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## This New Hotel Is One of the Most Luxurious Stays in Finland — and We Were Among the First to Stay

The Hotel Maria just opened in Helsinki with a restaurant serving a hyper-local, seven-course tasting menu and a distinctly Finnish spa.

By [Maggie Shipstead](#) | Published on January 10, 2024



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PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOTEL MARIA

Although it had been open for less than 48 hours when my husband and I arrived on a frosty December evening, The Hotel Maria in Helsinki already had the aura of an institution. As we glided up to its classically symmetrical yellow façade in a whisper-quiet electric Mercedes chauffeured by an equally silent driver (the Finns are famously averse to small talk), I felt like an attendee at a winter ball in a bygone era. The illusion was only heightened by the tuxedoed man and the woman in champagne sequins who flitted past the open door. History is in the hotel's bones. Three of its four buildings in the tony Kruununuhaka neighborhood date from 1885, when they started life as accommodations for the families of elite army sharpshooters. The last was added in 1930, and for decades the structures housed part of the ministry of

agriculture before falling vacant. In 2020, an investment group headed by Finnish developer Sampaa Lajunen bought up the parcel and embarked on transforming it into Finland's most luxurious hotel. Lajunen, who happens to be a five-time Olympic medalist in Nordic Combined (cross-country skiing plus ski jumping), told me that while there were plenty of five-star properties in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, there was a gap in the market in Finland.

"I saw demand was growing," he said. "We wanted to do American luxury with our own twist, combining it with Nordic hospitality and Finnish art and customs."

Inside, the hotel has a Narnia-like snowy, silvery color palette. Its hallways and guest spaces glitter with mirrors and blaze with chandeliers, a decor choice that serves both as an antidote to Finland's winter darkness and an homage to its frozen landscape. The three gold medals Lajunen brought home from Salt Lake City add extra sparkle from a display case outside the Bar Maria, a lounge overhung by chandeliers of thick, icicle-like crystals. Finnish artist Pia Feinik has been commissioned to fill the walls with 200 paintings and graphics: ethereal, shimmering images of birds and reindeer and denuded trees. "My inspiration was Finnish nature and the nature inside our heads," she told me. "The places that are meaningful to us." But not everything is Finnish — the hotel's staff of about 125 hails from six continents and speaks more than 20 languages.

## WHAT WE LIKE

- The hotel provides a glamorous take on Nordic hospitality from an excellent location in central Helsinki.
- Historic buildings lend charm and character to 117 luxurious rooms and suites.
- Ambition abounds in the flagship restaurant Lilja, and guests and well-heeled locals can mingle over thoughtful cocktails in the wintry-chic Bar Maria.
- The Finnish sauna tradition meets luxury wellness culture at The Maria Spa, with results that will leave you feeling refreshed and renewed.

The short December days (our 9:30 a.m. breakfasts corresponded with dawn breaking; night fell by 4 p.m.) encouraged much lolling and lazing in our 900-square-foot Maria Signature Suite, either in the deep, freestanding bathtub or under the cloud-like duvet. When we bundled up and ventured out, the inviting brasseries and coffee shops and bustling shopping streets of Helsinki's compact city center were only a short stroll away. One afternoon, indulging in a local practice, we walked along the waterfront to the hip sauna and dining complex, Löyly, for a sweat session followed by a bracing dip in the frigid Baltic.

The Hotel Maria is a namesake of Maria Feodorovna, born Princess Dagmar of Denmark in 1847, who became the penultimate Empress of Russia. Finland — then a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire — was a respite and retreat for Maria, and she opposed efforts to limit the territory's autonomy. "She was cosmopolitan and popular and a friend of Finland," said Katriina Moksi, general manager of the hotel. "Studying her story, the design team thought we would make this hotel for the modern-day Marias: strong, independent women who travel. If they come, the men will follow."

For all the Marias and their companions, here is what you need to know about The Hotel Maria:

## The Rooms



While developing the concept of The Hotel Maria, Lajunen and his team visited a dozen or so luxury hotels in London and, perhaps unsurprisingly given that city's notoriously tight quarters, came away committed to offering relatively spacious accommodations. Of The Hotel Maria's 117 rooms, 38 are suites and all, given the historic nature of the buildings, are a little bit different in size and layout. They range from basic guest rooms at around 300-square-feet to the 1,722-square-foot Imperial Suite, which will set you back €6,600 per night. Spa suites have either steam rooms or Finnish saunas, and many rooms feature distinctive architectural details dating back to the hotel's roots as a high-end barracks, like rough-hewn attic beams in the top floor rooms or the 26 miles of crown molding that was painstakingly restored by a team from France.



COURTESY OF HOTEL MARIA

## Food and Drink

Lilja, the hotel's main restaurant, spends its mornings hosting The Hotel Maria's well-executed classic breakfast buffet, and by night, it offers a chic but friendly dining experience. "We want to be one of the best, if not *the* best, hotel restaurant in Finland," Heli Mende, the hotel's commercial director, told me. "The ambition is quite high."

Diners may choose to order à la carte or to indulge in a seven-course tasting menu highlighting elevated local fare, such as reindeer sirloin from Lapland with pear and spruce shoots, burbot (a catfish-adjacent subarctic "ugly fish," as our waiter put it), and a cloudberry-and-flower dessert. The caviar menu is serious and considered, as is the array of eight distinct gin and tonics on offer at the Bar Maria alongside diverse

signature cocktails and a rogue's gallery of Champagne and liquors. For a more casual meal (salads, burgers, reindeer tartare), the hotel's Garden Terrace has an enclosed, conservatory-like setup with heated glass for winter and an outdoor courtyard patio for the warmer months.



COURTESY OF HOTEL MARIA

## Experiences and Amenities

The Hotel Maria has a tranquil spa in the centermost of its four buildings and, by this summer, will also feature a gym and a ballroom. Plans are in the works for various wellness programs, including exercise classes and a weekly running club. Next door to a boutique displaying the work of Finnish makers as well as a small collection by Fabergé, a small chapel stands ready to host intimate weddings or provide a quiet spot for reflection or prayer. An experience manager is available to arrange bespoke city tours or to facilitate more distant forays, such as a trip by helicopter to the summer opera festival in the medieval city of Savonlinna, or to connect guests with partner hotels, like the glass-roofed, aurora-oriented [Levin Iglut](#) hotel in Lapland or the [Elsanranta Saimaavillas](#) in the Finnish lake district. Day trips by ferry are also easily planned to [Tallinn, Estonia](#).

## The Spa

By far the most prominent word of Finnish origin to have achieved mainstream use in English (and other languages) is *sauna*. Finns love a good shvitz, and there are an estimated three million saunas in Finland, serving a population of 5.5 million. It's

widely agreed that the ideal location for a sauna is beside a body of water, so people can alternate between hot and cold. The Maria Spa, for a fee, offers guests access to similarly invigorating temperature extremes, with a steam room, Finnish sauna, cold plunge, jacuzzi, and warm pool. Once sufficiently flooded with endorphins, spa goers can recline around a fountain in a central courtyard and enjoy a restorative drink and snack. An array of massages, facials, and body treatments are available by appointment, featuring products from Biologique Recherche as well as Finnish clean skin care label Niki Newd. I had a signature Luminizer treatment, which combined massage with skin care and left me feeling Nordically glowy. A wellness concierge is on-site to make your loftiest dreams of well-being come true, from planning healthy meals at the hotel to setting up a session with a health coach or beauty consultant.



COURTESY OF HOTEL MARIA

## Family-Friendly Offerings

While The Hotel Maria does not offer programming specifically for children, its concierges are always happy to suggest activities and itineraries for families, and multilingual babysitting services are available. I spotted a handful of well-behaved youngsters over breakfast at Lija, and they appeared most welcome.

## Accessibility and Sustainability

“Sustainability is woven into the fabric of our luxury experience,” Mende told me. “We have a commitment to minimize our environmental impact by energy efficient lighting, cutting-edge climate control, and renewable energy sources.” This philosophy of

sustainability as integral to developing a property is in keeping with Finland's generally eco-friendly attitude. Secondhand clothing stores are so common in Helsinki that there's even one at the airport, and a sushi buffet where we stopped for lunch one day had signs warning that food wasters would be fined. The Hotel Maria's restaurants utilize locally sourced proteins and produce whenever possible and try to minimize the distance other ingredients must be shipped for reasons concerning both carbon footprint and freshness. The hotel will be applying for Green Key certification early in 2024.

Because the hotel's buildings had to be renovated according to historical preservation standards, not all the rooms or common areas (including the gym) are wheelchair accessible, though many are. Those with specific accessibility needs should chat with the reservations team before booking to ensure a comfortable stay.

## Location

The Hotel Maria is a half-hour drive from Helsinki's very civilized single-terminal airport and a 15-minute walk from the central train station. The city boasts an efficient public transportation network of buses, trams, and subway, but its commercial center and waterfront are highly walkable from the hotel. A rental car would only be an encumbrance.

## Finding the Best Value

While certainly the most overtly luxurious hotel in Helsinki, The Hotel Maria's rates — starting at €430, including breakfast, for a basic room — are not as eye-watering as those of top hotels in other international capitals. Seasonal and holiday packages are available, and because the hotel is part of Preferred Hotels and Resorts' Legend Collections, *I Prefer* members will be able to secure discounts on their stays. Credit card and AARP offers are also available through the Preferred website.

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/hotel-maria-helsinki-finland-hotel-review-8424594>