Finland, Republic of (Suomen Tasavalta)

Location and Geography

Finland is located in North Europe. It is a country of 130,557 square miles (337,030 sq Km) that sits at latitude 64 00 N and longitude 26 00 E. The overall size is just smaller than the state of Montana. Sweden and the Gulf of Bothnia are to the west, Norway to the North, Russia to the East and the Gulf of Finland to the South border. Finland has approximately 1,126 km of coastline along the gulf waters, which supports a strong fishing economy.

The geography of Finland is nondescript with most of the area consisting of low, flat-to-rolling plains. Most of the countryside is hilly and heavily forested, but one aspect of this country that has made it famous is that there are thousands of lakes throughout the land, over 55,000 of them. The northern area of the country is considered a coniferous zone with pine, spruce, and birch trees. The southwest coast is in the continental European oak zone. The terrain of Finland is considered four different areas. The archipelago area begins in the southwest coastal waters and ends at the Aland Islands. It is called Saaristomeri and it consists of over 17,000 islands and skerries. The coastal area extends from the Russian to the Swedish border with usually no greater width than 100km. The plains slope toward the central area of Finland, which is the central plateau, and the basis of the Lake District. The final area is the upland area, called Lapland, where the climate begins to get harsher. Many of the country’s rivers cross through the Lapland area where some of the elevation rises to over 1300 meters. The two primary rivers are the Tornionjoki and Kemi, which flow south to the Gulf of Bothnia.
Climate

Finland has a cold temperate climate, primarily considered sub arctic. Continental winds help to keep the weather mild by bringing cold air in the winter and warm air in the summer. Wet weather is common in this area with an average annual precipitation in the North from 20 to 24 inches, mostly arriving as snow. In the South, the average annual precipitation is higher, from 24 to 28 inches. In the capital city of Helsinki, on the Southern coast of Finland, the temperatures range from around –6 degrees Celsius in winter to 20 degrees Celsius in the summer. In the Northern area of the country, the sun never sets for about two months in the summer and never rises for about six weeks in winter. The most southern part of the country has greater than 19 hours of daylight at the height of summer.

History

Though there was settlement of what is now known as Finland as early as 10,000 years ago, not much was written about the people that inhabited the area until it was conquered by Sweden in the 12th century. Finland was considered part of Sweden and Norway for close to 700 years. In 1323, the treaty of Pahkinasaari was signed by Sweden and Norway that divided the territory of Finland evenly. Forty years later, Finns were granted the right to send representatives to vote in Sweden’s royal election, and in 1397, the kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway united in the Kalmar Union, which divided the area within the borders evenly and gave the countries equal say over the land. An important time in religious history was the reformation begun by Luther in the early 16th century. The religion reached the borders of Finland quickly and the Lutheran faith gained a foothold as the major religion.

Sweden was defeated by Russia in the Finnish war of 1809 and Finland was lost. The country became an autonomous Grand Duchy with the Czar of Russia as the ruler and was able to
retain its legislation, religion, society, and system of laws. In 1812, the southern area of Finland was joined to the Grand Duchy and Helsinki was named as the capital.

In 1906, Finland achieved its own national parliament, which made Finnish women the first in the world to be granted full political rights. In 1917, Finland finally won its independence from Russia and became its own country. It had to fend off invasion again in WWII from the Russians and the Germans, but ultimately, it was successful.

Over the last sixty years, Finland has become a diversified modern industrial economic power in Europe. It became the first Nordic state to join the European Union in 1995, and in 1999, it joined the euro system.

The government stands today as a sovereign parliamentary republic with six provinces. The current president is Tarja Halonen who has been in office since March 2000. The government is made of three branches, the executive, the legislative, and the judicial with most parliament elections held every four years. The president is elected every six years. There are approximately nine political groups within the country.

Important Dates

There are many dates celebrated at a national level by the Finns. New Year’s eve – January 1st, Friendship day (Valentine’s day) – February 14th, Easter – late April, Good Friday, Vappur (May day), Mother’s day – 2nd Sunday in May, Juhannus (midsummer), which is also Flag day, Father’s day – June, Lucia day – December 13th, and Christmas eve – December 24th.

Population

As of July 2001, the population of Finland was just over five million. Almost 70% of those are within the 15-64 year age category. There are approximately 16 people per square kilometer
(43 people per square mile) with 62% of the population residing in an urban environment and 38% living in a rural area. The population growth is less than 0.2% because the birth rate is about 11 births per 1,000 people and the death rate is about 10 deaths per 1,000 people. Life expectancy is still considered very high at about 74 years for men and almost 82 years for women. The life expectancy, along with a very low infant mortality rate of less than four deaths per 1,000 live births, shows that Finland is a very healthy and modern country. The population of Finland is primarily of Nordic descent. The principal ethnic majority are the Finnish with a Scandinavian-Baltic origin who account for almost 94% of the population. Most of the other 6% of the population consist of Swedish Finns, Lapps, Russians, Germans, and Gypsies.

Religion

The predominant religion within the country is Lutheran, which makes up almost 88% of the population. Approximately 1% is Orthodox and the rest of the population is a mix of other religions often brought by immigration or no religion.

Language

The official languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish, which were left over from the long Swedish rule of the territory. As of today, 94% of the population speaks Finnish and only 6% speaks Swedish. Other languages spoken include Russian, Lappish, and English, but they are the minority.

Currency

As of January 1, 1999, the official currency of Finland is the euro, which has a fixed exchange rate of 5.94573 markka per euro. The official currency until joining the EU was the Markka (Finmark), which was divided into 100 Penni.
Education

The Finns pride themselves on education. This is one of the few countries of the world that is able to boast virtually a 100% literacy rate in the population aged 15 or over. All children attend primary school during the ages 7 to 15. Education is only required to the age of 16, but many continue beyond that to age 18 or above. There are approximately 5,000 comprehensive schools, vocational schools, colleges, and universities in Finland, which educate over one million students. This is approximately one-fifth of the total population. The majority of educational institutions are public and the cost of higher education is made affordable to anyone who desires it.

Economy and Trade

Finland has an industrialized, free-market economy that rivals any country in Western Europe. Exports mainly involve some type of manufacturing such as chemicals, clothing, machinery, petroleum products, ships, timber, and wood products. Exports make up almost one-third of the countries’ GDP. Trade is crucial for this country for many products are not producible within its borders. The country relies on importing almost all goods except for timber and some minerals. The import goods are often used for manufacturing export products. The main trading partners are Russia, Sweden, Germany, the UK, and USA. Most of the import trade is for commodities such as petroleum and petroleum products, chemicals, transport equipment, iron and steel, machinery, textile yarn and fabrics, and grains.

Agriculture

Because of the climate and that only about 8% of the country is arable land, agriculture is severely limited to maintaining a self-sufficient level of basic products. Agriculture makes up only 3.5% of the GDP, whereas industry provides 29% and services add 67.5% to the GDP. Most of the agricultural products produced in Finland are plants. Grasses make up approximately 40% of these, with grains at about 41%. Of the grains, most commonly grown are oats and rye, with some wheat and barley as well. Peas and potatoes are also a common staple seen in many areas. Livestock agriculture is predominantly
dairy cows. There are some beef cattle and sheep but the second most common form of animal based agriculture is fishing.

Food

The people of Finland often eat foods that taste good, but are heavy in calories. They have meals that are eaten on special occasions, such as holidays, and other favorite foods that are eaten more often. Popular holiday dishes include Pulla, which is braided coffee bread, boiled cod, often served at Christmas Eve, and riisipuro, a desert like an unsweetened rice pudding.

Everyday foods that are favorites of the Finns are nakkimimakkara, which is like a hotdog, berlinimakkard, otherwise known as sausage, and Kajijalanpaisti, a pork, veal and mutton stew.

Common dishes such as reindeer sausage, meatballs, fish, and French fries are eaten more often.

Landmarks

There are many wondrous places to see when visiting Finland. The capital of Finland, Helsinki, has many museums including the Sibelius art museum that honors great music. There is also the Lutheran cathedral that was the first building rebuilt after a devastating fire destroyed most of the city.

If traveling at the end of August, there is the Helsinki arts festival that runs from the end of August to the beginning of September.

Beyond the capital and the Southern part of Finland there are many more cold weather places to see. The city of Kuhmo is near the border of Russia where there are plenty of reindeer to view and where tourists can watch reindeer herding. There is also the fascinating city of Rovaniemi that houses a snow castle, a hotel, and a restaurant made entirely out of ice and snow. The Santa Claus village, where travelers can meet Santa and shop at one of the many stores in the area, is a must find. On the Southeastern half of Finland, around the cities of Lahti, Vaasa, and Tampere, one can visit any of the more than 55,000 lakes that cover the countryside.