

Regional and structural patterns of tourism in Finland

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In this article, general and regional patterns of tourism in Finland are compared with the preconditions for tourism development. A new model of the 'regionalism' of Finland's tourism is presented. A comparison of regional tourism demand (actual tourist flows) with preconditions and supply shows that actual tourism development does not yet correspond sufficiently to the predominant image of Finland as a destination of nature-based recreation activities. The author suggests the promotion of tourism by means of a new image of "modern periphery" and its specific application to different tourist segments and nationalities.

Keywords: tourism, regionalism of tourism, tourism flows, preconditions for tourism.

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Destination "modern periphery"

Finland has relatively good qualifications for tourism development. The strengths of the country are its physical attractiveness, modern infrastructure, political stability, and favorable geographic location in regard to wealthy European markets, i.e., the continent's tourist potential. Conditions for the emergence of real mass tourism are not very favorable, however, as the following discussion shows.

Finland has been portrayed as "the country of a thousand lakes" for a long time (CD-Fig. 1). Indeed, there are approximately 200,000 lakes as a heritage of geological history (see Tikkanen 2002), but the lakes are not the only attraction of the Finnish landscape. It would be more appropriate to speak of a special *tourism topography* (a combination of hydrography, relief, and vegetation), which in many places is quite suitable for recreational use. Finland's rich hydrography consists of lakes, lake chains, rivers, and, especially, the magnificent archipelagos of the coastline. This hydrography thus includes an abundant variety of islands and islets. Forests, beautiful eskers, and hill country complete the landscape, which in the north and east is sparsely inhabited wilderness. In this natural environment, Lapland has a spe-

cial status among tourists and hikers as a country of reindeer, midnight sun, winter sports centers, and Santa Claus. Also, the highest elevations are to be found in Lapland.

On the basis of this tourism topography, climate, a well-developed economy, and geographic location, Finland is best suited for active vacations and outdoor recreation in which nature-based activities and experiences dominate. Indeed, one could expect that the value of Finnish nature as a recreational and entertainment environment will grow as urbanization proceeds elsewhere. "Tourist Country Finland" can thus be described as a *modern periphery*: an excellent symbiosis of general peripheral attractiveness (where natural environment has been spared) and modern services and facilities available for tourists almost everywhere (Vuoristo & Vesterinen 2001).

Another strength of tourist development concerns Finland's role as one of the world's leading destinations for congress tourism. In 1999, Finland hosted 170 international congresses with 50,000 participants, according to the Helsinki-Finland Congress Bureau (Kongressiuutiset 2000). The reasons for this development include memberships in numerous international organizations, the existence of modern congress centers, high-

standard accommodations, and suitable attractions for short excursions around the congress cities (Vuoristo 1991: 92–94).

The principal center of congress tourism and other culture-oriented tourism is the southern part of Finland, the country's historical and modern core region (CD-Fig. 2). The largest cities – the most popular tourist centers – are located there. The capital city Helsinki is the leading destination of both domestic and foreign tourism. Southern Finland is also an important gateway region for tourist flows en route to Russia (Tourism statistics 1998). It has been said in fun that St. Petersburg is Finland's main tourist destination.

Regional structure of tourism

Finland is divided into five macro regions according to the general preconditions for tourism development (Artman et al. 1978) (Fig. 1.):

- 1) Southern and southwestern Cultural Finland
- 2) Central Lake Region
- 3) Ostrobothnia
- 4) Eastern Hill Region
- 5) Lapland

This division gives only a general idea of those possibilities and limitations that prevail in different parts of the country. It does not reveal much about the actual distribution of attractions and tourism facilities or the orientation of tourist flows (destination choices of tourists). In fact, major parts of the macro regions are outside the proper tourism industry. Therefore, a more exact picture of the 'regionalism' of tourism demand and supply is needed in order to understand the geography of Finland's tourism. "The inner regionalism of Finland as a tourist country" (Vuoristo & Vesterinen 2001: 113–121) is revealed by examining: (1) different regional or national models and concepts of tourism and recreational travel (Eriksen 1974: 327–348; Campbell 1967: 85–90; Gunn 1972, cit. Travis 1989: 489–491; Rognant 1990, cit. Pearce 1997: 94–95); (2) a classification of recreation areas by Clawson and Knetsch (1966: 36–39); and (3) the criteria for the selection of tourism destination development areas by Balmer and Crapo Corporation (Tourism development... 1980, cit. Travis 1989: 491).

The outcome of this analysis is a model of the regional structure of tourism in Finland (Vuoristo

& Vesterinen 2001: 118–121) (Fig. 1). The model is dynamic because the suggested regional division changes over time: for example, some attraction complexes may expand to a neighboring complex and new attraction complexes or tourist centers may emerge.

The basic elements of the Finnish tourism system are:

- Individual attractions
- Proper tourist services and enterprises
- Tourism centers: (a) popular cities where tourism is only one segment of the local economy; (b) rural tourism agglomerations, especially in eastern and northern Finland
- Tourism regions or attraction complexes (specialized regions or zones that consist of tourism centers and routes, separate attractions, and enterprises)
- Potential attraction complexes
- Travel routes, especially scenic roads with tourist services
- Highway-oriented service establishments (especially firms established particularly for tourists)
- Wilderness areas (extensive uninhabited areas in Lapland, including the country's most attractive national parks and other legal entities)

In addition, the emergence of special regional tourism clusters is also possible in the future. This means specialization in the manufacturing of tourism and recreation products around the growth poles of some important macro regions.

The geographical distribution of attraction complexes shows an orientation towards south, east, and north, while there are only scattered tourist centers in Ostrobothnia in the west (Fig. 1). The principal center, however, is southern Finland, where most domestic and foreign tourists visit. Indeed, the Lake Region, the actual "country of a thousand lakes," has so far received only a very small share of the international tourist flow, as the enclosed diagrams and maps indicate. In northern Finland things are 'better' in this respect.

The main tourist centers, the old cities in the southern part of the country, are typically located in an attractive environment and have versatile service facilities and good traffic connections. Tourism resorts complement this pattern in Central Finland, where many of the resorts are relatively new winter sports centers. In northern Fin-

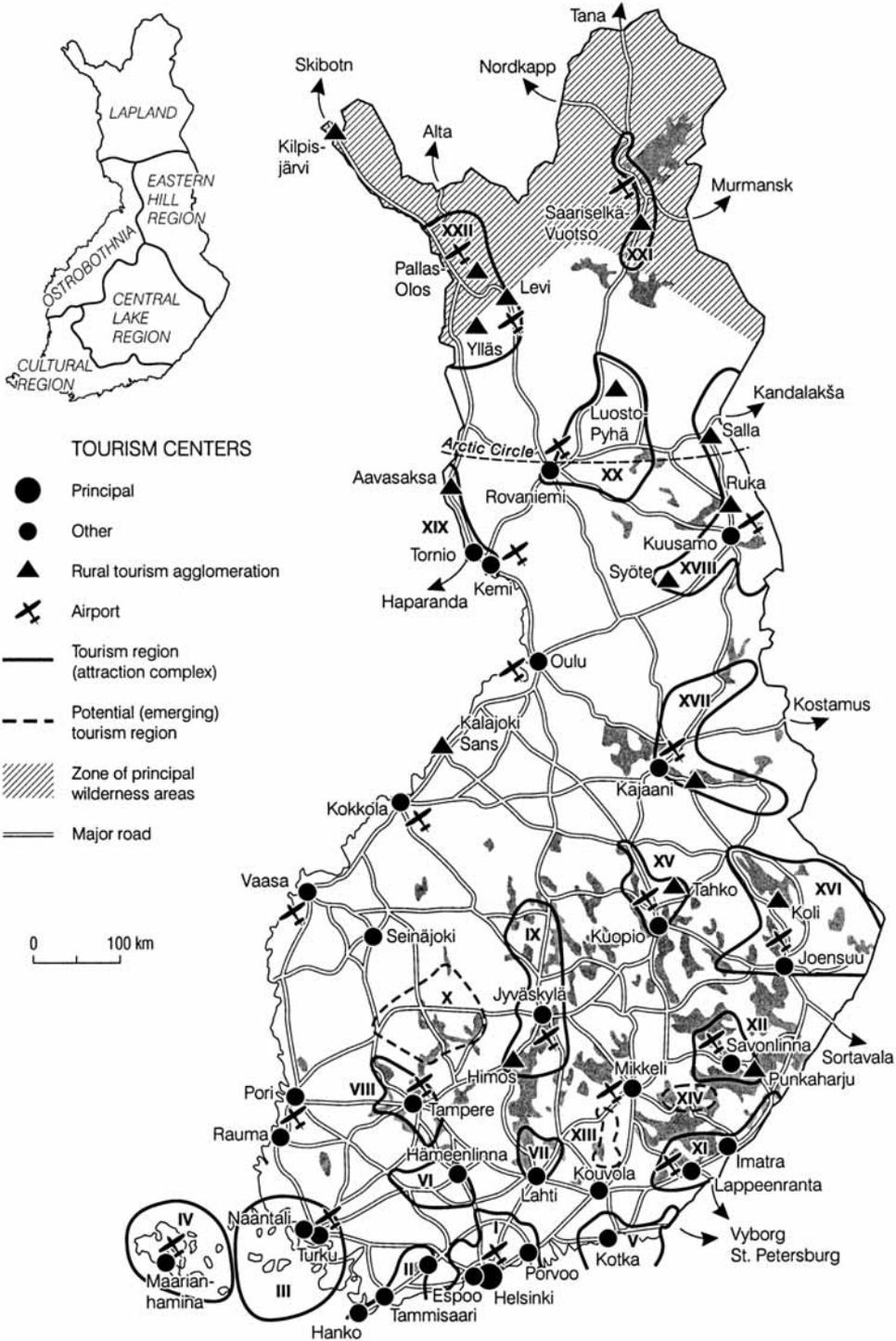


Fig. 1. Tourism regions in Finland: I = Helsinki Region; II = Hanko Peninsula and Lohja Ridge; III = Turku Archipelago Coast; IV = Åland Islands; V = Kotka–Hamina; VI = Hämeenlinna–Tammela; VII = Lahti and Southern Lake Päijänne Region; VIII = Tampere Region; IX = Central Finland; X = Lake Näsijärvi and Suomenselkä Wilderness; XI = Lappeenranta–Imatra; XII = Savonlinna–Punkaharju; XIII = Verla–Vihersalmi; XIV = Inner Lake Saimaa Region; XV = Upper Savo; XVI = Northern Karelia; XVII = Kainuu; XVIII = Koillismaa–Salla; XIX = Kemi–Tornio–Aavasaksa; XX = Rovaniemi and Luosto–Pyhänturi; XXI = Saariselkä–Vuotso; XXII = Western Lapland (Vuoristo & Vesterinen 2001).

land attraction complexes have grown in the uninhabited wilderness around emerging 'tourism towns' (Fig. 2). This development has often been 'wild' and catalytic at first – planning, control, and integrated development have followed later. Illustrative examples are Lapland's Saariselkä and Ruka where different stages of typical resort development (exploration, involvement, development, consolidation) are visible (for details, see Butler 1980; Kauppila 1995: 17-19; Vuoristo 1998: 152-162).

Region I in Figure 1 includes the capital Helsinki and its surroundings within a 50-kilometer radius. As the leading cultural and economic center of the country, this region is the most important destination of foreign and domestic tourists (cf. Fig. 3 & CD-Fig. 3). The sub-urban fringe around Helsinki

is a very popular zone of weekend tourism, which is directed to numerous outdoor recreation centers and attractive towns (especially medieval Porvoo).

Within a 30-minute drive, the Nuuksio National Park offers an introduction to the Finnish lake land and wilderness (CD-Fig. 4). Adapting the original concept of Clawson and Knetsch (1971: 36-38), this region could be regarded as user-oriented due to its proximity ("close to users"), i.e., market-oriented. About 1.1 million people live within Region I, and the demand for recreation and entertainment facilities is great both in the fringe and in the cities themselves. According to Clawson and Knetsch, areas of this type are most suitable for day trips and located "on whatever resources are available" (Clawson & Knetsch 1971: 37). In the

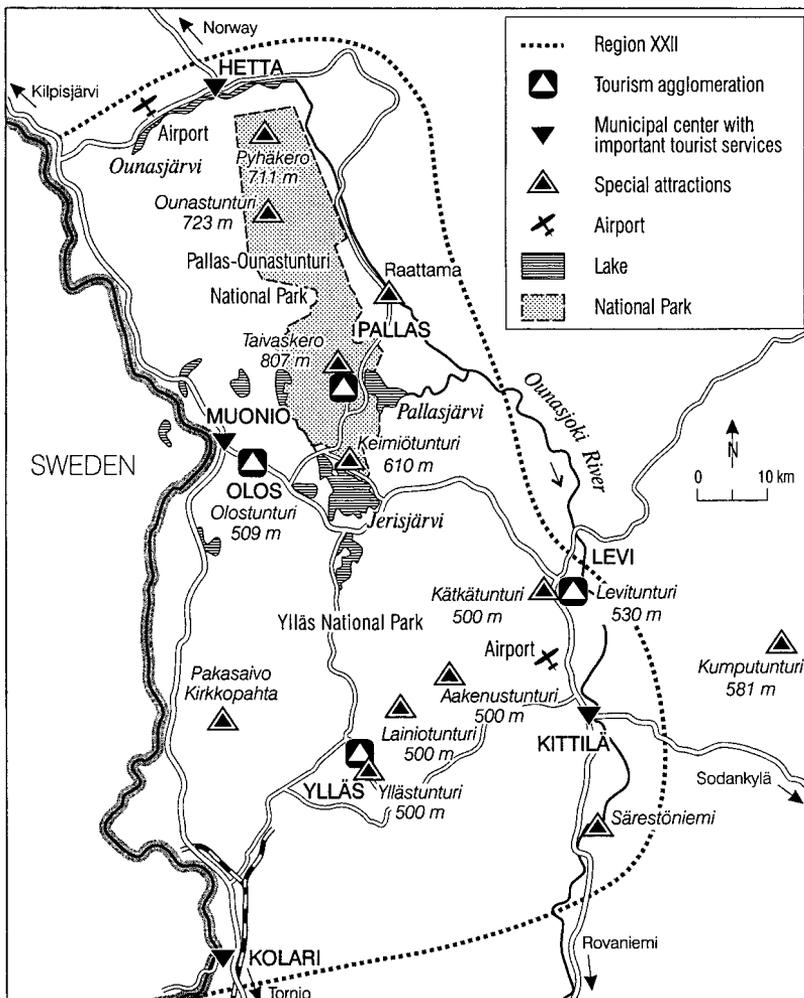


Fig. 2. An example of Finnish attraction complexes: Western Lapland (XXII). The boundary of the new Ylläs National Park is not presented on the map.

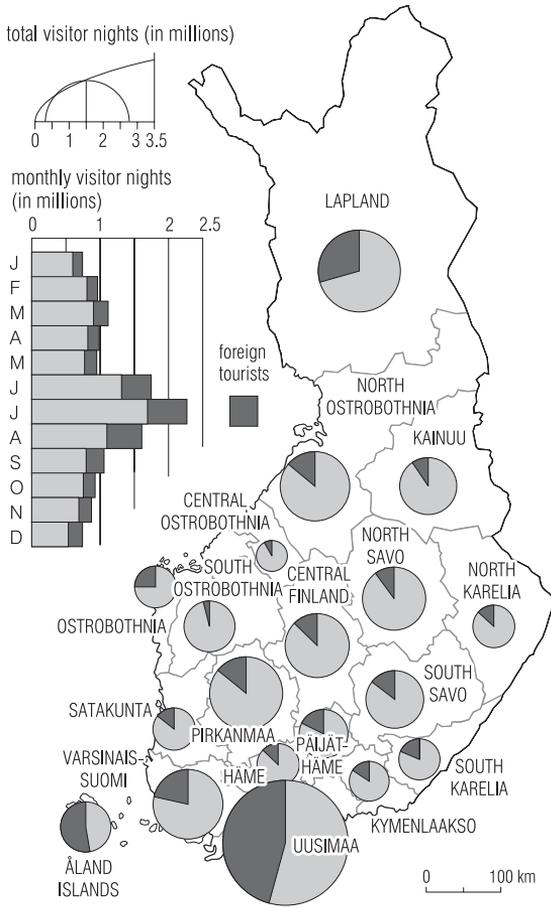


Fig. 3. Distribution of tourist nights, by region and month (Tourism statistics 1998). The pattern has not changed significantly since the late 1990s.

case of Helsinki, several rural areas and landscapes within the city's jurisdiction are suitable for recreational use, enabling lively weekend tourism.

Several of the country's most popular tourism destinations are located in this region: the amusement park Linnanmäki and the fortifications of Suomenlinna in Helsinki are among the leading attractions (over 1 million and 600,000 annual visitors, respectively). Suomenlinna was constructed under the direction of A. Ehrensvärd in 1748–1788 according to the famous bastion system ideas of a French engineer officer, S. Vauban. As a unique example of military architecture, it is one of UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage Monuments (CD-Fig. 5).

Attraction complexes in the east and the north are typically resource-based regions, which "may

be distant from most users" and "where outstanding resources can be found" (Clawson & Knetsch 1971: 37) (Fig. 2). Their strengths are comprehensive areas that include very attractive natural sights and opportunities for diverse activities. The very strong demand by people living in southern Finland has made these peripheral suppliers of tourism facilities economically profitable – in spite of the short, nationwide economic depression in the early 1990s. Winter sports have become particularly popular, which has leveled seasonal variation remarkably. Many foreign tourists have also discovered northern Finland, partly because of the important travel routes connecting Lapland to the neighboring countries.

The regions of southern and central Finland, excluding Helsinki and its surroundings, represent an intermediate type. Regions of this type "must not be too remote from users" and they should locate "on best resources available within distance limitation" (Clawson & Knetsch 1971: 37). Some local demand generally exists, but the largest cities form the main market of these regions. Advantages are the availability of space and other resources for tourism development. The proportion of foreign tourists of all visitors varies considerably. Southwestern coastal regions are more popular than the interior. In the eastern frontier region particularly, the number of Russian tourists stands out (Vuoristo & Vesterinen 2001: 165, 203, 325–326).

A special feature of Finnish tourism and recreation is associated with *second homes*. Most Finns own, or have an opportunity to use, a vacation cottage during holidays and weekends. These second homes were previously called "summer cottages," but today they are very commonly used through the year. Almost 460,000 cottages are dispersed almost all over the country, but a clear concentration is visible along the southern and southwestern coastlines and in the southern parts of the Lake Region (CD-Fig. 6). Private apartments and log cabins in the tourism agglomerations of northern Finland represent a special type of vacation homes. In fact, a majority of the accommodations offered to tourists in the large resorts of Lapland and northeastern Finland are privately owned. Generally, second homes are of a considerable local importance because of the direct and indirect income effects they create in the economy of rural municipalities (see Vuoristo & Arajärvi 1990).

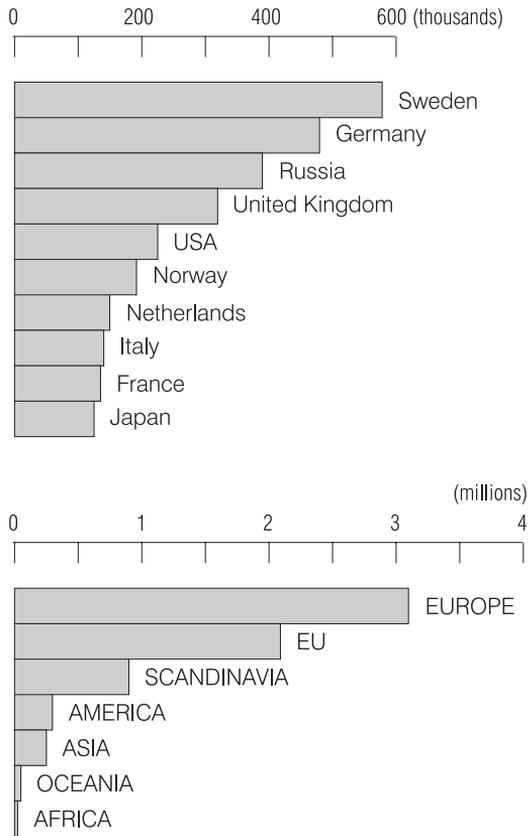


Fig. 4. Visitor nights spent in Finland, by country of origin and by macro regions, in 1999 (Tourism statistics 2000: 49).

A destination for European tourists

Foreign tourists choose Finland as their destination for different reasons, which vary somewhat according to nationality (CD-Fig. 7). Several motives are connected to the natural environment. Russian tourists especially have a shopping motive, the Japanese are particularly interested in cultural attractions and events. Foreign tourists as a whole, however, prefer urban attractions to natural environments in spite of the growing pull force of Lapland. Thus, Helsinki is by far the most popular tourist center where both domestic and foreign visitors meet.

3.8 million foreign visitor nights were registered in Finland in 1999 (24% of all visitor nights in accommodation establishments) (Fig. 4). The number of visitor arrivals was 1.8 million (Tourism statistics 2000: 49).

Most of the foreign tourists came from Sweden, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom. Outside of Europe, important countries of origin were the USA and Japan, both of them significant sources of tourism income due to these travelers' generous spending habits. Naturally, the share of Europe is considerable, approximately 80 percent of all foreign visitors to Finland. Neighboring Sweden and Russia and the world's most significant single country of origin, Germany, dominate the incoming tourism, but Finland attracts an increasing number of tourists from Southern Europe as well.

Some nationality-bound orientation is visible in the geographical distribution of foreign visitors. By way of example, the majority of Norwegians and Swedes travel in northwestern and western Finland, while the Germans favor the Lake Region and the eastern Hill Region. The Russians prefer eastern Finland as well. Geographical proximity thus explains partly these nationality-bound orientations.

Finland's balance of tourism expenditure and tourism receipts is persistently negative (cf. CD-Fig. 8 & CD-Fig. 9), because the Finns are among the top 40 tourism spenders in the world (ranking 33rd in 1997 in WTO's statistics) (WTO tourism statistics 2000: 16). Tourism's share of Finland's gross domestic product (GDP) has normally been only one percent (4% of the exports) (STV 1999: 217).

Seasonal features and trends

Due to its climatic location, Finland is a country of four seasons. There are no extreme weather oscillations that could restrict noticeably the development of tourism. Yet, the weather conditions are unstable to some extent, and long sunny and warm summer tourism seasons or sunny and moderately cold seasons fitted for winter sports cannot be guaranteed. However, the preconditions are sufficient for two main tourism seasons, summer and winter, and for a short fall period between them (Fig. 3 & Fig. 5). This *ruska* season in the fall is famous for the bright colors of vegetation as the plants prepare for the forthcoming cold. Lapland is the main destination of this tourism.

The influence of the greenhouse effect on Finland's tourism development is difficult to predict. According to some recent scenarios, it is to be

feared that winter tourism in South and Central Finland will be damaged. Thus, the value of Lapland and the eastern Hill Region as major winter recreation areas will rise. On the contrary, the summer season in the south is expected to become longer and warmer.

The duration of the seasons varies considerably in different regions. In southern Finland, the summer season lasts from May to August, but in Lapland only from June to August. In contrast, the northern winter is very long, over six months approximately. In other words, when summer has already begun in Helsinki, the winter sports season still continues in the north. The winter season in the eastern Hill Region is also long, at least five months in duration. Traditionally, the peak of the winter tourism period has been reached during February, March, and April, but two minor peaks have emerged recently: The so-called *first snow weeks* in November and the Christmas season that lasts beyond the New Year. The former peak reflects the growing popularity of winter sports and cross-country skiing (CD-Fig. 10), the latter is also an expression of the lure of Santa Claus. Santa's attractiveness is exploited in the Santapark complex at the Arctic Circle outside the city of Rovaniemi. Already before the opening of the theme park, Michael Pretes (1995) analyzed the Finnish "Santa Claus industry" as an expression of postmodern tourism development.

The rise of special 'snow business' activities and innovations in Finland is based on the possibilities associated with winter and snow. Examples of several innovations within this sector are mighty snow castles (sizeable snow constructions that contain hotel rooms, churches, etc.) and 'ski tubes' which allow skiing even in the summer. Manufacturing industries have employed the benefits of the 'snow business': some automobile companies test their new models in the extreme winter conditions of northernmost Finland and choose tourist hotels as their base for many weeks in the mid-winter, which normally is off-season.

In spite of the growing winter tourism, summer remains the most important season. The Finns, who form the vast majority of all tourists in Finland, spend much of their holidays during the summer months, especially in July. Likewise, most foreign tourists visit Finland during the summer. Thus, the significance of winter tourism so far focuses on the smoothing effect on the seasonal variation. Also the relatively short fall season levels seasonal variation, but the emergence of the

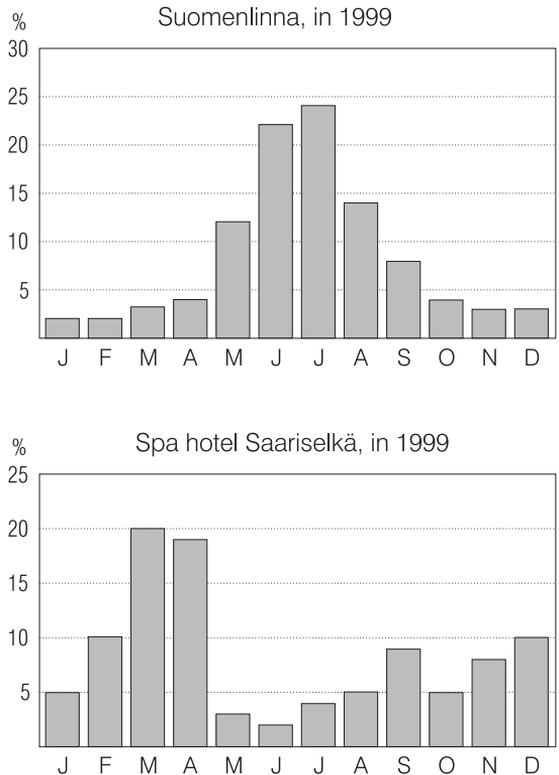


Fig. 5. The seasonal rhythm of tourism varies according to the geographic location and characteristics of each destination. Mid-summer is the top season in the Suomenlinna fortifications, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Monument in Helsinki (above). The busiest seasons of the spa hotel Saariselkä in Lapland are late winter months, early fall (ruska season), November, and December (the *first snow weeks* and Christmas–New Year) (below).

bright ruska colors in the natural vegetation depends on weather conditions. Business tourism also levels seasonal variations because its focus remains outside the summer season. Roughly every third foreign tourist comes to Finland for professional reasons.

A nature destination?

Actual tourist flows and the geographical preferences of foreign tourists regarding destinations do not correspond well to the afore-mentioned assumption about Finland's image as a nature-based tourism country, even though outdoor activities are not available in those urbanized countries

where the foreign visitors come from. Most foreign tourists, however, visit southernmost Finland and the largest cities. Elsewhere, their proportion of all tourists is relatively small, particularly in the Lake and Hill Regions, where preconditions for summer tourism are the best.

The conclusion is that the suggested definition of Finland's image as a "modern periphery" that is most suitable for active outdoor holidays may be correct, but its validity remains to be proved. Finland is still a potential tourist country whose capacity is not in full use. One reason for this is quite simply that the greatest demand for outdoor recreation and activities is still forthcoming. The lure of northern Europe will gain strength as the pressure on nature-based vacation destinations by the urban masses increases in the most urbanized societies that exhaust their own facilities. This also means a growing demand for sustainable tourism facilities, which Finland is able to develop in abundance for both summer and winter conditions. There is, of course, some contradiction between sustainable tourism products (reindeer or dog safaris, boating, fishing, rafting, hiking, etc.) and such forms of 'techno tourism' as the skidoo safaris that are increasingly popular. Environmental factors have been taken into consideration by planning an extensive network of skidoo routes which covers the most important tourism regions but avoids ecologically valuable environments, such as national parks, special areas included in the nature conservation program of the European Union (Natura), and other sensitive zones better suited to eco-tourism.

It is probable that the future marketing of Finland as a tourism destination will have a twofold focus. The first emphasizes selected nationalities, as stated in the recent strategic plans of the Central Tourism Board of Finland (MEKin uudet... 2000). The second underscores specialized market segments who prefer the type of nature-based activities Finland can offer, partly in cooperation with the neighboring countries within the Barents area and the Baltic Sea Region (see Agenda 21... 1997; Vuoristo 1998: 201–204). A general image of Finland is not a sufficient tool for marketing the country to foreign tourists (Vuoristo 1998: 178). Besides this, carefully designed, specific images and market brands are necessary in order to make different activity groups or segments choose the "modern periphery" as their destination.

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