



Saimaa Lake Paradise

www.goSaimaa.fi
www.lappeenranta.fi



TEXT: HOWARD JARVIS | PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CITY OF LAPPEENRANTA

With its gentle harbor, lakeside spas, and pristine countryside, the Finnish city of Lappeenranta makes a charming getaway at any time of year. In the summer, experience cruises on Lake Saimaa, famous for its freshwater seals, the biggest sandcastle in Scandinavia, and some of the most scenic golf in Europe.

go salmon-angling, or take a boat out with experienced locals and catch rainbow trout, pike-perch, and even arctic char.

A network of carefully mapped routes for canoeing and kayaking, from five to 115 km. long, take in some of Finland's most tranquil and isolated spots, filled with the sounds of nature and far from the intrusions of man.

The routes stay close to the shore, as a turn in the weather can make this huge lake as rough as the open sea, despite its countless islands and bays. Fortunately that's uncommon, and the summer skies over Saimaa are often as blue and restful as the water.



Freshwater Seals

If you're very lucky, you might catch sight of one of Europe's most timid and least-glimpsed creatures, the graceful Saimaa Ringed Seal. These unique freshwater animals are listed as critically endangered, and there are only about 250 of them left. The seals tend to live for around twenty years, but, because of their tiny numbers, less than thirty

seal pups make it to adulthood each year. To capture one on camera is a rare but remarkable experience.

One small company offering cruises on Lake Saimaa does a "seal cruise" every Monday from mid-May until the end of August, making a valiant effort to spot these elusive animals. The *M/S El Faro* sails slowly through the silky waters as passengers keep their eyes peeled for the playful pups or their more wary parents.

Being so close to Russia—the border is only 20 km. away—it's possible to sail between Lappeenranta and the neighboring town of Vyborg via the historic Saimaa Canal, built in the 1840s. The ship takes passengers 75 meters downstream over a course of eight locks. Afterward, passengers can choose to stay in Vyborg for a night or two, or continue across the Gulf of Finland.

In the past, Vyborg was a bustling trading town. Elegantly laid out on a circular waterfront, the town's sights include a Swedish-built medieval castle and the Lenin House, where the Russian insurrectionist stayed in 1917 while planning the October Revolution. Package boat tours to Vyborg can be arranged visa-free, and there is also the possibility to sail on to St Petersburg. Cruises from Lappeenranta can be booked as a package together with hotel accommodations. Hotel stays are well provided for in Lappeenranta, with the Scandic Patria close to the harbor offering classy, well-appointed rooms and the Sokos Hotel Lappee located close to the town's shops and galleries.

White-Night Golf

Golf is another summertime recreation that can be booked as a package at competitive prices. The star attraction here is the midsummer opportunity to tee off at

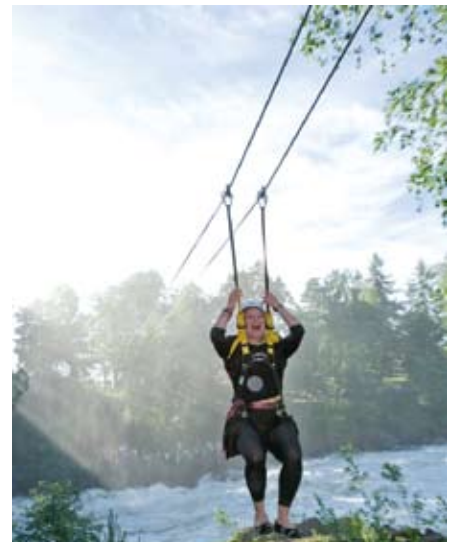
Strolling

at sunset along the quay, with the yachts barely moving on the placid water and the inviting lights twinkling in the windows of pastel-colored spa houses, visitors can easily forget that Lappeenranta, one of Finland's most picturesque lakeside hamlets, is also one of its most active.

The town's location beside Lake Saimaa, the fourth biggest lake in Europe, ensures that many of the adventures and activities available in the pristine forests of South Karelia take on a watery dimension. It's easy to obtain a weeklong fishing license and



- 📍 **Lake cruises**
www.kareliainlines.fi
- 📍 **Seal cruises**
www.saimaanristeilyt.fi
- 📍 **Canal cruises**
www.saimaatravel.fi
- 📍 **Etelä-saimaa golf**
www.viipurigolf.fi
- 📍 **Kahilanniemi golf**
www.goldenswing.net
- 📍 **Ylämaa gem show**
www.jalokivimessut.fi
- 📍 **Lamb heaven**
www.sarapirtti.fi
- 📍 **Cottages**
www.karhupirtti.com
www.imatrankylpyla.fi
www.lomavakkara.com
www.mikonsaari.fi



midnight and play through the cool white night. The atmosphere on the scenic, 18-hole Etelä-Saimaa golf course, 15 minutes from Lappeenranta, is magical at all times due to its sprawling views of Lake Saimaa from every tee. Study your Strokesaver map of each hole carefully before you swing and you'll avoid any lost-ball embarrassments. Officially, the course and its new clubhouse open at 5 a.m. in summer, but an all-night game can be booked in advance. Golfers can test their poise at another location closer to town, the nine-hole Kahilanniemi course. Also situated on the panoramic Saimaa shores, the course lets players hit multiple balls at holes on floating islands in the lake. There is another 18-hole

golf course in the town of Imatra 35 km away and one more under construction at the Saimaa Gardens Holiday Spa development at about the same distance. Golf is all over the place here. Back in charming Lappeenranta, an array of good restaurants and lively bars, independent art galleries, and revealing museums keep visitors occupied. Lappeenranta Fortress is a great oval peninsula stretching into the lake. Most of its tsarist-era fortifications have been lost to time, but below it, by the water's edge, is an area reserved in summer for the biggest sandcastle and the most elaborate sand sculptures in Scandinavia. Three million kilos of sand are shipped to the area each year, and the resulting giant sandpit is an exciting

adventure playground for kids. Between June and August, a "street train" chugs passengers to and from the sandscape. At the center of town is Wolkoff's House, a 19th century residence-turned-museum that is wonderfully evocative of family life as it was lived over one hundred years ago. Originally built as a merchant's residence in 1826, Wolkoff's House has miraculously kept much of its antiquated furniture. In the children's room, hand-painted century-old dolls peek out from miniature beds. Almost imperceptibly, icons of Russian Orthodox saints look down on each of the rooms from the darkest and most undisturbed corners, a sign of this region's close historical ties with tsarist Russia.

Wolkoff's House is part of a series of carefully reconstructed 200-year-old wooden buildings. In one of them next door, the Wolkoff Cafe-Restaurant serves the best dining in town. Another is home to a unique art gallery. Tasihin House sells everything imaginable made of felt—most distinctively, a “felted rabbit cooler” that keeps wine bottles cool after being dipped in ice-cold water—and holds handicraft classes to keep local traditions alive.

Rainbow Colors

More surprises can be encountered outside of town. Just over 30 km. south of Lappeenranta, Ylämaa Gem Village is positioned close to a mine that produces the world's most beautiful spectrolite—a precious stone so named because of its garish rainbow of colors, including blue, green, yellow, and varied tones of red and orange. Polished and honed into jewelry of all kinds, from pendants to cufflinks, the spectrolite is certainly eye-catching, although the pieces that are almost black with just a hint of color are perhaps the most tasteful.

Discovered here during World War II, when the Finns were digging out blocks of granite to be used as anti-tank obstacles, spectrolite consists of wafer-thin layers of crystals



pressed on top of each other. Treasure-hunting tours of the mine are conducted throughout the summer months.

Nearby, assorted gems and minerals from around the world are brought under one roof in an unostentatious museum, together with oddities such as a Tibetan prayer wheel, Nepalese crystal handicrafts, and imitations of the world's most famous diamonds. The Ylämaa Gem Show attracts several thousand visitors each year; the next one is scheduled for July 2-4.

Fly to Lappeenranta with airBaltic

- Direct flights from Riga, Tallinn and Kuusamo starting from **EUR 19** – earn 500 BalticMiles in Economy class
- From Western Europe via Riga starting from **EUR 90** – earn 1500 BalticMiles in Economy class
- BalticMiles partners in Lappeenranta: airBaltic, Sixt, Cumulus Hotels, Language Direct

Enjoy Spa Holidays

Golf

One night at the Spa Hotel, including breakfast and a round at the Etelä-Saimaa Golf course (18-holes) or an all day green fee at the Kahilanniemi course (9-holes), as You wish.

One night in a double room from **105** €/person

Vyborg, Russia

One night at the Spa Hotel, breakfast and a visa-free day trip to Vyborg: return ticket by ship and transfer harbour – Vyborg centre – harbour.

One night in a double room from **117** €/person

Cruise on Lake Saimaa

2 nights at the Spa Hotel, including breakfast and a cruise ticket.

2 nights in a double room from **124** €/person

Theatre

2 nights at the Spa Hotel, including breakfast and a ticket for the play Vodka Tourists at Lappeenranta Summer Theatre.

2 nights in a double room from **151** €/person

All holiday packages include the use of sauna and pools at the Spa Hotel.



Your well-being is our priority

• Lappeenranta Spa • Alonkatu 17 • Lappeenranta
• tel. +358 (0)5 616 7201 • www.kylpyka.info

