

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a purple strapless dress and black boots, stands on a wooden dock extending into a calm lake. She is holding a dark can in her right hand. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds from a sunset or sunrise, with the sun partially visible on the left. The lake's surface is perfectly still, reflecting the sky and the surrounding forest. In the background, a dense line of evergreen trees stretches across the horizon. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

VERA STAHA

Finland
through the eyes
of a foreigner

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Prologue

Finland is known as a country of thousands of lakes and islands. I came here for the first time back in 2005. And five years later I packed my bags, said good-bye to Latvia, and moved to Finland.

I've been living here ever since. Strangely, only recently I've noticed how much life here has changed me. I learned to love beer and sauna. I started enjoying peaceful evenings by the lake and long walks in the forest. I think I have always admired nature, but only after I moved to Finland I truly opened my heart to it. I don't just love nature; I respect and appreciate it now. And words "unity with Mother Nature" are not just stilted words to me anymore. They became something important, something meaningful. They became a part of who I am.

Yes, Finland has changed me. I would say I got "Finnishilized" if that's even a word. If not, it definitely should be.

My Nordic walking experience

For those of you who are not familiar with the term “Nordic walking” (Finnish: *sauvakävely*), it’s a fitness walking with specially designed poles, which are quite similar to ski poles only shorter. I haven’t heard about this type of walking till 2005 when I visited Finland for the very first time. And when I saw people walking with the poles in the middle of July... I giggled. Well... in my defense - it looked silly, funny, and unnatural.

It took me twelve years to get around the thought of trying this “dementia skiing” (forgot skis at home). In the beginning, it felt really weird. Six kilometers later I had mixed feelings but overall, I kinda liked it. So, I continued.

One cold April day I decided to take it to the next level. I wanted to check how it would feel to do this Nordic walking thing in the forest. Here I should mention that the Finnish forest is not like any other forest I’ve been to before. It has stones, big rocks, cliffs, and hills; and Nordic walking turns into Nordic climbing and jumping, which made the experience more challenging.

The two-kilometer long path took me to the dead end. I had two choices, either turn around and go back or continue walking and exploring the magical Finnish forest. Unfortunately, I didn’t know at that time that the forest is not just magical but enchanted as well. Or should I rather say “bewitched”?

Farther I went, denser the forest became. Branches of spruces were ruthlessly slashing my face; cut trees sprawled

on the ground like dead soldiers were constantly grabbing my ankles as if they wanted me to fall and lie down beside them on their battlefield. Every now and then my rubber boots plunged into some strange wet and sticky substance while making hideous smacking sounds.

Any normal person (if he is in his right mind, of course) would stop this masochistic and extreme experiment and would turn back a long time ago; back to civilization and steady ground under his feet. But I guess I'm not normal enough, he-he. The excitement that drove me, in the beginning, was replaced by unshakable stubbornness, so I continued my path. It was a matter of principle... or maybe just stupidity, who knows.

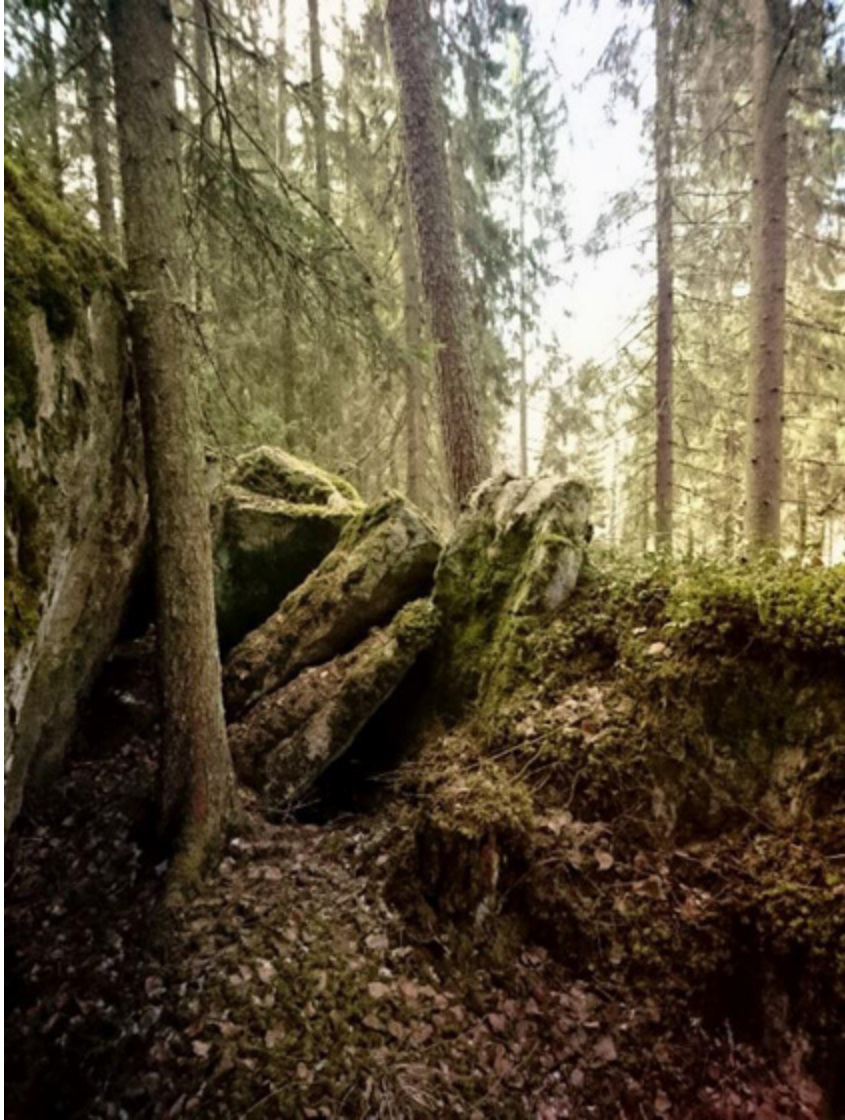
I was lost. That's what happens when you have a broken "inside navigator". Google map didn't help much either, it was all the time advising me to get back to the road. Thank you, Google! What would I do without you? Not the best forest guide I must say.



But I wasn't worried about it since it wasn't my first time being lost. It happened a lot over the years. Luckily, I always managed to find the way out. And this time was not an exception. I got out of the forest... one and a half-hour later.

I was angry, tired, and excited. And that was the moment when I realized that Nordic walking can actually be fun. I haven't had that kind of adventures since childhood and it was awesome!

One more reason why I like Nordic walking in the forest is the opportunity to make really beautiful pictures of nature.



Nordic walking in Soukka

If you are not from Finland, then you probably wonder what Soukka is.

Soukka is a Finnish district, located in the southwestern part of Espoo city. It's one of the oldest areas in Espoo.

Even though I'm not a Finn, I do love and adore nature. So, if I have to choose between life in the quiet green neighborhood or noisy overcrowded center of the city, I won't think twice.

Soukka is just 25-30 minutes' drive from Helsinki by bus, which I think is pretty close but at the same time, it seems to be far away because it's surrounded by forest.

I was aware of the fact that Soukka has beautiful sceneries and landscapes... But knowing it and seeing it with your own eyes are totally different things. And up till the spring of 2017, I haven't really realized how blessed I am to live here! I have seen some parts of the area already the previous year. I've been to the closest beach, have driven around in the car, and have witnessed the most incredible and fascinating sunsets in my life from my very own balcony:



But I was able to see and appreciate the beauty of the magnificent place that I call home only when I began my Nordic walking exercises.

Thanks to Nordic walking my childhood passion for adventures has awoken. I started wandering around, exploring “the unknown land” and every single time I was blown away by the beauty of Finnish nature. I walked to the sea using different routes, climbed the highest rocks and

cliffs, made dozens of photos, and enjoyed most breathtaking sunsets while sitting on top of the cliff.



That's how Nordic walking helped me to see what a wonderful and magical place Soukka really is.

Mini road trip to Rantapirtti

Ah, summer... My favorite time of the year! I love it so much that I can even ignore the fact that the Finnish summer is not so ideal. Most of the time it's pretty short, there are not many warm and sunny days and plenty of rainy ones instead. Finns even have a joke about it: I'm looking forward to summer... it's the nicest day of the year. Sometimes it feels sad and depressing, but I prefer to concentrate on the positive thoughts, "At least it's not snowing... in most parts of the country".

Anyways, this chapter is not about the weather. It's about a place called Kievari Rantapirtti Inn. Or "Hunter's hut", as I refer to it. You'll understand why I call it that from the photos below.

We visit it with my husband almost every time when we come to Jämsä city (located in the Central part of Finland) to visit my mother-in-law. Her home is less than 40 kilometers away from this magnificent place.

So, what is Rantapirtti? I would describe it as an outdoor activity zone, surrounded by stunning Finnish nature.



Rantapirtti arranges different kinds of safaris. Canoes and ATVs during spring, summer and autumn seasons, and sled dogs and snowmobiles in the winter. Fishing, frisbee golf, and hiking is also a possibility. And the sauna is a must! You can also rent a room, cottage, or camping area.

Here is the photo of traditional Savusauna a.k.a. “smoke sauna”:



Unfortunately, I haven't had a chance yet to do any of the things mentioned above... well, I've hoped to get a ride on a dogsled or go on a snowmobile safari, but we weren't lucky with the weather. Every time we came to Central Finland during the winter holiday there was almost no snow at all.

You might ask why we are coming here so often if we are not participating in any of those activities. The thing is, owners of Rantapirtti are old friends of my husband, so he comes here to chit-chat with them and catch up. As for me... I simply love this place! It's nice, cozy, peaceful, and relaxing. Very zen I would say. I usually take hot cacao with Cointreau (orange-flavored liqueur) and just wander around.



Even though I have been to Rantapirtti dozens of times, I don't get bored of it. More than that, every time we come here it feels like I'm visiting this place for the very first time. At least the level of excitement doesn't drop no matter how many years pass by.