



Welcome to Finland

Basic facts about Finland



Welcome to Finland!

Moving to a new country is a major change. Resourcefulness and an open mind can help immigrants to integrate into the new country to a considerable extent. It is a good idea to take up opportunities for study and other activity shortly after moving. It is also worthwhile to look for ways of getting to know the new country by yourself.

There are many organisations which help refugees to start a new life: the municipality deals with the reception of refugees, the employment office helps them to find work and a place of study, and citizens' organisations offer help, e.g., with leisure pursuits. Yet it is each individual who is ultimately responsible for his or her own integration.

It is important to be prepared to meet a wide variety of people. In Finland, many things are arranged through the authorities. Refugees also have to work together with both other Finns and immigrants from their own country and elsewhere in the world. If your own family does not live in Finland, it is very important to forge links with other people living in Finland.

This guide contains some basic facts about Finland, the Finns and integration into the country. You can obtain further information from, e.g., your local municipality, school, employment office or, say, your neighbours.

Basic facts about Finland

- Finland has a population of five million.
- The capital of the country is Helsinki, which has 530,000 inhabitants.
- Other large towns and cities include Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere, Turku, Lahti and Oulu.
- Finland covers an area of 338,127 km² and is the sixth largest country in Europe.
- Finland is divided into five provinces: Southern, Eastern and Western Finland, and Oulu and Lapland. Each province comprises several municipalities. Some of the country's 452 municipalities are towns or cities and some are smaller centres.

Welcome to Finland!
Good luck with integration!

Finland and the Finns

Finland is situated at the northern and eastern fringes of Europe. It gained independence in 1917. Previously, Finland had been ruled by its two powerful neighbours: first Sweden for around 600 years and then Russia for over a century. Today, Finland enjoys good relations with its neighbours. It has long traditions of co-operation with other Nordic countries. Finland joined the European Union in 1995.

From the countryside to the town

Up to well into the 1950s, Finland was an agricultural country, i.e., the majority of its citizens lived in the countryside and gained their livelihood from farming. Finland then began to industrialise quickly. The main branches of industry focus on forestry, paper, metals and high technology. Nowadays, a large number of Finns are employed in service jobs, e.g., in restaurants or shops.

Rapid industrialisation has meant that many Finns have moved from the country to the towns. In the largest towns and cities, this has led to an acute housing shortage. For a long time, the employment situation in Finland was good, but the recession in the early

1990s caused it to deteriorate sharply. In 1999, 13% of Finns of working age were out of work.

Despite unemployment, the standard of living in Finland is relatively high. The country is in fact one of the richest in the world. Many families own their own home, a car, television and various domestic appliances. They may go abroad on holiday each year. Obtaining a standard of living like this calls for a good deal of work and economising over several decades.

Democracy

Finland is a democratic country. This means that people can choose their leaders from candidates put up by the various parties. The largest parties are the Social Democrats, the Centre Party and Consensus.

The Finnish state is led by the President, who is chosen in an election held every six years. The country's most important decision-making organ is the Government, whose activity is monitored by Parliament. Citizens elect Parliament's 200 members at elections held every four years. Finland's representatives at the Parliament of the European Union are

Finnish families often eat only an evening meal together, since the children eat at school and their parents at work.

also elected at elections held every four years. Decisions on local matters are taken by the municipal councils, which are elected at municipal elections. Each Finnish citizen aged eighteen and over is entitled to vote at all elections.

Immigrants can vote at municipal elections once they have been living in the country permanently for two years prior to the election year. On the other hand, only Finnish citizens may vote at Parliamentary and Presidential Elections. Citizens of the European Union and the Nordic countries may vote at European Parliamentary and municipal elections on the same terms as Finns.

Winter is the longest season of the year

With its snowy and forest climate, Finland has wet and cold winters. The country is renowned for its countless lakes, of which there are

around 200,000. There is also a large number of forests. 65% of the territory of Finland consists of forest and almost 10% of waterways. It is only in the northernmost part of Finland, Lapland, that few trees grow.

Finland has four distinct seasons: summer, autumn, winter and spring. The winter lasts longer than the other seasons. It is snowy and dark, whilst the summer is bright and sunny. During the warm summer months, June and July in particular, many Finns usually take their summer holiday which lasts about a month. The school holidays last from June to mid-August.

During the summer, the average temperature in July in, e.g., Helsinki is approx. 17 C and during the winter, in February, -6 C. It is generally colder in the North. During the winter months, there can be a frost in Lapland as low as -30 C. However, it is warm indoors in the winter, too, since almost all buildings have central heating.

All children attend comprehensive school

Under the law, all permanent residents of Finland are entitled and obliged to study for nine years at comprehensive school. Usually, comprehensive school education will not suffice on its own for getting a job, and so the majority of young people go on to senior high school or vocational college. Many of them then continue their studies at a polytechnic or university.

School days are longer the older the schoolchildren are. In the lower forms of the comprehensive school, the day lasts for just a few hours, but pupils at senior high school may study for eight hours a day. Schools provide all pupils with a free meal. At the weekends, i.e., on Saturday and Sunday, the schools are closed.

Finns have a high level of education. This is made possible because study is free or reasonably priced. For example, no charge is made for comprehensive school, but pupils at senior high school have to buy their textbooks themselves. Education is esteemed highly in Finland and is a precondition for obtaining many jobs. It is also common for adults to study at the same time as they go out to work. All Finns are able to read and write. Illiteracy makes it difficult to cope with everyday life.

The state seeks to arrange equal opportunities for education for all. There are numerous universities, vocational colleges and other places of education all over Finland. Girls and boys have equal opportunities for study. Nowadays, there are even more girls than boys at senior high school.

The Finnish educational system

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

- children usually start comprehensive school at the age of seven
- compulsory
- divided between the lower and upper forms
- lasts for 9-10 years

SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

- usually lasts for three years
- necessary for continuing at a university or polytechnic

VOCATIONAL COLLEGE

- lasts for 1-3 years
- prepares pupils for a profession (e.g., hairdresser or mechanic)

UNIVERSITY

POLYTECHNIC

People in Finland engage in a large variety of winter sports such as skiing, downhill skiing, skating and ice hockey. People do not get cold even in the cold weather as long as they dress up well enough.

Finland's official languages

The Finnish population is quite homogenous and there are few national minorities. The largest minorities are the Sâmi (Lapps) living in Lapland, of whom there are 5,700, and the Romanies (Gypsies) of whom there are 6,500. Many such groups have their own languages, but they also speak Finnish. They are Finnish citizens.

Finland has two main official languages: Finnish and Swedish. The majority of Finns have Finnish as their mother tongue. Swedish speakers account for 5% of the population, and mainly inhabit the South of Finland and the West Coast. In these areas, e.g., doctors, shop assistants and post office workers are required to have a command of both languages. Pupils can also study

at school in both languages. In the Sâmi areas, the Sâmi (Lappish) language is the official language.

Finnish belongs to a different group of languages than most European languages. Other Finno-Ugric languages include Hungarian and Estonian. Many people regard Finnish as a difficult language. For example, the words can be very long and there is a large number of grammatical cases.

Many Finns have some command of English. However, it is difficult to get by without some skill in Finnish or Swedish. If an immigrant cannot speak at least one of Finland's official languages, he or she will be virtually unable to find work. It is very important to begin language study immediately after moving to Finland.

Young people often move to a town or city to look for jobs because they are not easy to find in the countryside. On the other hand, many older people are keen to remain in their own homes.

Welfare is maintained through taxes

Like the other Nordic countries, Finland is a welfare state. To put it simply, this means that nobody in Finland need go hungry. In order for it to be possible to safeguard welfare, the work contribution of everyone is required. When a person is healthy and capable of working, he or she is expected to train for a profession and to maintain himself or herself and the family by working. If a person is unemployed or too old to cope alone, society secures his or her basic needs.

Welfare is maintained by means of taxes. Everyone who works is under an obligation to pay tax to both the state and their own area of residence. Taxes are used to pay for, e.g., health services, the construction of roads and public buildings and for maintaining social security, schools, child day-care centres and hospitals. Taxation means that basic services are almost or entirely free-of-charge. The reception of refugees is also funded out of taxes.

The level of taxation in Finland is one of the highest in the world. Up to half of some people's income is deducted

in tax. Taxation is one way of levelling out income differences, since high earners pay more taxes than people on low incomes. The majority of Finns belong to a middle class with reasonable earnings.

Many Finns' roots are in the countryside

Nature and the countryside are important to the Finns, even though, today, the majority live in towns and cities. This may be due in part to the fact that Finland became urbanised only a short while ago. Many people only moved to housing blocks in the inner cities or densely built-up suburbs as late as the 1960s. Finns like to exercise and play sports out of doors, and to go hunting, fishing and rambling.

Finns are also keen to spend their holidays close to nature. That is why many town-dwellers have bought a summer cottage in the countryside, where they spend most of the summer. Essential features of summer cottage life are the sauna and boating. In the autumn, people go off to their cottages to collect berries and mushrooms.

In families, domestic chores and the upbringing of children are shared between the men and women. They can take turns to do the cleaning, cook, wash the clothes and take the children to day care.

Finns have small families

Ordinary Finnish families consist of the parents and one or two children. Families with more than three children are rare. Families are also small because usually only the parents and the children live in the same household. The grandparents live either in a home of their own or in an old people's home.

It is common in Finland for couples to co-habit, but it is just as common for co-habiting couples to get married after a few years. In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of divorces: as many as one in two marriages end in divorce. For this reason, Finland also has a fair number of what are referred to as "new families", comprising spouses that have previously been married to someone else, their own children or ones from their previous marriages. On the other hand, the number of parents caring for their

children on their own is also on the increase.

Childhood, youth, adulthood, old age

The Finnish lifestyle has altered considerably in a short space of time. Finnish children nowadays have a long childhood during which they mainly play, busy themselves with hobbies and attend school. Typical hobbies include sport and music. Children are not expected to carry out paid work.

Childhood is followed by youth, ten years of which may pass by in study. Young Finns are usually highly independent. In adolescence in particular, they may have problems with their parents over, e.g., courtship, home-coming times and use of intoxicants and money. Many of them leave home at about the age of twenty.

As adults, Finns go out to work and set up a family. Their parents do not involve themselves in their children's choice of spouse, but each person decides by themselves whom they are to marry. Living on one's own is not regarded as unusual in Finland. Not all couples decide to have children.

People normally work up until retirement age, i.e., to about the age of 65. If a pensioner is in a poor state of health, he or she can move to a home for the elderly, where assistance with daily chores is available. Some people enjoy living in an old people's home, but others feel useless and lonely. Many people in fact prefer to live in their own homes, where they are given help with everyday tasks.

Adults go out to work, children attend day care

In Finland, women go to work outside the home almost as much as men. That is why giving birth and the care of a new-born baby call for special arrangements. A mother has a statutory right to take time off work for maternity leave to care for a new-born child. A working father can also apply for paternity leave to look after a child. Financial support can be provided for the care of a child until he or she reaches the age of three.

However, many parents soon return to working life. This is possible because Finland has a good child day-care system. Children are normally in day care arranged by the municipality, looked after by families or a private minder. Sometimes, relatives also look after children.

An ordinary working day is eight hours long. Work often begins at eight or nine in the morning and finishes at four or five in the evening. In the middle of the day, there is a meal break lasting for about an hour. However, not everyone is engaged in full-time or day-time work. Employees are granted holidays in accordance with how many months they have been at work. Ordinarily, Finns take most of their holiday during the summer.

Finland has a state church

Finland has freedom of religion, which means that everyone has the right to practice their religion or to not belong to any confession at all. Almost all Finns are Christians: 90% belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church or to the Orthodox Church. Both of these are state churches.

Even though almost all Finns are members of a church, they are not necessarily devotedly religious. The majority of Finns are what are known as nominal Christians. By tradition, they attend a Christmas service, allow their children to be baptised and most of them are married according to Christian rites, but, otherwise, they do not practice their religion actively.

Honesty is the best policy

Finnish law is in force in Finland. The rights and obligations which it refers to apply equally to men and women, to Finnish citizens and immigrants alike. Anyone who breaks the law will be sentenced for the offence. Anyone who moves to Finland would do well to acquaint him- or herself with Finnish

As Finnish families have few children, the extended families are also fairly small. Relatives usually meet each other rarely, perhaps just at family celebrations such as weddings, christenings and funerals.

law, since ignorance does not exempt a person from punishment.

The commonest sentences are fines and an imprisonment. In extremely serious violations relating to upbringing by the parents, a child may be taken into care, which means that he or she is taken away from its family to be raised elsewhere. This is very rare.

The Finns have confidence in their legal system. For example, wealth or social status do not influence a judge's decision. If you fall victim to a crime in Finland, you should always get in touch with the police. The Finnish police are honest and fair.

Although many things are permitted in Finland, they may be controlled by means of precise rules. For example, only holders of a firearm certificate are allowed to carry a gun and permission is required for holding a demonstration. In unclear situations, you can ask the police for advice.

Here are some examples of things which are prohibited and permitted in Finland

PROHIBITED

- physical disciplining of children
- use and possession of narcotics
- driving a vehicle whilst intoxicated (drunk driving)
- discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or gender
- sexual relations with a person under the age of 16

PERMITTED

- to hold meetings and establish and join, e.g., organisations
- to express various opinions publicly
- to publish printed material

Revealing dress and other cultural traits

Compared to women in many other countries, Finnish women are quite free in the way they behave. They may smile warmly, look you in the eyes and dress revealingly. However, this does not generally mean that they are loose-living or particularly keen to engage in sexual relations. Just like men, women may also go together to parties, smoke and drink alcohol.

One typical characteristic of the Finns is punctuality. If, for example, it is stated that a train will depart at 9.21, it will depart at exactly 9.21. Many people regard it as bad manners to arrive late. However, if a delay appears inevitable, people inform the person they are going to meet by telephone so that he or she does not have to wait in vain.

Finns are often described as quiet and shy. They may be particularly cautious if they have to speak a foreign language. Finns have a great respect in particular for other people's privacy. For example, it is commonplace for people to agree in advance before visiting even close friends.

Finns esteem hard work and honesty. They are keen to demonstrate that they are themselves persevering and also value the same trait in others. Finns are often delighted when immigrants show an interest in learning Finnish.

Finland only has a few immigrants

Compared to other European countries, only a small number of immigrants have come to Finland. On the other hand, many Finns have emigrated to Sweden and North America in particular. Around half a million people of Finnish origin live outside the borders of Finland. After the Second World War, some Finns were forced to abandon their homes. When Karelia was ceded to the Soviet Union, about 400,000 people had to move to elsewhere in Finland.

During the 1990s, the number of immigrants in Finland rapidly quadrupled. Whereas at the beginning of the decade, there were 20,000 immigrants in the country, by 1999 there were 85,000. This represents 1.7% of the country's population. The largest number of people have moved from the countries bordering on Finland, from Russia, Estonia and Sweden.

As there have been so few immigrants, Finns are still quite unaccustomed to meeting people that look different and who have a different culture, religion or language. This is why they can sometimes be a little suspicious about immigrants.

Some people's suspiciousness is due to the fact that they do not understand why people move from abroad to live next door to them. They may also think that immigrants are taking, e.g., their jobs. However, not all reserve or quietness is due to distrust, since Finns do not always talk very much even among themselves.

The majority of town and city dwellers live in apartment blocks. As the neighbours in apartment blocks live right next to each other, it is important to live quietly and peacefully so that others are not disturbed.

The reception of refugees

The largest groups of refugees in Finland

Former homeland	Number
Somalia	4,900
Iraq	2,800
Former Yugoslavia	2,600
Vietnam	1,900
Iran	1,800

There a total of 16,000 refugees dotted all over Finland. Each of them is the resident of a municipality. When a municipality takes in refugees, it concludes an agreement on reception with the state. Under the agreements, the municipality takes care, e.g., of housing, health care and education. To begin with, the municipal authorities lay on housing for the refugees, which is usually a rented municipal apartment.

Soon after their arrival, newcomers undergo a doctor's examination and an immigration interview, and they are told all about the services provided by the municipality and the local area. Finnish Red Cross personnel are also often involved at this point.

Refugees can apply for family reunification if part of the family has been left behind in their homeland or some third country. In family reunification, Finland follows the recommendation of the UNHCR, i.e., a refugee can get his or her spouse and underage children into the country. If a refugee is a minor, family reunification can allow him to get his parents and underage sisters into the country.

Finns are not usually able to speak the languages spoken by refugees. Interpreter's services are therefore arranged as far as possible for the first year in each municipality for the purposes of school tuition and dealings with the authorities. Immigrants dealing with the authorities in Finland should realise that their work is governed by the law and regulations. Friendship or threats, for example, will thus have no effect on decisions taken by the authorities.

If one municipality has received a large number of refugees all at the same time, you may have to wait some time before the initial arrangements are dealt with. The reception arrangements may also vary from one year and one place to the next.

Personal integration plans

Finland supports an immigrant's efforts to become integrated into the country. Immigrants draw up an integration plan in collaboration with officials at the employment office. It is drawn up for immigrants aged 17-64 permanently resident in Finland who are

unemployed or in receipt of income support. The plan encourages them to acquaint themselves with Finland and to make an active effort to find work. Immigrants can take part in e.g., language courses, further training, job practice, voluntary work or rehabilitation.

The integration plan is drawn up together with the employment authority and a worker from the municipality. It can be drawn up for a maximum of three years. When an immigrant carries out his or her integration plan, he or she is paid integration support. The sum of money has been scaled so that it will suffice for basic necessities such as food, cleanliness and clothes.

Study in order to find work

It is not always easy to find work in Finland. However, it is worthwhile making an active effort to find a job. In particular, good language skills, qualifications obtained in Finland, contacts and familiarity with the culture are among the best tools which can enable an immigrant to get work.

Not all the education and work experience obtained by an immigrant in his or her homeland can be directly applied to the world of work in Finland. This is why many immigrants have to obtain supplementary education and training. Some of them have to study for a new profession, whilst others can supplement their professional skill. Training often entails job practice, which involves familiarisation with a workplace by working there for a short period.

Work practice can be a path towards finding a permanent position as well.

Children attend school

To begin with, children of school age, i.e., 7-16-year-olds, are provided with preparatory instruction in a group of their own. The aim is for children to first learn the language and school attendance according to the Finnish system, and only then for them to switch to Finnish classes which correspond to their level. Some subjects such as music, drawing and sport can be studied all the time together with Finnish children.

Other cultures are taken into account in schools as far as possible, e.g., by providing children with instruction in their own religion and by making provision for various diets. Pupils also have the opportunity to receive tuition in their mother tongue for two hours a week.

Starting a new life in Finland

Adjusting to a new country calls for plenty of patience and enterprise. The first thing that hits many people in a foreign country is homesickness. It can be eased by starting to get to know Finland and the Finnish language actively and by looking for new friends in one's new homeland. For example, the Finnish Red Cross can help you gain Finnish friendship families who want to get to know immigrants and support them as they start a new life. Involvement in organisations with people from the same country has also been

important for many people in the initial stages.

Living in Finland brings with it very new kinds of situations. For many fathers, unemployment has been especially difficult as they have always been used to providing for their families with their own work. They have been able to cope with the situation, e.g., by studying actively or by taking part in interesting voluntary work.

The situation faced by children can also be contradictory: on the one hand, they are keen to behave in accordance with the culture of their homeland and the one taught them by their parents, but, on the other, in the same way as their Finnish peers. If this gives rise to problems, it is important to liaise actively with the school. The teachers and other staff there can help you find the best ways of solving such problems.

You can apply for Finnish citizenship once five years have elapsed from the date when you received a permanent residence permit. Once an immigrant has been granted citizenship, he or she has the same obligations and rights as other Finns. He or she can, e.g., vote and stand for election. Young men must also serve in the Finnish army.

The Finnish state supports voluntary return by refugees to their homeland if the conditions there have become settled. The authorities can provide more information on the opportunities for returning, matters relating to residence permits and financial support.



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