



# Nature and nurture in Finland's hidden holiday gem

Hiking on Mount Koli. Photo: Harri Tarvainen

**North Karelia is truly a hidden gem. But despite it only being known only to a few savvy visitors, it has a huge amount to offer, from nature to excellent hospitality and unique culture.**

By Philip Denvir | Photos: Visit Keralia

Anna Härkönen, VisitKarelia's account manager, is first-generation Finnish. She explains just what makes North Karelia so special: "Karelia is a meeting point of eastern and Nordic cultures. The food, music, art and even the mythology have been rooted in the history of this area for centuries. The Finnish national epic Kalevala also has its origins here. The poetry sings of the mystique of the forests and hills."

## Nature's embrace

North Karelia is a nature lover's dream, with no less than four national parks full of hiking and biking trails, rapids, ski slopes, snow-shoeing trails and husky safaris in the winter months. There are also nature walks, fish cookouts and wildlife spotting. Visitors can even rent a lake to canoe and fish.

Among the unmissable excursions in North Karelia is Musta Mäntyjärvi lake. It's primarily a fishing destination, but the area is also ideal for camping, canoeing, hiking in the nearby forests and foraging for wild berries and mushrooms. It is also on the doorstep of the Patvinsuo national park.

Hikers, ramblers and mountain bikers can also enjoy the Karhunpolku system

of trails, in the pristine Lieksa area. The trails follow the eastern border along the shores of kayaking routes, and connect to the Karelian Circuit which runs through the wilderness of the Patvinsuo national park.

The Visit Karelia board isn't interested in mass tourism, but encourages visitors to come and appreciate the countryside in peace and quiet. Business advisor Mari Mustonen explains: "Everything we do is environmentally sustainable and aimed at letting our guests breathe. They can spend a day in the forest or on a lake, or a week camping and watching wildlife such as elk, lynx, brown bears and golden eagles."

"The forests and lakes in our region offer guests a wide variety of accommodation for a rural break. There's everything from remote log cabins to impressive country houses. Finland's Lakeland is perfect for getting away from it all and relaxing by the water, enjoying a sauna or living like the locals," she adds.



Koli: Mystic Mountain. Photo: Askö Kuittinen



Sauna is a national institution in Finland, with an estimated three million saunas serving a population of just 5.5 million people. Visitors to North Karelia can enjoy a private woodfire sauna complete with birch leaves to get the skin tingling, followed by a refreshing plunge in the lake. In winter, those feeling brave can take an invigorating dip in an ice hole in the lake, or just make snow angels to cool off. VisitKarelia even offers sauna tours.

### Nurture yourself

Though Finns are famously shy, Karelians buck the trend. Whether you're an old friend or a new visitor, they are renowned for their tradition of extending hospitality to all. There is even a saying that 'you can get bread and sauna at anyone's door.'

Karelian cuisine is traditional, yet totally unique, as it is seasonal and must be fresh – because there was no alternative in the past. Visitors are guaranteed the highest quality through the 'Karelia à la Carte' scheme, whereby many restaurants and country inns promise a combination of the best aspects of traditional cuisine that take full advantage of seasonal ingredients, but with a more modern taste and preparation.

A particular must-try is the moreish Karelian pastry. These slipper-shaped rye flour savories are usually stuffed with rice or mashed potato and served warm



Photo: Harri Tarvainen

with egg butter. Loved by Finns all over the country, they are enjoyed as a snack, breakfast or side dish.

For those who enjoy a drop of the strong stuff, Hermanni Winery offers a range of wines, liqueurs and spirits brewed from sustainably sourced Finnish berries. In the summer, visitors can enjoy their drinks at the Winetower in Ilomantsi.

"The local cuisine is a crossover and uses ingredients from the forests or lakes. In the past, everything had to be seasonal, and we are returning to that again. It means an abundance of fresh herbs, berries, mushrooms and fish can go directly from nature to the table," says Härkönen.

Whether visiting North Karelia for a mini-break or a long holiday, tourists

can be assured of a warm welcome and great new experiences. "We offer a unique and inspirational destination. The locals are always happy to help and share food, stories, music and laughter. North Karelian hospitality means you don't even need a common language, although most locals know English. We really have something special to offer our visitors," concludes Mustonen.

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Chilling after a sauna. Photo: Harri Tarvainen



Nature's larder. Photo: Harri Tarvainen