

# The Heart of Nokia Country

*Finland's most popular city has a long and vibrant history as an economic capital—and of re forging its identity.*

By Rowdy Geirsson

Located in central Tampere, the Nokia Arena, a 15,000-seat venue constructed by Polish-American architect Daniel Libeskind, is the home of major events including ice hockey games by Finnish teams Ilves and Tappara; in February it will host Uuden Musiikin Kilpailu (UMK), the Finnish selection for the Eurovision Song Contest 2024.





PHOTO: TAMPERE TAMPAALTA/VISIT TAMPERE



PHOTO: LAURA VANZO/VISIT TAMPERE

**Winter ice skating** at the Sorsapuisto rink next to Tampere Hall (left); **Hämeenkatu**, a main boulevard located in the city center (above).

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HEN VISITORS PLAN

their itineraries to Finland, Helsinki is usually a must-see destination. But some would be surprised to learn that for Finns, the capital is not the number-one travel site in their own country—that distinction instead lies with its second-largest city, Tampere. Located 110 miles northwest of Helsinki alongside the Tammerkoski water channel, which lends the city its name and connects the two inland lakes of Näsijärvi and Pyhäjärvi, this former manufacturing beacon has also in recent years outranked its fellow cities as Finland’s most attractive residential destination, edging out Turku and Jyväskylä.

For those who have made the journey, Tampere’s popularity comes as no surprise. With its walkable city center and districts surrounded by scenic views of nearby lakes, and impressive cultural offerings ranging from the contemporary Sara Hilden Art Museum to the art-nouveau Tampere Market—not to mention the nearby walking trails of the island of Viikinsaari and family-friendly activities like Särkänniemi amusement park—Tampere is

as known for its local culture and atmosphere as for the 50-plus saunas that have earned it the title of “Sauna Capital of the World.”

But outside of its popularity now for visitors both from abroad and within, Tampere has a storied history in Finland as an economic center. Once regarded as the nation’s Manchester for its dense cluster of brick mill buildings, the city has anchored the country’s industrial backbone from the 19th century to the present day: since its founding, Tampere has witnessed the collapse of the Swedish and Russian Empires, the rise and fall of Finnish manufacturing, and the eventual emergence of the nation as a dominant force in the global telecommunications market with the giant of Nokia leading the way. Today, Tampere forms the core of Finland’s second-most populous metropolitan area, home to about 335,000 people.

And throughout the more challenging chapters of the city’s history—many of them including the shadow of its eastern neighbor of Russia and, more recently, the late-20th century era of factory decline—Tampere has repeatedly risen to forge its identity anew.



## THE FOUNDING OF TAMMERFORS

TAMPERE WAS FIRST ESTABLISHED IN 1779 AS TAMMERFORS (as it remains known in Swedish) by King Gustav III of Sweden. At that time, Finland had been a fully integrated part of the Swedish realm for several hundred years, and the Swedish crown hoped the new city would become a center of iron manufacturing, then a significant part of Sweden's economy. The location was chosen primarily for its proximity to the Tammerkoski rapids—featuring a drop in elevation of nearly 60 feet over the course of a mile; the channel was considered a substantial source of hydropower. Along with this, iron ore would be found in the surrounding bogs and lakes while the extensive Finnish woodlands would provide the charcoal needed for the smelting process.

To help facilitate this, King Gustav III designated Tampere as a so-called “free city,” granting it special privileges in the form of reduced taxes to attract private businesses. Though this incentivized some entrepreneurs at the outset, the strategy overall proved to be unsuccessful in Tampere's early days, leaving it as a small outpost up until the 19th century. It would, however, eventually contribute to a boom of migration—only by then, Finland would no longer be a part of the Swedish realm.

In 1809 Sweden lost Finland to Russia—the culmination of nearly two centuries' worth of hostilities between the two nations that stretched back to the Thirty Years' War and Sweden's emergence as a major power. Finland's subsequent and highly unique position within the Russian Empire following this development directly contributed to Tampere's rapid rise as an industrial powerhouse during the 19th century.

While Sweden's Imperial Era had effectively ended after a devastating loss to Russia at the Battle of Poltava in Ukraine in 1709 and its subsequent forfeiture of territory in 1721, tensions continued to smolder on both sides throughout the remaining decades of the 18th century. In particular, the Swedish parliament worried over the growth of St. Petersburg, which had been founded in 1703 by Peter the Great and by 1750 hosted a population that outnumbered that of Stockholm. From the Swedish perspective, St. Petersburg sat uncomfortably close to the realm's eastern border, which was, of course, the border between Finland and Russia. Additional wars between Sweden and Russia followed, in which the pattern of Swedish defeat and Russian victory was repeated.

During this period, the Swedish parliament decided to build two maritime fortresses to help bolster the defense of Finland: Svartholm at Loviisa and Sveaborg in Helsinki's harbor, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage site better known by its Finnish name of Suomenlinna. Later, after another war with Russia and its embarrassing defeat, King Gustav III was murdered during a masked ball at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm, a historical event that has since given rise to numerous masked ball-themed murder



A dam over the Tammerkoski rapids in the Finlayson industrial area of Tampere.

mysteries. His successor King Gustav IV Adolf embroiled Sweden in the Napoleonic Wars, which, after some shifting in the military constellations of the period, pitted Sweden against Russia once again.

SVARTHOLM AND SVEABORG WERE UNABLE TO STOP the Russian military, which occupied Finland and advanced as far west as the Åland Islands in 1808. Finland officially ceased to be a part of the Swedish realm at the conclusion of hostilities with Russia in 1809. The Swedish nobility deposed King Gustav IV Adolf and eventually installed a former general of Napoleon as the new king, Karl XIV Johan, who then engaged in a brief alliance with the Russian emperor to defeat Napoleon. After a subsequent war to conquer Norway to compensate for the loss of Finland, Sweden disengaged from further European military affairs and began its famed policy of neutrality.

Finland itself emerged from this turmoil as an autonomous territory within the Russian Empire. The unique status granted to Finland by Russian Emperor Alexander I permitted uniquely advantageous trade terms with the rest of the Russian Empire. And Tampere, with its own specific set of historical and geographical qualities, was thus primed for the launch of Finland's industrial revolution.

PHOTO: MIKKO VARES/VISIT TAMPERE





**Located** in the Naistenlahti district, a factory building housing heavy industry manufacturer Oy Tampella Ab was a vital party of Tampere industry in the 19th century; today it houses the Museum Centre Vapriikki.

### FREE TRADE IN THE GRAND DUCHY, THE RISE OF FINLAYSON AND THE BIRTH OF NOKIA

**S**WEDISH LAWS AND CUSTOMS WERE ALLOWED TO continue in the new Grand Duchy of Finland. Russian policy at the time aimed to placate the generally Sweden-favoring Finnish population while simultaneously developing the territory as part of a broader defensive strategy to provide a buffer protecting St. Petersburg (a notion that would persist with major ramifications into and throughout the 20th century). Helsinki also now became the capital of Finland—the former provincial capital of Turku was too close to Sweden for Russian comfort.

Finnish language and culture flourished at unprecedented levels throughout the Grand Duchy, and duty-free privileges were granted on imported raw materials and machinery. This new status on goods imported to Finland provided an alluring incentive to economic and industrial development. In addition, the Russian emperor also allowed the special taxation privileges established by King Gustav III (applied to all of Finland) to continue unabated in Tampere.

Tampere consequently emerged in a very unique position. No place else

PHOTO: ROWDY GERSSON

## *Tampere's special status did not go unnoticed by western entrepreneurs.*

in the world provided the same combination of abundant hydropower, domestic tax incentives, international import incentives and extremely advantageous trade terms with Russia (heavy tariffs were placed on goods imported to Russia from outside its empire). And to top it all off, Tampere lay in close proximity to the constantly growing metropolis of St. Petersburg and its associated demand for factory-made goods.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tampere's special status did not go unnoticed by western entrepreneurs. This was the case with the industrialist James Finlayson, a Scotsman who was living in Russia at the time and working in a managerial role for a consortium of cotton mills in St. Petersburg. In 1820 he moved to Tampere and launched Finlayson & Compagnie, initially as a machine shop and cotton mill. While the company would eventually grow to become the most profitable business of the 19th century in the Nordic countries, its early years were characterized more by struggle than success, and consequently James Finlayson declared bankruptcy and moved home to Scotland in 1835.

Two entrepreneurs, Carl Nottbeck and Georg von Rauch, subsequently bought Finlayson's company, investing in it by importing the latest technology and bringing in skilled workers from abroad. Over the following decades, the company transformed into a thriving business manufacturing a range of products—the most notable being textiles, paper and metal products. Most of Finlayson's products were shipped to St. Petersburg, where they were sold in the absence of competing international products.

**T**HE SUCCESS OF FINLAYSON SERVED AS A CATALYST for the establishment of other businesses in Tampere. One of these was an unassuming wood-pulp mill founded by Fredrik Idestam in 1865. Three years later, he relocated this business to the neighboring village of Nokia, and three years after that, he and his friend Leo Mechelin formed a limited company called Nokia Aktiebolag. This marked the beginnings of a company that would eventually grow, decades later, to be a global telecommunications giant.

Meanwhile, Tampere and its surrounding communities (including Nokia) continued to grow. Many new businesses were established over the course of the 19th century, ranging from common cotton and paper mills to match factories and industrial distilleries and everything in between. Workers flocked to the city from the countryside, and the population exploded. A city that began the 19th century as little more than a backwater by the rapids would reach a population of 35,000 by the dawn of the 20th century.

A testament to Tampere's rapid rise and success as an industrial center may be seen in its status as the fifth city in Europe (after London, Paris,



*As a working-class factory city, much of Tampere's population at this time was sympathetic to the communist ideology.*

Milan and Strasbourg) to successfully conduct electrical illumination. In 1882 a member of the Nottbeck family returned from working alongside Thomas Edison in New Jersey and implemented the new technology in the Finlayson factory. During this same decade, Nokia continued to expand its operations in wood processing and paper production as well as hydropower. Tampere thrived, and Finnish trade relations with Russia were profitable.

However, a pronounced sense of Finnish national identity had also grown over the course of the 19th century. This was exemplified by a newfound pride in the Finnish language, the creation of Finland's own currency of the markka and the emergence of a golden age of Finnish literature and art that included the publication of the national epic *Kalevala*, the paintings of Akseli Gallen-Kallela and the early musical works of Jean Sibelius.

This awakening of the Finnish national identity did not occur without political backlash. In 1899 Russia changed its policy under the guidance of Emperor Nicholas II and began to pursue a period of Russification intended to lessen the Grand Duchy's autonomy and undermine its unique culture. This only strengthened the resolve of the widespread Finnish desire for increased self-determination and true independence. Tensions increased, and amidst the violent backdrop of World War I, everything changed.

### THE MEETING OF LENIN AND STALIN AND THE BATTLE OF TAMPERE

**R**USSIA SEETHED WITH TURMOIL IN THE EARLY YEARS of the 20th century. Having lost a costly war with Japan, its revolutionary forces grew in number as social unrest spiraled out of control. After a failed revolt in 1905, one faction of revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks, held a conference in Tampere to address disagreements among Russia's competing radical left-wing organizations. As a territory of the Russian Empire, Finland was easily accessible but also outside the usual purview of the Russian authorities, and thus a good candidate to host controversial activities.

As a working-class factory city, much of Tampere's population at this time was sympathetic to the communist ideology, and generally receptive to playing host for the gathered Bolsheviks. The conference, which was held in secret at the Tampere Workers' Hall, marked the moment in which Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin met for the first time.

While these domestic affairs continued to simmer, World War I broke out in 1914. This proved a boon to the factories of Tampere, which manufactured



PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS 1.0

A 1951 painting by Aleksandr Moravov depicts Lenin's meeting with Stalin and other communists in Tampere.

supplies for the Russian military. Then in 1917 the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, overthrew the provisional government that had replaced Emperor Nicholas II after his abdication earlier that year; Russia descended into civil war and took its imperial territories with it, including Finland.

Like Russia, Finland was divided between the Whites, a collective term for the anti-communist forces, and the Reds, the communist forces. Both sides had been agitating for Finnish independence, and on December 6, 1917, it was officially declared by the Finnish Senate. Finland's independence was formally acknowledged by Lenin that New Year's Eve, galvanizing Finland's Reds to attempt to gain control over the new country, and on January 27, 1918, they began the Finnish Civil War by marching into Tampere. Within a few days the Reds had also seized other southern Finnish cities and called for the arrest of the members of the Finnish Senate, most of whom had already fled.

**T**HE WHITES BASED THEIR HEADQUARTERS IN VAASA, a city on Finland's western coast named after Sweden's most prominent royal dynasty. From here, the Whites negotiated with German leaders and eventually received German military support to help fight the Russian-backed Reds. But before this assistance arrived, the bloodiest battle of the Finnish Civil War took place—the Battle of Tampere, which lasted from March 15 to April 6 and resulted in a victory for the Whites, who eventually regained control of the country with German support. When Germany surrendered to the Allies not long after, Finland became a republic.





A view of central Tampere features the Metsä Board Tako mill, producing high-quality paperboard.

## THE WINTER WAR, THE CONTINUATION WAR AND THE LAPLAND WAR

ENTERING THE 1920S, THE NEWLY INDEPENDENT nation of Finland had lost its century-long trade advantages with Russia, and the factories in war-torn Tampere experienced a phase of economic decline. One of the oldest, the Frenckell paper mill which had been founded in 1783, closed in 1928; as historic preservation of industrial heritage was not considered a priority, the building was initially slated for demolition, though this fortunately did not take place.

This would change for Tampere with the onset of WWII, during which its factories again began producing arms for a series of conflicts: the Winter War, the Continuation War and the Lapland War. The first began soon after Finland was dragged into World War II on November 30, 1939, when Soviet forces invaded and began bombing southern Finland after Finnish leaders had resisted their demands to alter borders for Soviet military bases as part of a strategy

PHOTO: ROWDY GEIRSSON

*Many Tampere factories modernized their facilities to meet production demands.*

intended to strengthen the defense of St. Petersburg—a perennial Russian concern that stretched back to the 18th century and its wars with Sweden. During the subsequent fighting, the Soviets vastly outnumbered the Finns but took much heavier losses. Nevertheless, hostilities ended with Finland ceding territory that included the strategically located Karelian Isthmus (located between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, north of St. Petersburg), a historically Finnish region that remains part of Russia to this day.

This territory would again come into play during the Continuation War which began in 1941. Finnish worries about Soviet intentions once again spiked in 1940 when the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic states and shipped their leaders to Siberian prison camps. Having learned from the Winter War that the Allies would or could not help defend Finland, Finnish leaders repeated the tactic used in World War I and turned to Germany for support against their eastern neighbor. In exchange, Finland helped German troops enter Russia by invading the Karelian Isthmus. Despite fulfilling its end of the agreement—and maintaining that this move was merely defensive—Finland soon became caught in the crossfire between the Allies and Axis powers and a series of negotiations with (and attacks by) the Soviet Union, which eventually led to the Lapland War in which Finland ousted German troops from Finnish territory. But their eventual peace agreement came at a heavy cost, in the form of heavy reparations paid to the Soviet Union. Soon, Tampere would begin manufacturing the products that would repay this debt.

## THE RISE OF NOKIA AMID INDUSTRIAL DECLINE

A SUBSTANTIAL AMOUNT OF THESE REPARATIONS WAS required in the form of metal products. Many Tampere factories modernized their facilities to meet production demands. And by the time Finland's debt was paid off in 1952, a stable, well-functioning and advantageous bilateral clearing agreement had been established for trade between the two governments that would persist until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the post-war years, Russia's fears of attack from the west remained strong, and in 1948, Finland and the Soviet Union entered the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, also known as the YYA Treaty or VSB Treaty, which required Finland to resist any advances against the Soviet Union on Finnish territory while also not building up its own military; it was also not allowed to join NATO, which would put Finland in an unusual balancing act between the east and west throughout most of the 20th century. But Finnish manufacturing, specifically in Tampere and its surrounding region, continued strong through the 1960s and 1970s as a result.



## *Nokia began shifting its focus to electronics and telecommunications in the 1980s.*

One of the most noteworthy developments in Finnish manufacturing to occur during this time involved the little wood-pulp business that Fredrik Idestam had first incorporated in 1871—Nokia Aktiebolag. In 1966, it began morphing into an entity resembling the Nokia that we now know today, through a merger with two other companies—one of which, Suomen Kaapelitehdas, specialized in manufacturing various cables.

Suomen Kaapelitehdas had especially benefited from the war reparations. The thriving trade networks that it established with the Soviet Union persisted long after these had been paid, which in turn served to benefit the new 1960s incarnation of Nokia after it had begun to lose its competitive edge in the wood-processing sector. Suomen Kaapelitehdas' strategic advantage included its acquisition of Finnish firearms manufacturer Sako in 1962, which was leveraged to create new electronics and product development divisions that would in turn prove vital to Nokia's development in telecommunications.

**M**EANWHILE, OTHER COMPANIES REMAINED strong, including the textile manufacturer Finlayson, which served as the country's largest private employer. In spite of this, a worldwide decline in manufacturing began to affect Tampere as it did other cities. Local government began taking preventative steps, one of which included collaborative partnerships between local businesses such as Nokia and the city's two institutions of higher education that had been established in the 1960s—now merged into the single entity of Tampere University. These efforts helped ease the city's transition to a service- and technology-based economy, setting it apart from other European and American brick-mill cities that were less well-equipped for industrial decline.

When the downfall of manufacturing did finally reach Tampere in the 1980s, these preventative measures were not quite enough to stave off a local recession, in part due to the total collapse of the textile and footwear industries, which even affected Finlayson; the company closed the doors to its original factory in the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union furthered this loss, taking Finnish trade advantages along with it. During this time, however, the city's new technology center had already been established, located on the edge of town rather than in the empty mills. And in the following years, Nokia began bringing new high-tech jobs to the city, particularly as it began shifting its focus to electronics and telecommunications in the 1980s, shedding numerous subsidiaries and removing itself from its traditional sectors.

In 1988 Nokia opened its Research and Development Unit for Mobile Phones in Tampere and that same year conducted the world's first commercial GSM call—standing for Global System of Mobile Communications, a standard



PHOTO: TAMPERE TAVVAALTA/VISIT TAMPERE

**Since 2021** Tampere has boasted a light-rail system, here shown on Hämeensilta Bridge crossing the Tammerkoski rapids.

for wireless communications used by mobile phones—between Helsinki and Tampere. The success of this led Nokia to hone its focus on mobile phones, and by the mid-1990s it dominated one third of the entire global market.

### TAMPERE TODAY

**T**HE RAPID TRANSITION TO A TECHNOLOGY-BASED economy in the 1990s combined with the dissolution of the Soviet Union meant that Tampere soon became known as a city characterized by culture, heritage, higher education and high tech, helping to reorient Finland towards a more western-leaning international outlook.

Though the mass factory closures of the 1980s and early 1990s left a vacuum in Tampere's central brick mill complexes, they were converted to new uses rather quickly, foregoing the more common period of prolonged dilapidation. Today these old mills are intact and refurbished, housing a multitude of business types. Two of Tampere's biggest industrial complexes,





**Visitors** to the Backlight Photo Festival, a triennial event in Tampere organized by the Photographic Centre Nyky aika.

Finlayson and Tampella (a former manufacturer of heavy machinery), re-opened in the mid-1990s with an impressive array of cultural establishments and businesses. For the Finlayson complex, this includes Aamulehti (Finland's second largest newspaper), a movie theater and a medical facility, as well as the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas, the Spy Museum, the National Police Museum and an art gallery. Across the canal, the Tampella complex now houses the Museum Centre Vapriikki, comprising the Finnish Museum of Games, Tampere Museum of Natural History, Pirkanmaa Regional Museum, the Postal Museum and even the Finnish Hockey Hall of Fame. In addition to these, Tampere is also home to the Lenin Museum (housed in the room in which the initial meeting between Lenin and Stalin occurred and the only museum of its kind outside of Russia) and the Moomin Museum, located just outside the mill district.

**I**N 2000 TAMPERE'S CREATIVE ECONOMY BEGAN TO BOOM, leading a series of small businesses and start-ups to establish themselves in the mill complexes of central Tampere. Alongside this development, Nokia continued its meteoric rise on the global mobile phone scene until a failed partnership with Microsoft in the early 2010s, after which it turned

PHOTO: OLLIPEKKA LATVALA/VISIT TAMPERE

## *The Tammerkoski channel is now formally registered as part of Finland's national heritage.*

its focus to wireless network infrastructure. While headquartered in Espoo, a suburb of Helsinki, Nokia maintains an operational presence in Tampere to this day, and even sponsored the Nokia Arena—a state-of-the-art multi-purpose stadium in central Tampere that has been the largest in the country since it opened in December of 2021—which this February will host the highly anticipated UMK 2024, Finland's Eurovision final.

The city has also continued to grow as a place of higher education, and the collaboration between the universities and local business continues to flourish as the student population of 20,000-plus contributes to the liveliness and vitality of the city.

**T**HOUGH THE CITY HAS MADE A REMARKABLE TRANSITION, manufacturing still maintains a presence in Tampere, albeit a minority one. Metsä, a Finnish forestry industry conglomerate, continues to operate a cardboard mill in central Tampere in the same location where Fredrik Idestam, the founder of Nokia, established his very first mill in 1865. The brand of Finlayson itself has also been resurrected. Having briefly withered after it was purchased by Finnish interior design and home appliance company Asko Group in the 1980s, in 2014 it was purchased by new owners that moved the brand to Helsinki, where it acquired several Finnish and Swedish clothing brands and changed its name to Manna and Co. Finlayson products are presently sold at the original Finlayson store in Tampere.

The old Tammerkoski channel that has animated the city over the past few centuries is now formally registered as part of Finland's national heritage. It is the first urban location in the country to be awarded this distinction. And for all the stories that Tampere has to tell, perhaps the most impressive one is illustrated by the thriving cultural and business activity that visitors step into within and around the brick mill buildings of the past. Throughout its history, the city has adapted to face the future, and tell stories anew.

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