



Helsinki Travel Seminar 2025

Summary of the event

This summary has been compiled using artificial intelligence. It may contain minor factual inaccuracies.



Helsinki's moment is now

Nina Vesterinen

Matkailupäällikkö, Helsingin kaupunki

A Forerunner in Sustainability

Nina Vesterinen opened the official speeches at the Helsinki Tourism Seminar with a strong message: Helsinki is currently experiencing an exceptionally significant moment in tourism. The city has become an international example of sustainable tourism, earning recognition from both industry experts and travelers. This status did not emerge by accident but is the result of long-term development work, where responsibility, accessibility, and quality of life have been central.

Vesterinen reminded that Helsinki is not just efficient and functional but also warm-hearted and hospitable. This unique combination is an important differentiator in the global competition, where destinations compete not only with services but also with values and attitudes.

The Latest Outlook Promises a Good Tourism Summer

The first quarter of 2025 saw a record number of registered overnight stays in Helsinki. Compared to the 2019 record, there was a 5% increase, and 9% more than the same period in 2024.

International tourism, in particular, is growing strongly. In March, overnight stays by foreign visitors increased by an impressive 20%, with the most significant markets being the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. A record was also set for domestic travelers during the first quarter.

This summer, Helsinki will be enlivened by numerous events — from a major neurology congress to concerts, sports events, and festivals. Helsinki's culinary scene is also internationally attractive — high-quality, responsible, and inclusive.

Air passenger volumes are expected to grow compared to last year. Based on flight booking data, most travelers are expected from Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

A Story That Needs to Be Told

Vesterinen emphasized the importance of bold communication and a clear identity. Helsinki has all the necessary building blocks, but the story is still unfinished. The city must dare to choose its angle and tell the world what makes it special. This story combines nature, culture, architecture, design, and a human-centered urban lifestyle.

She gave special attention to the role of tourism in city development. Tourism is not just a business — it also impacts the city's structure, image, and everyday life. Therefore, it must be included in land use and strategic planning.

Success Built Together

The speech ended with a call to collaborate. Vesterinen stressed that Helsinki cannot succeed alone — shared will, a common vision, and continuous dialogue among stakeholders are needed. Helsinki has already achieved a lot, but taking the next step requires a unified voice and bold decisions.

Now is the time when Helsinki can claim its place on the global tourism map more strongly — not just as a part of Finland, but as its own clearly distinguished and meaningful destination.

The Helsinki logo consists of the word "Helsinki" in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed within a black-outlined speech bubble shape that points downwards.

At a New Cruising Altitude

Turkka Kuusisto

CEO, Finnair

From Dual Crisis to Growth

Turkka Kuusisto described Finnair's journey from crisis to sustainable growth, and its central role in enabling Finland's and Helsinki's accessibility. Finnair faced two major crises in recent years: the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of Russian airspace. These events eliminated a competitive advantage that had taken years to build, particularly in Asia-bound traffic. Kuusisto stressed that recovery wasn't guaranteed — it required fast, systematic decisions and a reorientation of the company's strategy.

The company is now back on the path to profitability. Its flight network has been rebuilt to serve Europe, Asia, and the US in a balanced way. Finnair now flies to around 100 destinations and has regained its position, especially in Japan and North America. Kuusisto highlighted that Finland still has excellent international flight connections, and Finnair plays a key role in providing them — making growth in tourism possible.

A Gateway to Finland — and the World

Kuusisto pointed out that Finnair brings travelers to Finland from a broad region. Routes include major European metropolises such as London, Paris, Milan, and Berlin, as well as major cities in Asia and the US. This makes Helsinki a gateway not just to Finland but to Northern Europe more broadly. Despite changes in the geopolitical landscape, Finnair's ability to connect East and West remains a strength.

He emphasized that airports are more than just transit points — they are part of Finland's infrastructure, an economic engine, and a foundation for tourism. Together, Finnair and Helsinki-Vantaa Airport form a platform around

which international tourism can grow. As tourists stay longer and spend more, the importance of air travel increases.

Success is Built Through Collaboration

In conclusion, Kuusisto highlighted the importance of the tourism ecosystem. Airlines alone cannot solve tourism's challenges — nor can they solely benefit from its growth. Close cooperation is needed between the city, tourism organizations, hotels, event organizers, and other players. Every successful travel experience begins and ends with smooth transportation, but it's built on a complete experience where everyone plays their part.

Collaboration isn't just about practical coordination — it's about recognizing shared goals. Helsinki can aim for tourism growth only if accessibility is maintained and if the industry supports itself strategically. Finnair is ready to help build this future — not just as a transport provider, but as part of a shared tourism strategy.

**Finland still has
excellent air
connections to
the world**

Helsinki

The Value of Safety in Tourism

Charly Salonijs-Pasternak

CEO, Nordic West Office

A World in Turmoil and Seekers of Safety

Charly Salonijs-Pasternak addressed Finland's and Helsinki's tourism in the light of global geopolitical changes. He emphasized how international instability, conflicts, and crises are not just headlines — they increasingly influence people's travel decisions. When the world is stormy, travelers seek stability, safety, and peace — and that is precisely what Finland and Helsinki can offer.

According to Salonijs-Pasternak, tourism is influenced by major political currents: the increase of wars and conflicts, value-based divisions, and growing feelings of insecurity. Simultaneously, stricter border controls, changes in visa policies, and restrictions on airspace usage are reshaping tourism infrastructure. Amid all this, Finland stands out as an exceptionally stable and well-organized society — where things simply work.

Finland Works — and That's Worth Showing

Salonijs-Pasternak underlined that Finland's biggest tourism asset is the reliability of everyday life.

"Finland. It just works." — this simple message captures what travelers truly appreciate. In Finland, tap water is drinkable, healthcare works, the police are trustworthy, and there's warmth even in winter. These are not self-evident in many countries. Strong societal trust, high-quality basic services, and general safety form a foundation for the visitor experience.

Helsinki is not just the capital — it is also a symbolic gateway to Finland. Salonijs-Pasternak emphasized that Helsinki can serve as a safe harbor — a place to escape daily uncertainty, noise, and chaos. He suggested themes for

tourism marketing such as:

"Escape the headlines. Embrace the forest. The calm. The peace."

These encapsulate what Helsinki can offer in an increasingly restless world.

Safety Is a Feeling — Not Just a Statistic

However, a traveler's experience is not built on facts alone. Salonijs-Pasternak reminded that safety is, above all, a feeling. It forms before the trip, strengthens during the visit, and remains as a lasting memory. That's why marketing Finland and Helsinki should emphasize the sense of security that travelers can genuinely feel here.

From a climate change perspective, Finland also offers stability: no extreme weather, no wildfires, no drought-induced crises. Nature is part of everyday life — not a threat.

Salonijs-Pasternak did not settle for listing threats — he saw the geopolitical situation as an opportunity. When tourism is based on dreams, hopes, and escaping the everyday, Finland can offer a safe and responsible response to that longing. He encouraged the entire sector to embrace this message and boldly build the future of tourism on the foundation of safety and stability — not just with numbers, but with emotion.

Safety is not just a statistic — it is a feeling that begins before the journey and stays after it ends

Helsinki

Momentum in Nordic Tourism

Jens Mathiesen

President & CEO, Scandic Hotels Group

Growth in the Nordics Exceeds Expectations

Jens Mathiesen examined Helsinki's potential as part of the broader Nordic tourism market. His message was clear: Nordic tourism is experiencing a strong upswing, and Finland — particularly Helsinki — can benefit from this development much more than it currently does. In the Nordics, demand is growing faster than supply. While in many markets hotel occupancy has already returned to pre-pandemic levels, Helsinki still lags noticeably behind.

According to Mathiesen, this is not a sign of failure, but an opportunity. Helsinki has room to grow. Hotels are ready, infrastructure is in place, and interest in the region is increasing. What's needed is more visitors — and that requires a joint investment in accessibility, marketing, and experience development.

Helsinki Needs a Stronger Role

Mathiesen emphasized that capital cities play a special role in Nordic tourism. They serve as international entry points to the whole region and shape first impressions of the country. In this role, Helsinki still has a lot to prove compared to cities like Copenhagen or Stockholm.

He called for a more strategic approach: Helsinki needs a clearer profile as a tourist destination. Simply being “the northern alternative” is not enough — a strong narrative is required, one that

speaks to both leisure and business travelers. Based on Scandic's experience, visitors value high-quality infrastructure, diverse cultural attractions, and a safe, well-functioning urban environment — all things Helsinki already offers but may not communicate effectively enough.

Mathiesen also encouraged the city to be proud of its achievements and showcase them boldly in the international arena. He pointed out that Helsinki has received recognition for sustainability and design — two themes that are especially attractive to modern travelers. Now is the time to make these core parts of the city brand.

Don't Waste the Investments

One of the key messages of the speech focused on the hotel sector's recent investments. Hotels in Helsinki have been significantly built and renovated, but these investments will not pay off unless visitor numbers increase. That's why Mathiesen urged the entire industry to collaborate more closely: attract more events, congresses, and tourists who use city services and fill the hotel beds.

He believes Helsinki has excellent potential to grow into a much more significant tourism city — not only nationally, but also on the Nordic and European levels. However, this requires purposeful work and belief that Helsinki can be one of the region's engines — not just a stopover.

Helsinki has room to grow — hotels are ready, now we need more visitors

Helsinki

Turning investments into revenue

Anni Vepsäläinen, CEO, Suomen Messut

Niko Karstikko, Co-founder & CEO, Bob W

Joonas Nurmi, CCO & Co-Founder, Aerocom Aviation Oy

Moderator: Nina Vesterinen, City of Helsinki

Three Perspectives in the Same Direction

The panel discussion focused on making tourism investments tangible — how to ensure they generate real value for Helsinki and its businesses.

All panelists represented different areas of tourism — aviation, events, and hospitality technology — yet they emphasized the same core themes: long-term commitment, anticipating customer needs, and the importance of collaboration. The discussion pointed out that tourism's value chain is long and multifaceted, and its impact is reflected widely in the city's vitality, employment, and international appeal.

Entrepreneurship, Quality, and Boldness

Joonas Nurmi highlighted the growing demand for luxury tourism and the opportunities it brings. His company, Helsinki Citycopter, sees how customers increasingly value high-quality, personalized service. According to him, Helsinki could position itself as a modern luxury destination where exclusivity stems from peace, nature, and a functioning society — not extravagance. However, stories are needed to support investments, making experiences desirable.

Anni Vepsäläinen stressed the importance of events. Large-scale events and trade fairs bring massive numbers of visitors to Helsinki and directly impact demand for hotels, restaurants, and other services. Yet the event industry needs predictability and city support, especially for improving facilities and accessibility. She emphasized that events generate ecosystems, which require long-term investment — but provide multiple returns.

Niko Karstikko presented the accommodation industry perspective. The Bob W concept combines home-like comfort with hotel services in a digital-first model. He stressed how traveler expectations evolve rapidly and that Helsinki should diversify its accommodation offerings. Karstikko also emphasized data-driven management — the effects of investments must be measurable and justified to ensure continuity.

Shared Goals and Shared Responsibility

The panel's collective message was clear: Helsinki needs boldness but also discipline. The city and the tourism industry must align on common goals where investments are not isolated actions but part of a comprehensive strategy.

We must invest in stories, not just infrastructure

Tourism's importance to the city's vitality is undeniable — but it must be supported with visibility, recognition, and impactful action.

Finally, panelists reminded the audience that while investments often mean financial inputs, they are above all a signal of belief in the future. Investing in tourism is investing in the city's image, people's well-being, and Helsinki's international identity.

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Growth Through PR

Soila Lehkonen

Head of Brand and PR, Helsinki Partners

Positive Recognition Is a Strategic Choice

Soila Lehkonen, Brand and PR Director at Helsinki Partners, emphasized the role of international visibility as a driver for tourism growth in Helsinki. According to her, recognition is not just a by-product of good services and experiences — it is a deliberate strategic choice. Without international attention, there is no interest. Without interest, there are no growing visitor flows — nor local benefits.

Lehkonen presented Helsinki Partners' new strategy for 2025–2027, which aims to attract people and investments to the city that will leave a lasting impact. At its heart is the “Happy Helsinki” concept, where marketing and PR actions are planned around how they foster a positive city image, shareability, and impact.

The goal is to make Helsinki approachable, joyful, and meaningful as a destination for international audiences.

The Multilayered Power of Positivity

Helsinki has been ranked the happiest country in the world for eight consecutive years — and this message resonates. However, Lehkonen stressed that factual communication alone is no longer enough. Emotional, shareable actions are needed. This is where the “Acts of Happiness” idea comes in: small and large actions that reinforce perceptions of friendliness, openness, and quality of life in Helsinki.

Campaigns like the Nordic Happiness Summit serve to spark curiosity and strengthen Helsinki's image. Lehkonen emphasized that the most important aspect of communications is that they are easy to understand, easy to share — and genuinely reflect the city's values.

A positive brand image isn't built through campaigns alone — it requires ongoing collaboration between businesses, the media, and the city.

Impact Is Measured Together

While PR is centered on emotion, Lehkonen also underlined its measurable outcomes. Helsinki Partners tracks success through indicators such as the economic value of international overnight stays, city recognition, and the rise in willingness to relocate to Helsinki.

PR is not a standalone activity — it's an essential part of the overall strategy to position Helsinki as a model city for sustainable growth.

Happy Helsinki is not a slogan — it's a strategic decision

Collaboration is seen as a key driver of impact. The city cannot act alone — it needs a network of partners who share the same vision. Shared campaigns, partnerships, and stories create visibility that multiplies opportunities for both tourism and investment.

Lehkonen concluded her speech with a clear and practical call to action:

“Let's stay in touch!”

This was not just an invitation to connect, but to co-create a city image that both resonates and reaches global audiences.

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Helsinki as the Engine

Kristiina Hietasaari

Kristiina Hietasaari, Visit Finland

The Weight of the Capital Region

Kristiina Hietasaari, Director at Visit Finland, delivered a strong and clear message about Helsinki's role as the engine of Finnish tourism. According to her, the success of international tourism is not evenly distributed across Finland — the capital region plays a significant role, and therefore, its development and strengthening should be prioritized from a national perspective.

She pointed out that the capital area functions not only as a destination but also as a gateway to the rest of Finland. It's the first stop for many international visitors, from which their journey may continue to Lapland, the Lakeland, or the

She stated that Helsinki's role as a destination could and should be even larger. It can act as a trailblazer, developing sustainable tourism, testing new solutions, and highlighting Finnish characteristics in a way that resonates with international travelers. From Visit Finland's perspective, Helsinki is a strategic partner, whose success radiates throughout the entire country.

That's why Hietasaari encouraged deeper partnerships and co-marketing — not just for campaigns but also in service development, investment efforts, and sustainability innovations. Together, we can create experiences that not only attract visitors but leave a lasting impression and inspire recommendations.

Helsinki is not just a destination — it is Finland's shop window

archipelago.

This makes Helsinki more than just a city — it is Finland's shop window and interface to the world. This is why its tourism offering, communication, and accessibility are crucial for the entire country's tourism.

Attraction Built Together

Hietasaari stressed that Finland's tourism success isn't created by Visit Finland, the city, or individual companies alone. Instead, ongoing collaboration is required to build a comprehensive image of Finland as an attractive, safe, and high-quality destination. Helsinki plays a central role here — and bears a major responsibility.

Sustainable Growth Is the Future

Hietasaari emphasized that growth does not have to conflict with sustainability — quite the opposite. Helsinki and Finland can grow because they take environmental impact, social responsibility, and cultural authenticity seriously. These are no longer just competitive advantages but baseline expectations from today's travelers.

She described Helsinki's unique position: compact enough to be manageable, yet diverse enough to be exciting. This combination offers a great platform for developing regenerative tourism — tourism that benefits both the visitor and the local community.

Her speech concluded with a powerful idea:

Helsinki is not in a supporting role in tourism — it is the main stage where Finland's image as a travel destination is defined. And for that reason, it deserves full attention, support, and ambitious goals.

Helsinki

Helsinki Needs Clarity and Courage

Frank Cuypers

Founder, Place Generation

The Paradox of Brand Building

Frank Cuypers, an internationally known city branding expert and founder of Place Generation, addressed a fundamental question in his talk: Who is Helsinki, really? In his view, the city's tourism brand has become stuck behind recognizable themes but has not yet succeeded in crystallizing its identity in a way that is both internationally appealing and locally authentic.

According to Cuypers, Helsinki is in a situation where the city's true essence — its "DNA" — is hidden behind communications and campaigns. He warned that if the city doesn't define its own identity, others will — and that risks losing both authenticity and credibility. The key to branding, he emphasized, is a coherent story that comes from within: from what residents value and how they experience their city.

Bringing Residents' Voices to the Fore

Cuypers presented the results of an identity study on Helsinki that utilized both place DNA analysis and resident workshops. The study revealed several contradictions: Helsinki is urban yet peaceful, communal yet introverted, ambitious yet reserved. These are not problems, he said, but potential strengths — they are what make Helsinki unique.

However, he pointed out that current marketing fails to highlight these traits. For example, Helsinki's design expertise and cultural offering are internationally interesting, but are often communicated too blandly or bundled into a generic "something for everyone" strategy.

True interest, he said, comes from

distinctiveness and emotion, not from how many things a city can offer.

From Passive Role to a Bold Voice

One of Cuypers' core messages was that Helsinki must move from being "Finland's gateway" to being an independent actor. The city cannot continue building its reputation merely as an extension of the national brand — it needs to find its own voice and present itself to the world as a capital that stands on its own. He noted that many other Nordic cities — like Gothenburg, Oslo, and Stockholm — took this step years ago. Helsinki should not fall behind.

Helsinki has all the assets – but its story isn't being told in a way that moves people.

Cuypers also said Helsinki's communications need more feeling. Currently, the city's marketing is often factual and carefully constructed — but fails to leave an emotional mark. He issued a direct challenge: "Don't turn the underdog into a mainstream mutt."

Finnish modesty is endearing, but it's not enough if the goal is global visibility. Now is the right time to update both the content and tone — and to do so with the help of residents

Helsinki

Community-based tourism as a tool for regenerative development

Pia Lange Christensen

CEO, Visit Århus

A Liberating Perspective: The Tourist Is Not a Customer, but Part of the Community

Pia Lange Christensen, CEO of Visit Aarhus, presented the Danish city's award-winning ReThinker Volunteers model — an internationally recognized example of community-driven and regenerative tourism. At the core of her talk was the idea that, at its best, tourism is not a one-way service transaction, but a multidirectional encounter where tourists, locals, and stakeholders enrich each other's experiences.

A great place to live is a great place to visit.

In Aarhus, this concept is implemented through volunteer engagement. In addition to the city's tourism organization, over 2,200 volunteers operate in events, welcome cruise visitors, and guide tourists. They are not just assistants — they are the faces and storytellers of the city, people who want to share their hometown with pride and presence. This not only enhances the visitor experience but also increases local pride and participation.

Value for All Parties

Lange Christensen shared compelling research on the impact of the model. Volunteers report gaining a stronger local connection, sense of community, and meaning from their involvement.

Visitors, in turn, feel genuinely welcome — not by authorities or service providers, but by people. Businesses benefit from this atmosphere indirectly, but significantly: tourists are more likely to return, recommend their experiences, and use local services more confidently.

The city's strategic choice to support volunteering is also financially smart. Even small investments yield wide impact, as volunteer work injects positive energy into the tourism environment. This model doesn't require massive infrastructure investments — it is built on people who make the city feel alive and welcoming.

Regenerative Tourism Is Born from Participation

According to Lange Christensen, this community-based approach is a prime example of regenerative tourism — where tourism does not just reduce its burden on the environment or society, but leaves behind something better. The ReThinker model is more than a practical tool — it is a mindset: participatory, empowering, and human.

She challenged the audience to consider how something similar might work in Helsinki.

To what extent do tourists feel part of the community?

How can locals be involved in co-creating the tourism experience?

Only by answering these questions can we move from sustainable tourism to truly regenerative tourism — the kind that increases well-being across all levels of city life.

For the Baltic Sea

Jesse Marttila

CEO, Natura Viva

Regenerative Tourism Is More Than Sustainable

Jesse Marttila, CEO of Natura Viva and recipient of the 2024 Tourism Company of the Year award, gave a straightforward and practical talk about the future of tourism — not just from a sustainability perspective, but through the lens of regeneration. According to him, tourism can no longer settle for reducing harm — it must bring added value to nature, communities, and the regions it operates in. This is the core idea of regenerative tourism: to leave behind a better world.

Natura Viva has built its entire operation around the wellbeing of the Baltic Sea. The company not only operates in a marine environment but actively improves its condition — for example, by organizing beach cleanups and participating in conservation programs. Marttila emphasized that every tourism operator should consider how their actions could actively improve the environment, not just protect it.

Everyday Action and Value-Driven Business

Marttila's speech was marked by honesty and realism. Regenerative tourism isn't about lofty declarations — it's about concrete, everyday choices. Natura Viva doesn't advertise itself as a responsible brand — it simply does things that speak for themselves.

The company's entire business is built around outdoor activities in nature: kayaking, cycling, and hiking, where customers encounter nature directly — without filters or intermediaries.

And this direct encounter brings responsibility.

According to Marttila, it's impossible to remain indifferent to the environment when standing knee-deep in the sea or observing a seal in the wild. You can't market nature without being committed to it.

That's why he believes tourism companies have both a unique opportunity — and a duty — to be pioneers in a new kind of thinking. Companies can show that responsibility is not a burden but a strength: it attracts the right kind of customers and builds long-term trust.

Real Actions, Not Just Stories

Marttila also challenged the tourism industry to engage in critical self-reflection. Too many actors talk about responsibility but fail to adjust their behavior accordingly. Genuine action is not a PR strategy — it's a business logic.

For Natura Viva, this includes using renewable energy, collaborating with local businesses, and guiding customers toward responsible choices — for example, taking care of recycling, transport, and environmental awareness even before the customer arrives.

Marttila emphasized that regenerative tourism is not a finished model, but a continuous process. It requires openness, a willingness to experiment, and above all, the courage to change entrenched practices.

Natura Viva's story is proof that even a small operator can make an impact — and that truly responsible tourism is born when someone decides to do more than required.

Regenerative tourism is not a campaign — it is a decision to act differently

Helsinki

The City's Role Is to Enable

Jukka-Pekka Ujula

Helsingin kaupunki

Tourism Is Vitality

Jukka-Pekka Ujula, City Manager of Helsinki, addressed tourism as part of the city's broader vitality policy. According to him, tourism is not an isolated industry, but a force tightly connected to the city's lifestyle and growth. Tourism brings energy, jobs, business, and community — but also international attention, which strengthens Helsinki's appeal to talent and investment.

Ujula emphasized that tourism enhances local identity and makes visible the values that Helsinki represents. From the traveler's perspective, the city is an experience — but for the resident, it is home. Reconciling these two dimensions is the city's role in developing tourism.

The City as an Enabler

Helsinki aims to double international tourism by 2030, but growth cannot rely on quantity alone. According to Ujula, the city's most important task is to ensure that growth is sustainable and supports the broader wellbeing of the city. This requires investments in three core areas: accessibility, business conditions, and networked collaboration.

In terms of accessibility, the city's task is to develop transportation infrastructure and improve smooth mobility within the city. A tourist's experience begins at the airport or harbor and continues on streets, public transit, and signage. Comfort is not just a luxury — it is part of competitiveness.

For business conditions, essential elements include fast and predictable permitting processes, flexible zoning, and open dialogue between the city and the business sector. Ujula said the city must be agile and forward-looking to remain an attractive investment environment — also from a tourism perspective.

Tourism brings life and energy to the city — it is part of the city's vitality, not a separate sector

The third key area is collaboration. Ujula stressed that new ideas are born at intersections. The city's role is to build platforms where various actors — tourism businesses, cultural organizations, digital sectors, and event organizers — can meet and co-create new kinds of tourism offerings. Joint marketing, such as campaigns between Visit Finland and Helsinki, are examples of this thinking.

A Direction Toward Sustainable Growth

In conclusion, Ujula summarized the city's vision for the future of tourism: growth is not an end in itself, but a means. The goal is to create sustainable growth that delivers value both to tourists and residents. This requires the city to be bold in setting ambitious goals and persistent in implementing them together with stakeholders.

Tourism is no longer just a service sector — it is increasingly part of the city's strategic development. Vitality is born from encounters, and a city that knows how to open its doors outward — but also look inward and strengthen its own identity — is, according to Ujula, heading in the right direction.

Helsinki

Into the Unknown

Ed Gillespie

Serial entrepreneur, writer and futurist

Courage in the Face of Uncertainty

Ed Gillespie's speech was at once a wake-up call, a challenge, and a depiction of possibilities. As a futurist and author, he addressed tourism in a broader systemic context: how can we build meaningful tourism in a world that is simultaneously in crisis and full of potential?

Gillespie emphasized that uncertainty is not something to avoid — it's something we must

You can't fix uncertainty – but you can change your relationship to it

learn to live with, and even thrive within. The future cannot be controlled, but we can approach it with curiosity and constructiveness. He invited the audience to develop “uncertainty tolerance” and moral imagination — the ability to envision alternative futures that are both ethical and viable.

Regenerative Thinking in Tourism

At the heart of his talk, Gillespie introduced the idea of regenerative tourism — not just sustainable, but restorative. Tourism should not merely reduce harm, but also generate good: strengthening ecosystems, increasing wellbeing, and leaving a positive trace in communities.

This, however, requires new thinking. Gillespie sharply criticized how the tourism industry often clings to the rhetoric of “efficiency.” He referenced Jevons' Paradox: when resource use

becomes more efficient, overall consumption often increases — not decreases. So the answer is not doing the old better, but doing something truly new.

He urged tourism actors to look in the mirror and ask: What are we really doing? Are we building the future or fleeing the present? In his view, regenerative tourism is not optional — it is an imperative. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality are not distant threats — they are here already. And yet, we have the power to influence the outcome.

Stories That Change

Gillespie spoke passionately about storytelling and its power. Fear alone, he said, should not be the only motivator — we also need hope, humor, and human-sized perspectives. Stories must be true, but they also need to shake us and move us.

He believes Helsinki is in just the right place: a city that has already done a lot, but has the potential to be a true forerunner.

Gillespie's message to Helsinki was simple but powerful:

Don't hide your candle under a bushel.

If Helsinki truly wants to be a leader in responsibility, it must dare to say it out loud — and act accordingly.

He even encouraged the audience to consider bold, even radical campaigns like:

“Don't fly to Finland.”

At first, it may sound provocative — but it opens up real conversations about important issues.

Helsinki

Speakers' Advice for Developing Tourism in Helsinki

Be bold and break boundaries!

Don't settle for cautious messaging — Helsinki deserves an ambitious and distinctive voice.

Create Helsinki's own authentic story.

Define what Helsinki truly is — and tell it with emotion, not just facts.

Communicate Helsinki's safety.

Safety is a competitive advantage — make it part of your messaging and the visitor experience.

Engage residents.

Citizens are the city's most important brand ambassadors — include them in development efforts.

Look for networks and collaborate.

Success is built together — operate in open networks across sectors.

Stay approachable to city employees.

The city's role is to enable — they are your support, not your obstacle.

Invest in recognition, not just visibility.

The goal isn't just to get noticed — but to be remembered.

Build stories that move people and stay alive.

We need shareable, human-sized narratives — not just campaigns.

Develop tourism that leaves a positive legacy.

Strive not only for sustainability, but regeneration — tourism should benefit both the environment and the community.

Use data and measure impact.

The value of investments and the effectiveness of communications only grow if they are tracked systematically.

Bring Helsinki's culture, design, and architecture to the forefront.

These are strengths that international visitors already love.

Reduce timidity — add humor, emotion, and curiosity.

Helsinki can be serious and strong — but also warm, playful, and vibrant.

What Does Helsinki Already Have?

Safety and Functionality

Helsinki is seen as a stable, reliable, and well-organized city — in a world where these qualities are increasingly valuable (Salonius-Pasternak).

“Finland. It just works.” serves as a concrete and competitive message.

Sustainability

Helsinki is internationally recognized as a leader in sustainable tourism (Vesterinen, Hietasaari).

The city consistently ranks at the top in global sustainability indexes (e.g., GDS Index).

Culture, Design, and Urban Nature

The city offers high-quality and diverse attractions: design, architecture, food culture, archipelago, and events.

International travelers appreciate these themes more than Helsinki itself communicates (Cuypers, Lehkonen).

Tourism Ecosystem and Willingness to Collaborate

The city plays an active enabling role (Ujula), and tourism stakeholders show a strong willingness to cooperate (panel, Suomenlinna, Natura Viva).

There are numerous examples of networked activity and community-mindedness in Helsinki..

Where Does Helsinki Stumble?

Unclear and Cautious Identity

Helsinki has not yet clearly or boldly told its own story (Cuypers).

The city's communication tends to be generic: nature, design, and sustainability are mentioned — but without emotion or a clear angle.

Low Recognition Relative to Quality

Helsinki does many things right, but few know about it.

Recognition does not match the actual offering (Hietasaari, Lehkonen).

The brand image is fragmented, and marketing communications are often too cautious.

Accessibility and Flight Connections

The number and price of flights are a significant barrier to tourism growth (Kuusisto, Hietasaari).

Finnair's role is important, but the geopolitical situation presents challenges.

The Trap of Sustainability Alone

Helsinki is already a global leader in sustainability, but now it should take the next step: toward regenerative tourism (Gillespie, Marttila).

The city must dare to take a stand, make choices, and set an example for others.