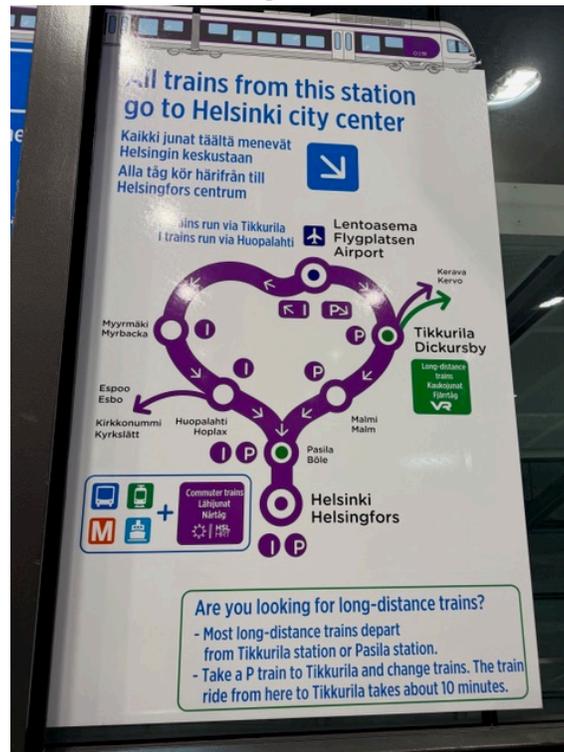


Upon landing at Helsinki airport, most of the UCLA travel group went on to catch flights back home, but a few of us had flights that didn't leave until the next day. After dropping our bags off at the Airport Hilton, we joined our new friend Michele on an adventurous day. The airport is in Vantaa, about 30 minutes north of the city, so we took the train into Helsinki. You see, Steve and I have spent most of our formative years in Los Angeles, where public transportation really just means Uber. She lives in Seattle and seems more confident about navigating the train system.



We loved something Michele said about trips like this. At first, you think that you'll meet people with whom you'll stay friends forever and ever, but after you do enough of them, you realize that they are just really nice people who will become a memory and you'll probably never see again.

The trains weren't all that hard to navigate because there are two lines, I and P, that only go from the airport to Helsinki and back. As long as we got on either of those and got off at the end, we were golden.



The trains were very clean and comfortable. Even had a huge bathroom (no photo of that, though).



Our main goal in visiting Helsinki again was to see the Church in the Rock, and you'll see why. We had to laugh at the entrance sign telling you what you could not bring in. Not only are you not allowed to bring in cats and dogs, but balloons are strictly forbidden! Have you ever in your life seen a "no balloons allowed" sign?



I'll give you the explanation of the church first, but if you don't feel like reading, this sign explains that it's a church ... in a rock.



*Built into the bedrock, Temppeliaukio Church is Helsinki's favourite attraction and an important architecture-based destination. Its impressive atmosphere, splendid architecture and excellent acoustics have made the church popular not only with tourists but also with local inhabitants and concert arrangers. Nevertheless, Temppeliaukio Church is first and foremost a place of worship – where people can stop for a while, pray and meditate.*

#### **Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen**

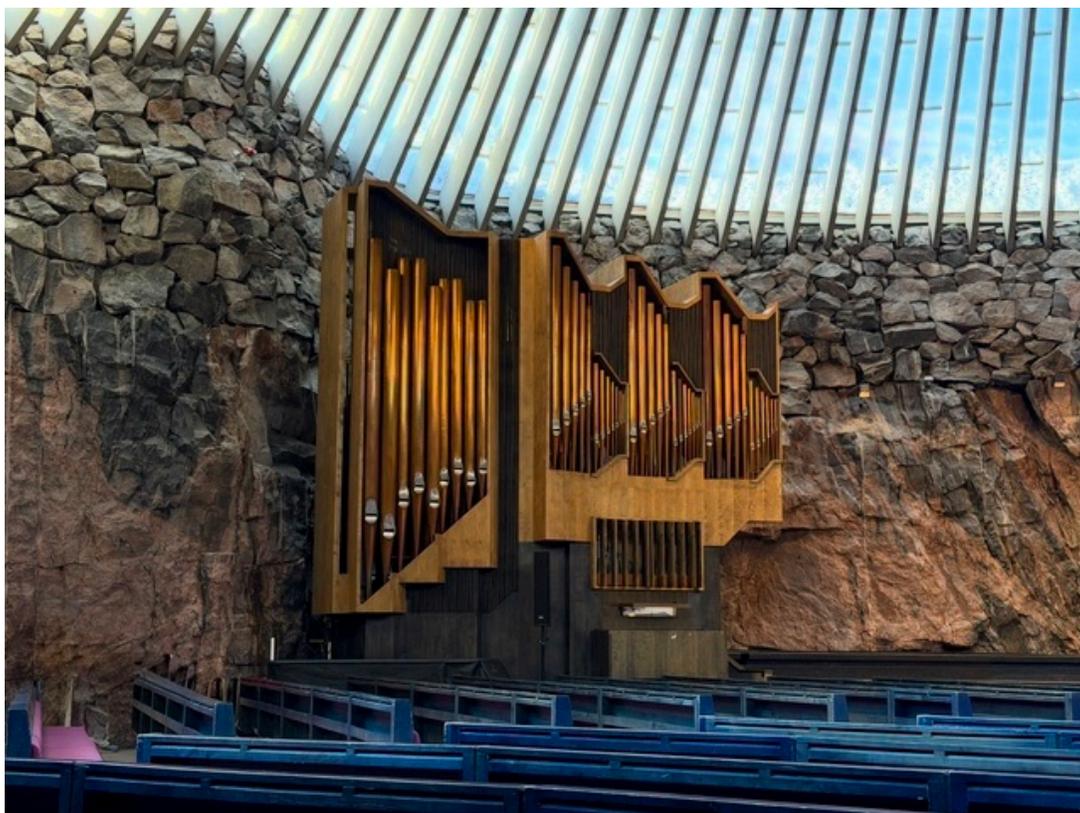
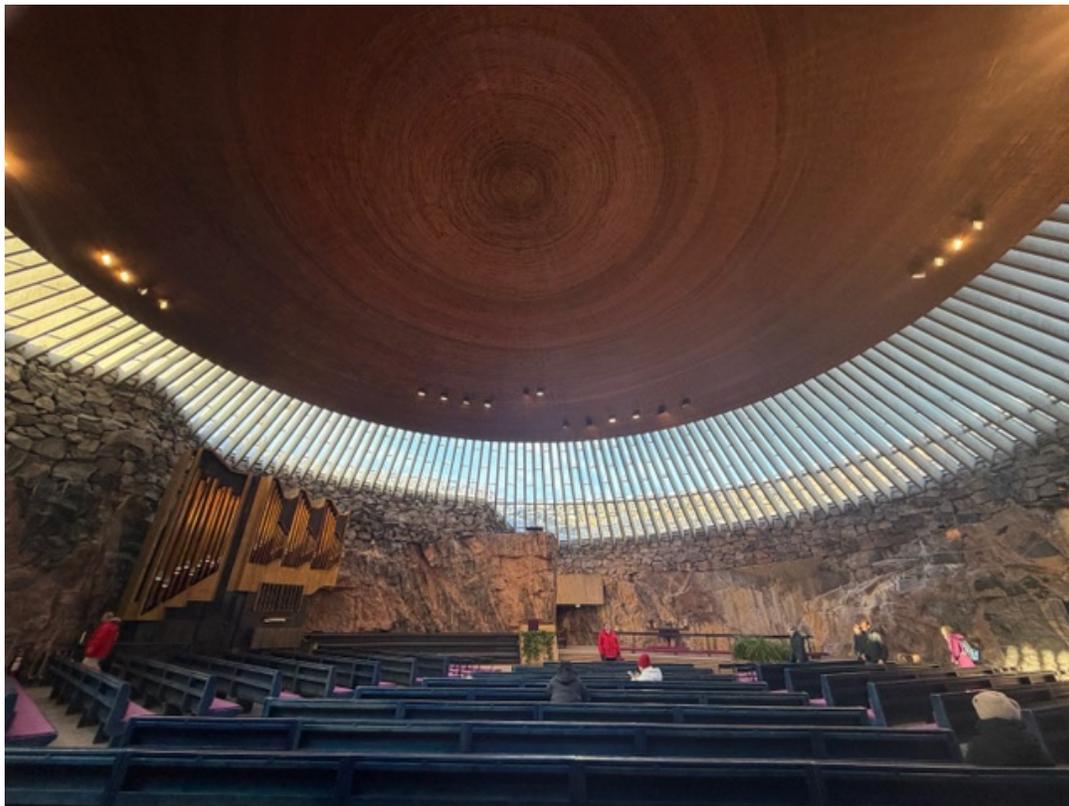
– brothers who were both architects – won an architectural competition held between 1960 and 1961 with their Kivikirkko (Church of the Rock) proposal, in which the church hall was embedded into the stone. Their radical design aroused public excitement, but the building has become a part of Helsinki's cultural milieu and is now a highly respected attraction as well as a popular church for weddings. The church was opened for use in 1969.

**The church area**, carved into the bedrock, is accessed from the street level. The elliptic church hall is bathed in daylight, which passes into the hall from the narrow skylights between the rock wall and the copper ceiling dome. The inner surface of the dome is clad in copper tape requiring a length of 22 km. The diameter of the dome is 24 metres, and the highest point is 13 metres from the floor. The excavation surface of the walls has been left rough for acoustic and aesthetic reasons. Water trickling from cracking in the rock, which is led away along channels proceeding under the

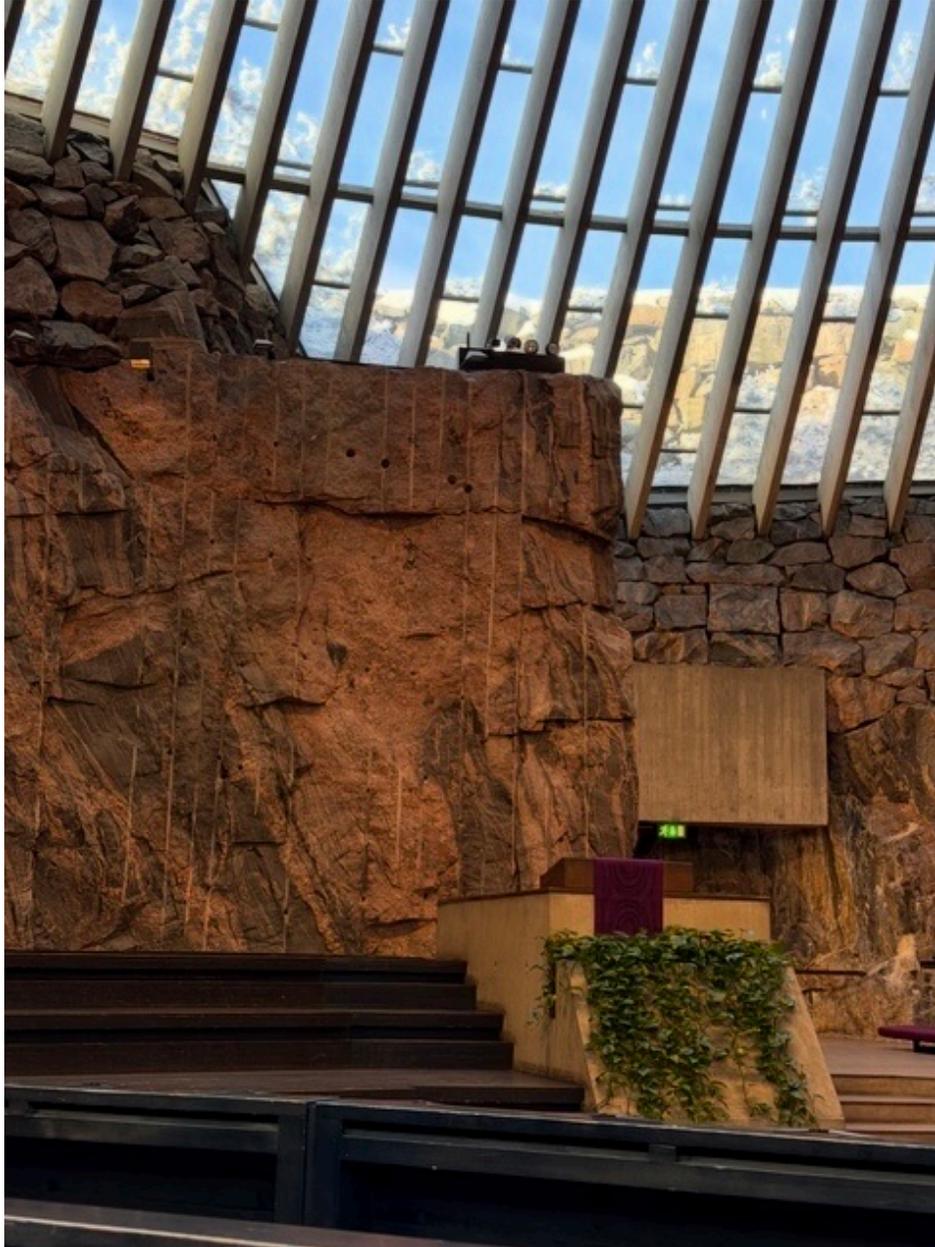
floor, adds vibrancy to the stone surfaces. Drilling trace remains have not been removed from the walls, due to the wish to display the working methods. The height of the walls is 5–9 metres.

**The altar wall** of the church hall is a split in the rock dating back to the Ice Age. The altar table is granite that has been evenly sawn, the floor of the hall is polished concrete, and the pulpit is made of reinforced concrete. The pews are made of birch wood. The altar crucifix, baptismal font and candelabra have been forged by artist Kauko Moisio. The church hall textiles have been designed by textile artist Tellervo Strömmer, and the green plantings in the rock surrounding the church have been designed by garden architect Erik Sommerschild. The stone wall encircling the church has been set and assembled with excavated rock. There are no bells in Temppeliaukio Church. In their place, a chime melody composed by Taneli Kuusisto is played, which can be heard from the loudspeakers placed in the outer walls of the church. ✚

As we walked in...



If you did read the explanation before jumping to the pretty pictures, you'll have learned that they purposely left the construction markings in the rock to display the working methods. This image shows that off.



The copper dome to the building is MASSIVE. Steve managed to get the entire thing into one shot. He thinks it looks like a spaceship. Michele and I decided it's a giant speaker, and she says it makes that massive BONG sound in ET when they first communicate with sound.



It was quiet and peaceful inside. We later found a path up above the church where we could walk around the dome.



Our second goal for our day of adventure was to go to the Modern Art Museum. I'm not a huge museum person, but as Michele pointed out, museums are warm, and they have bathrooms. Only 2 floors of 4 were open, so we were glad I got us the "pensioner's" rate, which was a little more than half off.

When you go to a modern art museum, you expect weird, and we weren't disappointed. The first floor we visited was paintings by Essi Kuokkanen. They were odd, but many of them were kind of lovely and often had very funny titles.

This one was sweet; it was entitled, "I Would Love You in Any World."



I hope I won't offend anyone's delicate sensibilities, but this painting and its title made me laugh out loud. If you don't get the joke, let me know. I'll give you the painting first:



And the title:

**Paskapää**  
**Skitstövel**  
**Shithead**  
**2022**

öljy kankaalle  
olja på duk  
oil on canvas

The good news (for you) is that I'm not going to share a single photo of what we saw on the second open floor. It was mostly obscene sculptures, and not in a good way. It was dreadful, and I couldn't wait to get away from it.

But the snow crystals on the glass were lovely looking out towards a church tower.



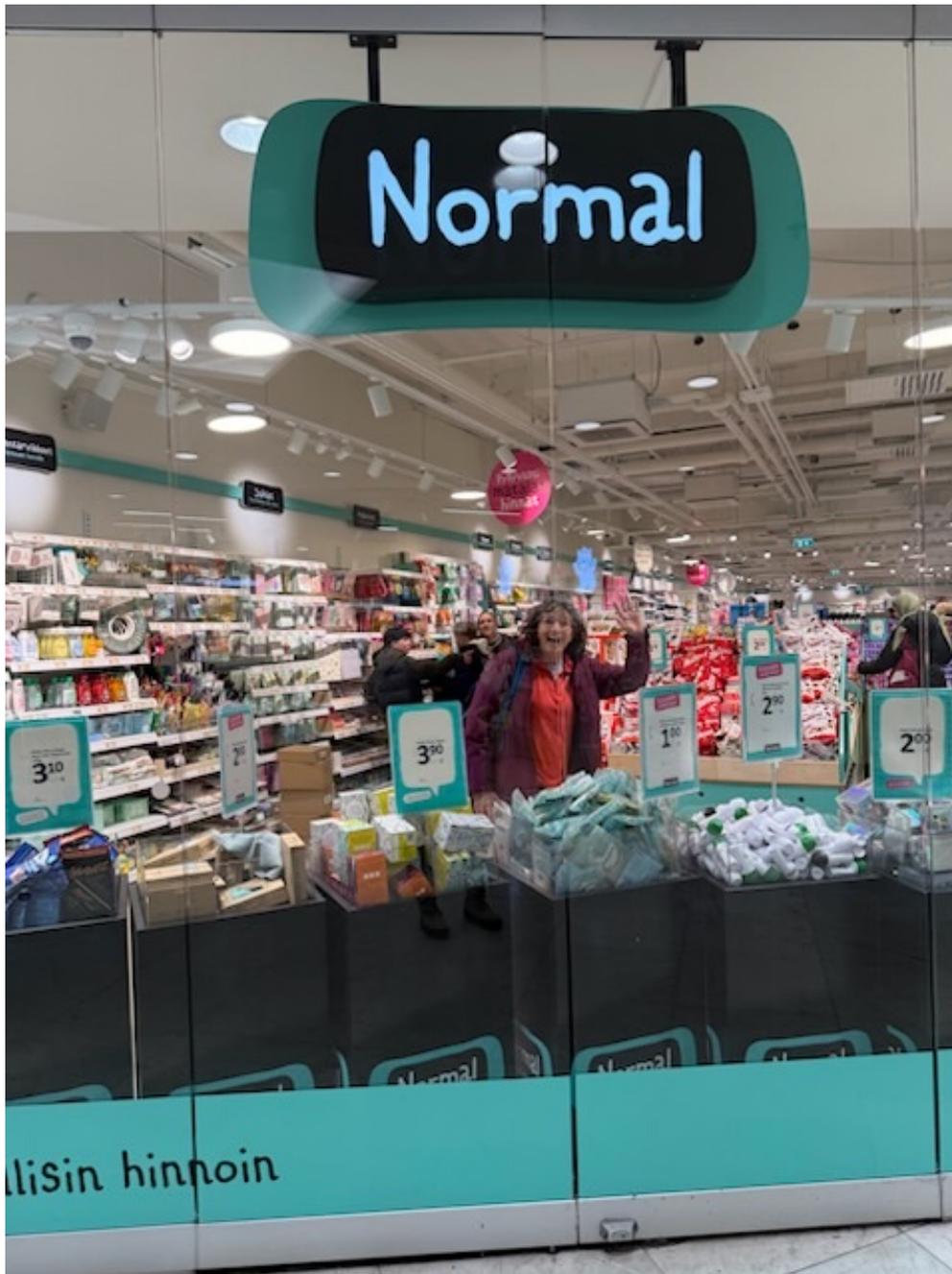
When we escaped the museum, we went on a quest to find some Moomin stuffies for our grandchildren. Moomin is a children's book series in Finland. Shhhh! Don't tell the kids! Michele also needed some nail polish remover, and we were directed to a shop called "Normal". The entire store was one long maze. Your only way out of it was through it. We couldn't stop laughing at the absurdity. It was so funny that I went back and did it again, hoping to record the route for you by using my Apple Watch to record a Walk. Unfortunately, it didn't

record the path, much to our disappointment, but it took 2 minutes and 10 seconds to walk through this relatively small shop.

I did meet the mascot of "Normal":



And Michele caught me as I struggled to get back out!



When the three of us got back to the Hilton at the airport, we enjoyed a cocktail, had some delightful scallops and Caesar salad, and went straight to bed at the aforementioned 8:30 PM!

We're off to home tomorrow, and I hope to do a wrap-up of our observations of Finland and the trip in general sometime after I wake up!

## Final Observations

Steve and I are back from our grand adventure. It's good to be home, but jet lag is real! I promised a final observations letter, but before I jump in, I want to say, "Hi Bob!" You see, our friend Hilda doesn't give her husband any details on her trips, so when we're on the same trip, Bob keeps up with her activities by reading my travelogues! He read all of Antarctica and now Finland and Estonia.

Ok, in no particular order, here are our observations from the trip.

All of the housekeepers we observed in all of the hotels were men. Traditionally, this work is performed by female employees in the US.

If you wear contacts, you might think it would be better to wear your glasses when doing things like dog sledding, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling, but that doesn't actually work. When you're in this extreme cold, and you breathe out when huddled into your coat and scarf, your breath fogs up your glasses ... and then it FREEZES! I learned during our dog sledding adventure that I simply had to take my glasses off and hope for the best. Luckily, I can see well enough for these activities without glasses, but some of our party were out of luck to be able to see at all. We think maybe ski goggles should be a suggested packing item for those glasses-wearing travelers.

Don't bother wearing makeup. Several women wore mascara for these adventures and ended up with black smears down their faces by the end!

If you have curly hair and bangs, make sure they're trimmed pretty short. In the dryness and pulling hats on and off constantly, your hair becomes very straight, so it lengthens. I was constantly fighting my bangs as they poked right into my eyes as they were so long!

Finland is very environmentally conscious, so you'll get stink eye if you try to buy water in plastic water bottles. Everywhere we went, we had the opportunity to refill water bottles, or there were simply carafes of water available to drink from glasses.

Decaf coffee was surprisingly hard to find, according to one of our travel mates.

Finnish men are very quiet and reserved. When speaking, they'll pause and say nothing at all for a while. We were told this, and then observed exactly this when Petri the reindeer farmer was telling us stories. He'd simply stop talking. A few minutes later, he'd start back up again.

When we were at CES doing interviews, we went to the highly popular Donut Lab booth, hoping to find someone to talk to. We had a great interview, and only after we were done did we discover that we'd been talking to the CEO. When we told this story to Timo, our new friend from Finland, he said that it was quite typical of Finnish people. He said that they actually compete on modesty. You'll not find braggarts there at all.

Finland is very big on berries. We had berry juice served to us quite often, berry coffee cake, and they even put cranberries (and rosemary) in our gin and tonics!



They're not so big on vegetables, though.

The Finns are not fans of Russia. Having the longest border of any NATO/EU country with Russia makes them quite anxious, as you can imagine.

The greatest invention of Finland is dual duvets. By that I mean a bed made for two occupants will not have one big duvet that can be stolen by one partner, but rather there are two individual duvets. It was life-changing.

The Finnish language does not have a gendered pronoun. There is no "him" and "her", it's all "they". We were told that they are a very forward-thinking country embracing LGBTQ folks and equality for women.

Every single place we went accepted payment by phone, and it was really fast. I didn't take my credit cards out one single time on the entire trip, and we never used cash.

It didn't occur to us while we were traveling, but we realized upon our return that we felt completely safe at all times in Finland and Estonia. We walked everywhere in Helsinki and Tallinn and never gave personal safety a second thought.

Steve and I both noticed the sound of birds chirping, generally near or in the bathrooms at the airports in Finland. Yet there were no birds flying around in the airport. We surmised the Finns play a recording of the pleasant, warm-weather sounds to help overcome the feeling of a long, cold winter.

Climate change was a pretty big topic. When we saw the reindeer with Petri, he explained that the reindeer eat lichen that is buried deep under the snow. But in the last few years, the temperature has been swinging wildly (from -45 °C to +3°C) within less than a week, which means the snow melts and freezes. This never used to happen, and it's catastrophic to the reindeer because they can't break through the ice on their own to reach the lichen. Petri said that he's having to provide all of the reindeer's food (bringing in dry grass for them to eat) during these periods, which is erasing his profits from farming the reindeer.

Overall, we loved all of the people we met and were enchanted by everything we saw and experienced in Finland. I hope you've enjoyed my silly little travelogue and will be ready for more adventure later this year when we go to Spain for a total eclipse, then to Portugal for 4 days, and finally a few more days in Ireland, where we'll meet up with our dear friend Bart (also my cohost in much of my podcast work).

Until then, thanks for coming along on this trip with us.

Allison & Steve