



# Helsinki Travel Seminar 2026

# Summary of the event

This summary was compiled using AI assistance from the event transcript and presentation materials. It may contain minor factual inaccuracies.



# Tourism as the Engine of Growth

## Daniel Sazonov

Mayor, City of Helsinki

### Strong Recovery and Engine of Vitality

In his opening speech in the dignified setting of the University's Great Hall, Mayor Daniel Sazonov emphasized that for Helsinki, tourism is not just a single industry, but a central part of the entire city's vitality and economic success. The past few years have been challenging, first due to the pandemic and then because of Russia's war of aggression. Despite these blows, Helsinki has shown exceptional resilience. Last year's nearly five million registered overnight stays and a ten percent increase in international visitors prove that we have successfully surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Helsinki's role as the engine of growth for the whole of Finland is undeniable, as nearly 40 percent of the country's overnight stays are concentrated in the capital region.

### Customer Experience and Sustainability as a Competitive Edge

While the overnight stay figures are impressive, the most important metric is the visitor experience. Sazonov pointed out that Helsinki regularly beats competing Nordic capitals—Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Oslo—in quality comparisons. Tourists find Helsinki not only safe but also highly accessible and international, offering excellent value for their time. At the same time, the city has managed to steer its growth sustainably. Helsinki being ranked as the world's most sustainable tourism destination for the second consecutive time in the GDS Index is proof that the city's long-term work on sustainability yields concrete results that are also noticed globally.

### Looking Toward Year-Round Potential

The mayor named the development of year-round tourism as the biggest strategic goal

for the future. Helsinki is already known as a wonderful summer city that offers high-quality restaurants, vibrant urban culture, an archipelago, and world-class design. However, future growth lies in the ability to attract visitors outside the high seasons. Sazonov sees enormous commercial potential not only in the light of spring and the colors of autumn but also in the so-called "dark exoticism" of midwinter. This is not exclusively Lapland's domain; the capital can also turn it into a highly attractive concept.

### Building the Future Together

Finally, Sazonov emphasized that while the city can provide the framework, the true tourism experience is created by local businesses and professionals. The future of Helsinki's tourism is built in strong cooperation with stakeholders in the tourism, restaurant, and event sectors. The city is committed to supporting the success of these industries and being an active partner in joint planning and innovation, ensuring Helsinki feels vibrant and attractive to both visitors and its own residents.

**"A living, attractive, and growing tourism sector in Helsinki is truly built together."**

Helsinki

# Record Satisfaction Lays the Foundation for Growth

## Nina Vesterinen

Tourism Director, City of Helsinki

### Data-Proven Record Satisfaction

Tourism Director Nina Vesterinen highlighted the difference between public discourse and actual tourism data. Although the media sometimes questions the city's offerings, the numbers tell a completely different story: visitors' willingness to recommend the city (NPS) is approaching an impressive 60. Among other things, over 40 museums, thousands of restaurants, and tens of thousands of events ensure that there is plenty to do. When Helsinki is a traveler's main destination, satisfaction with services is top-tier, and nearly nine out of ten visitors would recommend it to others. Criticism is often directed at things that are difficult to control, such as the weather, which Vesterinen noted is often simply a matter of dressing appropriately.

### Bright Prospects and New Tourist Streams

Current future prospects are highly encouraging. The number of air passengers is expected to grow by over nine percent, and international leisure travel in particular is anticipated to increase, for example, from the United States, Germany, and Japan. The upcoming summer's "super weekend" will simultaneously bring large and small events, international congresses, and cruise visitors to the city. Vesterinen also rejoiced that Helsinki will receive a record number of so-called "turnaround" cruises this year, where passengers start and end their journey here. These cruise passengers bring significant added value by staying in the city for one or more nights before or after their sea voyage. The geopolitical situation creates its own challenge to the good prospects.

### Happiness and Experiences All Year Round

Vesterinen also presented a draft of the new Tourism and Events Development Program - "Happiness, Experiences, and Vitality All Year Round". At its core is the strategic goal to extend visitors' length of stay and build strong year-round growth. In the future, marketing and product development will be increasingly guided by Helsinki's special strengths—architecture, design, maritime nature, and food and sauna culture. Studies have shown that Helsinki's theme of happiness and the concept of a good life resonate very strongly with international travelers, providing an excellent foundation for product offerings and marketing messages.

### Sustainability and Accessibility as Prerequisites for Growth

A successful tourism city also requires investments in digital discoverability and physical accessibility. Vesterinen emphasized that growth is not pursued at any cost. Tourism development must be sustainable, not only ecologically but also socially and culturally. Engaging residents and fostering a positive attitude toward tourism is critical to avoiding the tourism pressure that troubles many European cities. Tourism must make Helsinki a genuinely better place to live and do business for locals as well.

**"We need to increase international attractiveness with the themes of a happy Helsinki."**

**Helsinki**

# From Sustainability to Regenerative Resilience

## Guy Bigwood

CEO, Global Destination Sustainability Movement

### Energy Shocks Require New Thinking

In his keynote, Guy Bigwood, CEO of the Global Destination Sustainability Movement, challenged the traditional concept of sustainable tourism. In a world shaken by continuous geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions, and energy shocks, merely preserving the existing state or minimizing environmental harm is no longer enough. Historically, the tourism industry has been built on cheap energy and affordable materials, but these pillars are now crumbling rapidly. For example, the steep rise in the prices of aviation fuel, plastics, and food is forcing the industry into a radical systemic shift, where energy independence and local supply chains become a matter of survival.

### Circular Economy and Energy Efficiency as a Competitive Edge

Bigwood emphasized that sustainability and the circular economy have increasingly become clear economic competitive advantages, not just matters of reputation. For instance, operators who have transitioned completely to renewable energy and radically minimized waste have succeeded not only in lowering their operational costs but also in increasing customer satisfaction and improving their profits by double-digit percentages. Globally, only about seven percent of materials are recycled, meaning the potential for resource wisdom is vast. Companies capable of optimizing their material flows and energy efficiency through AI and new technologies will capture future market shares.

### The Era of Greenwashing is Over

Although Helsinki has been ranked as the world's most sustainable tourism destination

in the GDS Index for the second time, staying at the top requires increasing transparency. Bigwood warned that consumers are growing more skeptical of environmental claims, and the EU's Green Claims Directive, entering into force in the autumn, will significantly change the rules of the game. Under this directive, vague claims like "most responsible" must be replaced with precise data verified by an independent third party—such as exact figures on renewable energy usage and carbon footprint reduction. The standard of compliance will rise, particularly for industry pioneers.

### Transition to Regenerative Tourism

Finally, Bigwood introduced the concept of "regenerative" tourism. While sustainable tourism aims to cause as little harm as possible ("do no harm"), regenerative tourism actively strives to leave the place and the local community in a better state than before the visitors arrived. This means tourism that revitalizes nature, strengthens social structures, and creates genuine added value for local residents. This shift in mindset requires new design, strict measurement, and compelling, sustainable storytelling.

**"Regeneration is a design principle. It doesn't happen by accident."**

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# Architecture and Design as Distinguishing Factors

## Kaarina Gould

CEO, Finnish Architecture and Design Museum Foundation

### Architecture and Design as the Soul of Helsinki

Kaarina Gould, CEO of the new Architecture and Design Museum Foundation, reminded the audience that in few countries is design as deeply embedded in the national DNA as it is in Finland. From a tourism perspective, Helsinki is already a highly relevant and rational choice: it is safe, functional, and an easily accessible cool-climate destination. However, true international competitive advantage and growth stem from distinctiveness—the emotional impact that unique art, culture, and architecture leave on a visitor. Gould emphasized that design is the key to ensuring that tourists do not merely visit the city, but fall in love with it and return.

### The New Museum and the Development of Makasiiniranta

Helsinki's most significant future tourism asset is the new Architecture and Design Museum, scheduled to open in the early 2030s. The new museum building will write an entirely new chapter in Finnish modernism and will be prominently located in Makasiiniranta, creating stunning new postcard landscapes. The project is not just a monument; it serves as a catalyst for revitalizing the entire South Harbour area. The new blocks, restaurants, and meeting places rising around the museum will reshape the shoreline, opening it up as a shared living room for both locals and tourists, offering experiences right at the street level.

### Alvar Aalto's Legacy and Everyday Aesthetics

Another major upcoming milestone is the potential addition of Alvar Aalto's architectural

sites to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Because five of the thirteen nominated sites are located in Helsinki—including the newly renovated Finlandia Hall—a positive decision would bring a massive boost in international attention. Such an elevation in status acts as a magnet for cultural tourists. Gould stressed that Finnish design is nonetheless not just luxury confined to museums; it is a seamless part of everyday life in Helsinki—schools, metro benches, and streetscapes—making it an exceptionally interesting export product.

### The Importance of Storytelling and Collaboration

Telling stories about this everyday aesthetic remains an underutilized opportunity. Foreign journalists might be just as fascinated by an ordinary Finnish milk carton as by valuable design furniture. Gould challenged the entire tourism sector to join as partners with the new museum, so the power of design can be harnessed more broadly for the benefit of the whole ecosystem. By pooling resources, Helsinki can strengthen its position as an international cultural city and create experiences that turn visitors into lifelong advocates for the city.

**“Helsinki’s tourism has a massive potential to be a strong combination of relevance and distinctiveness.”**

Helsinki

# Tactical Design Creates Vibrant Urban Spaces

## Judith Portier

Founder, Studio Overall

### The Power of Tactical Design in Urban Spaces

In her presentation, Judith Portier, founder of the Montreal-based Studio Overall, highlighted how temporary and tactical design can act as a powerful catalyst for revitalizing urban spaces. She shared her experiences from a project on Wellington Street in Montreal, where a temporary urban "Sugar Shack" was created on the street to make Canadian maple syrup culture accessible to city dwellers who couldn't travel to the countryside. This initially small-scale but visually appealing intervention grew over the years, ultimately leading to a summer pedestrianization experiment for the entire street, making it one of the coolest streets in the world according to Time Out magazine.

### Designing for Safety and Distance

The COVID-19 pandemic taught Portier and the entire industry new dimensions of spatial design. When indoor gatherings were banned, the importance of public outdoor spaces skyrocketed. Strict two-meter social distancing rules forced designers to be creative: Portier's team used safety distances as a starting point for their design, creating visually striking installations—such as giant two-meter forks—that guided people's behavior safely yet invitingly. This proved that even strict regulatory norms can be turned into aesthetics that support community and well-being in urban spaces, even during difficult times.

### From Guidelines to Lasting Value

Based on these agile experiments, the City of Montreal drafted a best-practices manual for temporary urban design. It evaluates

design quality through six criteria: resilience, environmental responsibility, economic performance, culture and identity, equity, and health and well-being. Studio Overall has subsequently applied these lessons from temporary design to permanent projects as well, such as in the Port of Montreal area. There, a 26-kilometer-long safe walking route was built for residents and tourists, featuring structures along the way that serve not only as signage but also as storytellers of the site's industrial identity and future.

### Design Engages and Creates Meaning

Portier's core message was that design can create not only safety and functionality in public spaces but also deeper emotional bonds. When a landscape is given its own voice and story through design—whether it's the history of a port or a massive ice-climbing polar bear—it transforms into a personalized landmark. The true superpower of design in tourism lies in the fact that when spaces are thoughtfully designed and people feel welcome in them, they want to cherish and protect them.

**"How can our designs not only be read, but felt, so you feel you are in an overall experience throughout your journey."**

Helsinki

# Design at the Intersection of Everyday Life and Tourism

## Kaarina Gould & Judith Portier

Moderator: Riku Rantala

### Everyday Design as Helsinki's Trump Card

In the panel discussion, Kaarina Gould and Judith Portier, alongside moderator Riku Rantala, reflected on the role of design as part of Helsinki's appeal. Portier highlighted her first impressions of Helsinki, noting that the city's dedication to design is visible on almost every street corner. The Oodi central library left a particular impression on the Canadian guest, not only due to its architecture but also because of the way it integrates people into a living urban space. The discussion underscored the realization that, unlike in many other destinations, Finnish design is not elitist but is closely tied to the functional everyday life and well-being of the residents.

### The Need for an Experimental Culture and Tactical Design

When comparing the urban planning of Montreal and Helsinki, the power of tactical and temporary design was brought to the forefront. Montreal has over 20 years of experience with temporary urban experiments, through which spaces can be tested, iterated, and modified based on resident feedback before permanent investments are made. Helsinki also has successful examples, such as the development of the Teurastamo area and various experiments to revitalize public squares. However, the panel encouraged the city to continue and expand this kind of agile experimental culture—even tolerating mistakes—to ensure that urban space is utilized as effectively and flexibly as possible.

### Resident-Centric Design as the Foundation of Tourism

The panelists unanimously agreed that the best tourism strategy is based on catering to the needs of the residents. The regenerative tourism mentioned earlier by Guy Bigwood is strongly linked to design: when an environment is designed to primarily serve locals—by providing comfort, safety, and everyday aesthetics—it automatically attracts tourists who increasingly want to experience destinations like locals. This inclusive approach creates a sense of community ownership, where both residents and visitors care about their surroundings and want to take care of them.

### Small Actions Toward a Better Experience

Finally, the discussion turned to concrete areas for development. Suggestions included better utilizing the broader potential of the Market Square as a stronger hub for local crafts and food culture, as well as making signage and street names clearer and more multilingual from a tourist's perspective. Although Helsinki is already an internationally respected design city, continuously re-evaluating spaces and making small visual tweaks can significantly extend visitor stays and improve the tourist experience, regardless of the changing weather conditions.

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# The Untapped Potential of Maritime Helsinki

## Vili Tuomisto & Ville Wäänänen

Team Manager, City of Helsinki & Lonna Moments

### Unique Maritime Infrastructure

In the final segment of the morning session, the focus shifted to the potential of maritime Helsinki. Vili Tuomisto, Team Manager for the City of Helsinki, reminded the audience that over 300 islands and a vast, continuously developing coastline make Helsinki an entirely exceptional maritime capital, even on a global scale. The city's growth is increasingly directed toward the shores, as old port and industrial areas are transformed into open urban spaces and coastal routes. Tuomisto presented the city's strategic action plan, consisting of ten concrete goals aimed at improving maritime services and accessibility, whether it involves boating, swimming, or streamlining permit processes for entrepreneurs.

### A Simple Equation Reveals Tourism Potential

The entrepreneurial perspective was provided by Ville Wäänänen from Lonna Moments, who presented a simple yet arresting formula: tourism potential equals the number of visitors multiplied by the average purchase. If either of these is zero—as is the case, for example, on Pihlajasaari, where very little money is spent on services—the economic potential also remains zero. Although visitor numbers for Suomenlinna have recovered to the pre-pandemic level of one million, the figures for other stunning island destinations, like Lonna or Vallisaari, still lag far behind their true capacity, slowing down the development of the entire value chain.

### Courage in Pricing and Productization

Wäänänen challenged the Helsinki tourism sector to engage in self-critical reflection:

currently, the industry is plagued by a fear of pricing and constant pressure to sell services as cheaply as possible. He called for significantly more courage in pricing and high-quality productization, drawing inspiration from the success stories of Lapland tourism, where international customers are willing to pay for high quality. The archipelago should not strive to be merely an affordable recreation area, but an international-level experience that operators dare to invest in and market assertively to the right target audience.

### The Archipelago as the Primary Attraction

The common goal must be that the archipelago and the sea are not just a nice addition to Helsinki's offerings, but serve as the primary reason for a tourist to choose Helsinki as a destination. Just as Copenhagen has managed to profile itself as a maritime city without a proper archipelago, Helsinki holds a genuine treasure. The city's enabling role, combined with the open-minded vision of businesses, strong storytelling, and visual branding, can ultimately elevate maritime Helsinki to become the crown jewel of the city's tourism.

**“The archipelago is our visual brand, but do we dare to price it correctly?”\***

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# Smooth Accessibility as the Foundation for Tourism Growth

## Panel Discussion

Kimmo Mäki, CEO, Finavia | Ville Haapasaari, CEO, Port of Helsinki | Antti Karjalainen, VP of Sales and Pricing, VR, Moderator: Jenny Taipale, Head of Marketing, Helsinki Partners

### Current State of Accessibility and Travel Chains

The accessibility of Helsinki and the whole of Finland is characterized by our geographical location across the sea. The panel discussion emphasized that we are heavily dependent on air and sea traffic. Although we are far from many key markets, visitors come to Helsinki seeking very specific, unique things: pure nature, peace, and safety. These attractions require a seamless and reliable transport system. The panelists agreed that Finland's strength lies in a functional and trustworthy society where travel chains and infrastructure work. Even though the goal of a single-ticket model has not yet fully materialized due to legislative and liability issues, the smooth integration of different modes of transport is of primary importance.

### Sustainability and the Green Transition in Transport

A prerequisite for sustainable tourism is the reduction of transport emissions. In maritime traffic, development has been rapid: new vessels increasingly rely on lower-emission fuels, hybrid and electric solutions, and shore power. In rail traffic, sustainability is already highly advanced, as nearly all long-distance trains run carbon-neutrally on electricity. In aviation, the technological leap takes longer, and over the next ten years, the most significant improvements will come from fleet renewal and energy efficiency optimization. Industry representatives stressed that even though fuel costs or geopolitical

tensions bring uncertainty, customers' willingness to travel is not disappearing.

### Extending the Length of Stay as a Common Goal

A strategic goal for Helsinki tourism is to extend the length of stay, which transport operators can strongly influence. For example, "turnaround" cruise operations—where passengers start or end their cruises in Helsinki—have proven to be an excellent way to get guests to stay in the city for a few extra days. Better synchronization of train and flight connections also supports longer visits. The panel challenged Helsinki-based service providers to create concrete and attractive reasons why a tourist should stay in the city for a third or fourth night beyond the main attractions.

### Increasing Appreciation and Long-Term Cooperation

As the most concrete area for future development, the panelists highlighted raising the level of societal appreciation and understanding of the tourism sector. Finland's tourism exports still have a vast amount of untapped potential compared to peer countries. Even though Helsinki's tourism is already at a top level, its significance as an engine of the economy and employment should be more widely recognized in political decision-making. When the industry, the city, and the transport sector work together, accessibility can be turned into a true competitive edge in international markets.

# Doubling International Tourism

## Hannu Krook

CEO, SOK

### Setting the Bar Higher and Focusing on Growth

Hannu Krook, CEO of SOK, urged the audience to set their goals more boldly. A common problem among Finnish companies is often a too modest level of ambition. Krook stated that in the tourism industry, the goal should be clear: international tourism must be doubled over the next five years, from five billion to ten billion euros. The pandemic and Russia's war of aggression left a massive hole in the industry, which has been successfully filled with Western visitors, but changes in Asian flight connections and the lack of Eastern tourists require entirely new initiatives and open-minded market expansion.

### Clarifying the Finland Brand and Experiences

The Finland brand must also be stronger and more distinctive globally. For example, at international trade fairs, Finland's stands should be bolder and more active so that we stand out from other Nordic countries. Tourists do not come to Finland just for nice hotels; they seek unforgettable experiences and authenticity. Krook reminded the audience that what is ordinary to us—such as walking on frozen water in the winter, pure nature, berry picking, or the Northern Lights—is a luxury to an international guest. Helsinki plays a massive role as the "calling card" for all of Finland, from where tourists often continue their journey

### The Macroeconomic Significance of Tourism

The importance of the tourism sector to Finland's national economy is still not fully understood. Services account for more than half of Finland's GDP, and increasing the share

of tourism would bring significant economic benefits. According to Krook, doubling international tourism would bring nearly two billion euros in new tax revenue to Finland and create up to 40,000 new jobs. Therefore, it is contradictory that funding for the industry and international marketing, such as Visit Finland's budget, is being cut exactly when there should be heavy investment to boost exports. Furthermore, competitive conditions in the accommodation sector should be equitable for all operators, including large Airbnb operators.

### Cooperation and Political Appreciation

The importance of Helsinki and the capital region to Finnish tourism is immense, as two-thirds of international tourists spend time here. SOK itself aims for a billion-euro turnover from the travel and hospitality business by 2030, but no one succeeds alone. Krook expressed the hope that tourism would be genuinely integrated into the state's high-level export promotion trips alongside industrial giants. A long-term goal could even be the creation of a dedicated Minister of Tourism portfolio, so that the industry would receive the weight it deserves in decision-making.

**"If we doubled the share of international tourism, it would bring Finland 40,000 new jobs and nearly two billion euros in new tax revenue."**

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# Speakers' Advice for Developing Tourism in Helsinki

## **Build a thriving tourism ecosystem together!**

A vibrant, attractive, and growing tourism sector in Helsinki is a collective effort. Success relies on seamless collaboration across the entire tourism, restaurant, and event industry.

## **Raise the bar of ambition.**

Don't settle for modest goals. Clarify the brand with an open mind and boldly aim for significant international growth.

## **Extend visitor stays and expand year-round appeal.**

Make Helsinki highly attractive beyond the summer season. Turn the "dark exoticism" and coolness of winter into a commercial asset, creating compelling new reasons to stay in the city.

## **Shift from sustainability to regenerative tourism.**

Simply minimizing harm is no longer enough. Actively strive for practices that revitalize nature and leave the local community in a better state than before.

## **Verify actions with data and communicate sustainability with humility.**

The era of greenwashing is over, and regulations are tightening. Avoid arrogant communication and vague sustainability claims. Demand third-party verified data from yourselves before making big promises.

## **Build resilience and local supply chains.**

The rising costs of energy and materials demand a new approach. Turn the circular economy, energy independence, and strong local sourcing into an economic competitive advantage.

## **Put everyday aesthetics and design at the center.**

Leverage design, which is deeply embedded in Helsinki's DNA. Even the ordinary, everyday aesthetics of Helsinki can be a significant experience and a form of luxury for international visitors.

## **Utilize tactical design and a culture of experimentation.**

Revitalize urban spaces through temporary experiments and give places their own narrative. When an environment communicates meaning, both residents and tourists naturally want to cherish it.

## **Take a cue from Lapland—dare to price boldly.**

Forget the fear of pricing and the constant pressure to sell cheap. Lapland has succeeded in high-quality productization and bold pricing—apply the same mindset to Helsinki's archipelago and services.

## **Make the sea and archipelago a primary attraction.**

Helsinki's extensive coastline and archipelago are not just nice additions—they should be one of the main reasons a traveler chooses Helsinki as their destination.

## **Create seamless travel chains.**

Accessibility becomes a true competitive edge when the transport sector and tourism services collaborate seamlessly, focusing on delivering an exceptional customer experience.

