APPLE VACATIONS
For the Best Vacation Deals visit
applevacations.com/inquirer

LARISSA MILNE

TRAVEL

From Arctic Circle hiking to wild-berry-picking, from the Helsinki archipelago to Lapland, one experience made them feel like honorary Finns: The sauna.

PLUNGING INTO FINLAND

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

The small wooden cottage nestled among the birch trees in Lapland looks quite inviting. However, the building overlooking a crystal-clear lake isn't a house; in typical Finnish fashion, the entire structure is a sauna.

As we enter, the scorched air hits our bare skin like a coarse wool blanket. Michael winces, looks at the thermometer, and declares bravely, "It's only 75 degrees, we can handle that." Then we realize the temperature is in Celsius. A quick bit of clumsy mental math converts the temperature to about 165 degrees Fahrenheit — yikes, you could practically smoke some baby back ribs in that heat.

We had come to Finland not quite knowing what to expect. Because it's considered to be part of Scandinavia, so named due to the Scandes mountains running through this extreme northern section of Europe, it often gets grouped together with Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Although a small sliver of northwest Finland pokes a finger into the Scandes foothills adjacent to Sweden and Norway, the country actually shares its longest border with Russia to the east, which has also influenced the country over

See **FINLAND** on N3

The Arctic Circle Hiking Area, top, outside Rovaniemi, Finland, offers stark beauty and plenty of wild berries for picking during 20-plus hours of midsummer daylight. The rare cloudberry, left, in the Arctic north, home to nomadic Finnish Laplanders and the reindeer they follow. MICHAEL MILNE

Finland's berries, islets, forts, saunas

FINLAND from N1

the years.

For centuries, Finland was part of the kingdom of Sweden, a period that ended in 1809 when Russia gained control of it. That era of dominance lasted until Finland gained its freedom in 1917. The result is a land sprinkled with bits of both countries, yet with a fiercely independent character all its own.

The influences of foreign rule are most prevalent in Helsinki, a major world capital that is relatively new by European standards; its oldest building dates to 1757.

The small port town grew in the 19th century as Russian rulers recognized its strategic importance for protecting the waters approaching St. Petersburg.

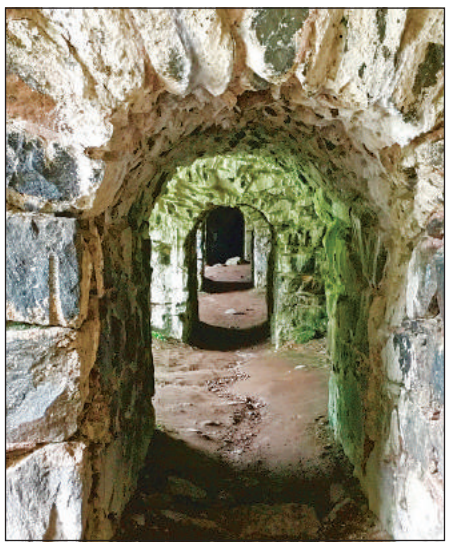
"The multifaceted nature of Finland's background comes into focus just off the coast," says historian Maarit Nieminen. She has joined us for an island-hopping trip through the country's history. "Each of our critical periods are represented here in the Helsinki archipelago."

Twenty minutes later, our ferry ride from town brings us to Vallisaari Island, a former military compound dotted with fortifications built by the Russian Army in the 19th century.

Abandoned for decades, the island reopened this year as a national park and nature reserve. Now, visitors can walk along the Alexander Trail in the footsteps of the Russian emperor, visiting both man-made military sites and natural sites.

The underground bunkers in which the soldiers lived remain. Visitors climbing above the linden trees onto the ramparts above them are afforded a rare view of the Gulf of Finland, illustrating why the Russians considered the site so vital.

Within a stone's throw of Vallisaari sits a cluster of tiny islets housing the Fortress of Suomenlinna. Known as the "Gibraltar of the North," it was built in the 18th century when Finland was under the dominion of Sweden. No longer needed for defensive purposes, the UNESCO World Heritage site includes the former Swedish fort, along with several museums and a small village that is occupied year-round. It's a popular spot for artisans, many of whom display their wares in workshops built into the old stone walls of the fort.



Passageways beneath the Fortress of Suomenlinna, from the 1700s. MICHAEL MILNE

Sauna near Arctic Circle: "Get sweaty and then jump into the lake." Santa's Adventures

IF YOU GO

What to do

- **Food tours of Helsinki:** Heather's Helsinki Ltd. www.heathershelsinki.com
- **Wilderness sauna and Arctic adventures:** Jarkko Leinonen, www.santasadventures.fi
- **Finland/Helsinki tourism:** http://www.visitfinland.com
- **Arctic Circle / Lapland tourism:** http://www.visitrovaniemi.fi

Where to stay

- **Helsinki lodging:** Sokos Hotel Torni: https://www.sokoshotels.fi/en/helsinki/sokos-hotel-torni;

  Hotel Katajonnaka: http://www.hotelkatajanokka.fi/en/
- **Rovaniemi lodging:** Arctic Light Hotel http://www.arcticlighthotel.fi

In summers, the islands off Helsinki are covered with wild berry plants, giving us further insight into Finland: Berries are a big deal here.

"Combine a sparsely populated country, a short but intense growing season, and 20-plus hours of daylight, and you've got berries of all sorts growing in profusion," says Heather Domeney. She is leading us through the streets of Helsinki on a food tour where the markets are overflowing with them, while several street corners host pop-up farm stands piled high with bilberries (wild blueberries), raspberries, even the elusive cloudberry.

"To really appreciate Finland," says Domeney, "you have to head north and go berry-picking."

Perched at the edge of the Arctic Circle, the town of Rovaniemi serves as the capital of Finnish Lapland and provides more than its share of wild berries. It is also home to nomadic tribes — and the reindeer they follow — who have historically roamed back and forth in northern Scandinavia and Russia, unfettered by national boundaries.

Irene and Ari Kangasniemi are artisans who share the traditions of their Lapland way of life.

In true Laplander tradition, they live off the land in a solid wooden house hand-built by Ari.

The voluble Irene explains the intricate role of reindeer in the Lappish world, which involves alpha and beta males and a few other twists of nature. We content ourselves with her summation: "The antlers fall off naturally each year, and we don't eat Rudolph!"

Surveying the surrounding landscape studded with birch trees and berry bushes, she says, "Nature is my supermarket. I get 70 percent of my food from the forest: berries, mushrooms, moose, and birds." Finland is an "everyman-rights" country where people can pick berries and mushrooms in the forest and even stray onto private property to do so.

Emboldened by Irene's encouragement, we strike off in the Arctic Circle Hiking Area in search of berries. We apply the insect repellent she thoughtfully provided — mosquitos are almost as plentiful as the bilberries, although, as Irene philosophically observes, "they are the ones that pollinate the berries!"

After an hour or so, we have foraged up a respectable crop, enough to make a tasty dessert.

Getting into the spirit of all things Finnish, one challenge remains: the sauna.

To Finns, the inventors of sauna (pronounced SOW-nuh), taking in the dry heat is almost a religious experience practiced daily by many people. The true Finnish experience goes beyond anything we might try at our health club back home.

Jarkko Leinonen brings us to this lakeside cottage for our evening immersion in Finnish culture, which includes a wilderness sauna followed by a dinner of fresh salmon cooked over an open fire.

After stoking up the sauna's wood fire, he reminds us, "Sauna is best taken naked. Stay in until you get sweaty and then jump into the lake. Repeat that a few times for the full experience."

We're just north of the Arctic Circle. This should be, um, invigorating.

We put off the cold water for as long as possible, but after about eight minutes, the heat overwhelms us, and the chilly lake starts to look pretty good.

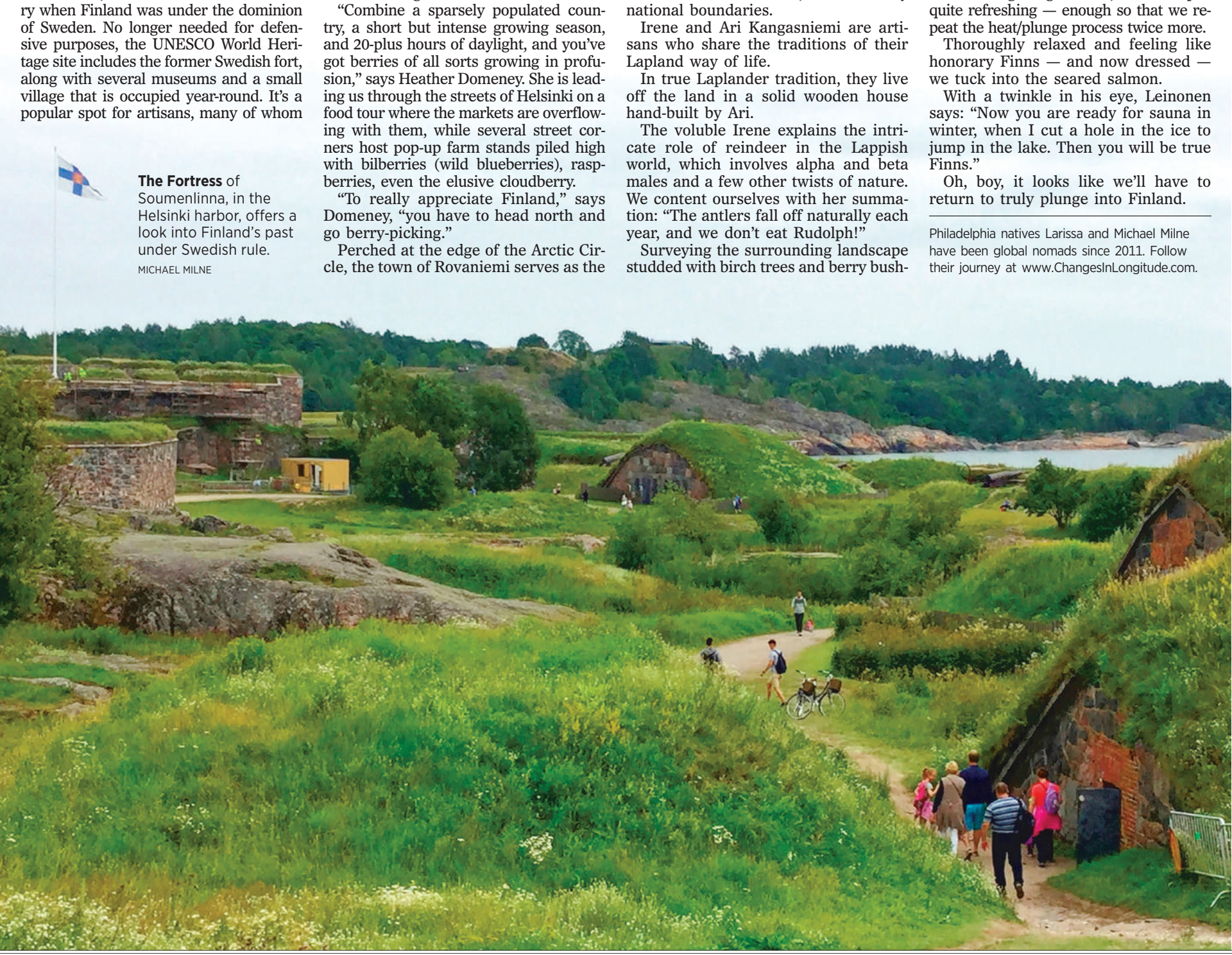
We sprint (sort of) down the dock and take the plunge. Fortunately for us, the long hours of summer sunlight keep the water from getting too cold, and our dip is quite refreshing — enough so that we repeat the heat/plunge process twice more.

Thoroughly relaxed and feeling like honorary Finns — and now dressed — we tuck into the seared salmon.

With a twinkle in his eye, Leinonen says: "Now you are ready for sauna in winter, when I cut a hole in the ice to jump in the lake. Then you will be true Finns."

Oh, boy, it looks like we'll have to return to truly plunge into Finland.

Philadelphia natives Larissa and Michael Milne have been global nomads since 2011. Follow their journey at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.



The Fortress of Soumenlinna, in the Helsinki harbor, offers a look into Finland's past under Swedish rule. MICHAEL MILNE