

COMMUNIQUE

# LAST TANGO IN FINLAND

... and other surreal tales from the land of 'sauna friends,' car harpoons and anthill-sitting contests.

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**H**ELSINKI — The room was spinning and my brain was awash in booze and near-surreal first impressions of this quixotic Nordic land. Vodka shots too many to count. A plate of crawfish, arranged fastidiously neat as though by an accountant. Beautiful — and polite — blondes everywhere. A pretty park adorned with oriental rugs hanging to dry. The voice of a Finnish woman brought me back to reality. “You’re really not doing that badly,” Riitta, a former Finnair flight attendant, said as we swept across the dance floor, clasped hands outstretched and faces cheek to cheek, to live Argentine tango music. Wherever

one travels, it’s typically considered good manners not to step on the toes of your hostess, especially while tripping the light fantastic and she’s teaching you to dance.

Competition tango dancers Riitta and her husband, Pertti, had taken me under their wings after dinner one night to experience first hand this unlikely passion in this introverted Scandinavian country better known as the home of composer Jean Sibelius and the midnight sun. The only problem was this: I was ass deep in my cups after our crawfish dinner because, in accordance with Finnish custom, we had downed a shot of chilled vodka after every — and I mean every — crustacean we consumed. While I’m not prepared to proclaim Finns the biggest drinkers ever encountered during a quarter century of travels, I will say

this: when it comes to boozing, your run-of-the-mill Finnish grandmother on her deathbed can still drink most any young Russian male under the table — and then use his *yaytsas* for bar food. Meantime, I felt just crazy enough to be confident that I was moving Riitta across the floor with the precision of *El Cachafaz*, despite the fact my legs had long since melted and I could feel my torpid liver protruding through my shirt. “It’s a paradox, to be sure,” Pertti later said when I suggested that it seemed extraordinary for a dance as passionate as tango to be fashionable among traditionally poker-faced Finns who make fun of their own aloofness. The couple ordered more rounds of beers. I tried my best to keep up — well, at least *upright*.

Riitta explained how the tango, born in the darkened brothels of Buenos Aires, was introduced to Helsinki in 1916, a year before Finland gained independence from czarist Russian rule. Since then, the voguish ballet has grown into an obsession that can be measured by the sheer number of tango dance halls in Helsinki and the country’s annual Tango Festival, which lures an estimated 150,000 fans to the city of Seinajoki. When Riitta and Pertti took to the floor they were seductive poetry in motion. But, as I discovered during a recent 10-day visit, the tango is by no means the only way this quirky country dances to the beat of a different drum. Various festivals throughout the year include the Wife Carrying Competition and the International Air Guitar Championship, as well as one event that finds people competing to see who can sit naked atop an anthill the longest. All of which seems to pale next to Sleepyhead Day on July 27, when the laziest people in the towns of Naantali and Hanko are unceremoniously grabbed from their beds and thrown into the sea.

**Q**uirkiness notwithstanding, Finland has long been a hotbed of wildly outside-the-box thinking. From the modernism of renowned 20<sup>th</sup>-century architect Alvar Aalto’s piazza like, three-story Academic Bookshop (the largest of its kind in Europe) in downtown Helsinki and fashion designer Marimekko’s brightly colored printed fabrics of the 1960s, to post-war sculptor Tapio Wirkkala’s Finlandia vodka bottle and Olof Backstrom’s Fiskars scissors, the Finns have been nailing it design-wise for nearly a century. By day, cool winds blow along Helsinki’s scenic harborfront, popular for its tree-shaded Esplanade of outdoor produce kiosks and bustling indoor Market Hall — home of the best reindeer burgers and marinated lamprey I’ve enjoyed anywhere. Arched-hull icebreakers in the harbor await the coming frozen winter, while overnight ferries to Stockholm are filled weekends with passengers en route to neighboring Sweden just across the Gulf of Bothnia. Strolling across the harborfront bridge to picturesque Tervasaari Island provided a lesson about this city’s relatively crime-free reputation. Here locals bring their prized oriental rugs to air out on chest-high hitching posts designed for this purpose. During long, cold winters, the rugs infuse tidy Finnish homes with the scent of the outdoors. At least one American visitor — that would be me — found it peculiar that people would leave such valuable belongings unattended. Life-long resident Ritva Muller merely shrugged her shoulders and grinned. “This is Helsinki,” she said.

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**F**inns will attest that the best buildings are those created for this country's sweaty No. 1 pastime: sauna. Numbers provide the proof. In Finland there are 1.6 million saunas for a population of 5 million (nearly one sauna per household). Locals view sauna (pronounced SOWH-nah, if you wish to sound like an English-speaking Finn), as more than merely an agreeable way to unwind while beating yourself ever so gently with a bundle of birch branches to stimulate circulation. "It is modern wellness," Matti Kivinen said as he led me into one of six saunas at the Finnish Sauna Society's complex in Lauttasari, just outside Helsinki. To be asked to sauna is an honor. "If I invite you to *sowhnah*," said Kivinen, "it's a great pleasure to have you as a *sowhnah* friend." As president of the Finnish Sauna Society, Kivinen, like most of his country's citizens, can debate the relative merits of traditional Finnish smoke versus wood-burning saunas at the drop of a towel. Yet few have much good to say for the oft-ridiculed electric sauna, seen as a soulless intrusion on a centuries-old tradition held in near religious reverence. Caution: if you own an electric sauna, don't expect Kivinen to be your "sauna friend" any time soon. "I would say, 'I don't come to your so-called *sowhnah* because your *sowhnah* is disaster,'" he said matter of factly.

To glimpse deeper into the subarctic heart of Finland, we took a three-day stay in Oulu, an eight-hour, overnight train ride from Helsinki. Tucked midway up the country's western coast, within spitting distance of the Arctic Circle and this country's storied Laplands, Oulu today is a technopolis of software and wireless communication companies. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this clean-swept town was the epicenter of Finland's chief export: tar. Helping me to remember this fact was Marja-Leena Kotilaine, manager of a downtown crafts shop that sells bric-a-brac honoring Oulu's "dark" past — namely, tar-flavored candy and tar-scented candles and shampoos. Go figure. While Oulu

shares Finland's fondness for the absurd (it hosts the country's annual International Air Guitar Championship), the city also mirrors the country's inescapably open-minded attitude regarding nudity, especially the evening my host family showed slides from their recent *au naturel* seaside vacation, which included grandma, and later invited me to sauna. (I politely declined the latter; could not escape the former.) Next morning I met with the Oulu police sergeant responsible for inventing a tidy little device designed to help Finnish cops catch runaway speeders and drunk drivers: the car harpoon (no, seriously).

**B**y noon I was ready for something, well, almost boring, like exploring the 19th-century Finnish homes on the artist colony of Pikisaari Island, and Rotuaari, the town's lovely harborfront, pedestrian-only promenade of restaurants, covered markets and art galleries. Like the rest of Finland, Oulu shares this country's zeal for high-fat foods such as smoked reindeer meat, often served on rye bread with Finnish-made Emmental cheese and slathered with butter blended with hard-boiled eggs. (No, those really were shooting pains I felt radiating down my left arm.) Nearly sacrosanct is the ubiquitous Karelian pastry. Named for the region of eastern Finland annexed by the Russians during this country's failed Winter War of 1944, these sumptuous, oval-shaped baked delicacies, made from rye dough, are filled with rice porridge or potatoes. But even the semi-sweet Karelian pastry couldn't salve the sour pang of disappointment upon learning that a planned trip to nearby Kemi in the Laplands to visit the town's Agency for Village Idiots, had been rendered moot. The agency, which promoted "the acceptance of people with eccentricities" (and that must have been putting it mildly), had shuttered its doors weeks earlier due to lack of funds. One can only hope former staffers follow the organization's motto: "When the money runs out, you have to start thinking." 