



# Helsinki Visitor Pressure

## Analysis and Management Plan 2024-2026

Helsinki

# Contents

Background.....	3
About visitor volumes in Helsinki .....	4
Additional visitor pressure management .....	5
<i>Geographical spread</i> .....	5
<i>Guides for visitors</i> .....	6
<i>Tour guides</i> .....	6
Seasonality and length of stay.....	7
Social carrying-capacity .....	8
Environmental carrying-capacity.....	8
Measuring the pressure and its effects. ....	9
Further development .....	11

Name of the publication:

Helsinki Visitor Pressure – Analysis and Management Plan 2024 - 2026

Publisher:

City of Helsinki, Business Helsinki, Tourism and Destination Management Unit

Date of publish:

17.5.2024

Picture on the cover:

Jussi Hellsten



# Helsinki Visitor Pressure

## Analysis and Management Plan 2024-2026

### Background

Helsinki aims to be the most sustainable tourism destination in the world. At the same time, the goal is to increase the number of visitors significantly. These dual objectives can be achieved by developing sustainable tourism holistically with the entire tourism ecosystem. One of the key factors in achieving this balance is controlling visitor volumes, both on a citywide scale and in specific areas experiencing pressure.

This analysis and management plan describes the present state of visitor pressure in Helsinki and the ways visitor pressure is being measured. Furthermore, it evaluates the social and environmental carrying capacities and the challenges posed by seasonality and length of stay. Finally, it explores potential paths for further development.

[Helsinki City Strategy](#) states the following:

*“An appealing city also attracts travellers. We will develop Helsinki into the smartest and most sustainable travel destination.”*

[Helsinki tourism and events programme 2022-2026](#) states the following:

*“The well-being of Helsinki residents must be the starting point for all development. The tourism and event sectors have a number of positive effects on the city. However, it is also possible that tourists or event participants will have negative effects. While Helsinki rejoices in the increase of diversity and internationalisation, the development of culturally sustainable tourism must be ensured. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, overtourism was a significant phenomenon in many European cities, and the adverse environmental and mobility impacts of events could put an excessive strain on residents. These can be managed using, for example, mobility data.”*

### Some relevant information sources

- The main sustainable tourism development plans can be found [here](#).
- Guides and tools for sustainable tourism development for companies are [here](#).
- Length of stay action plan is [here](#).
- The tourism impact assessment tool is [here](#).

## About visitor volumes in Helsinki

Regarding overtourism, Helsinki's numbers are generally low compared to cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, Lisbon, or Venice. While the situation is not yet critical, it is essential for Helsinki to monitor the situation and take proactive measures to prevent potential issues.

In the relatively large city like Helsinki, tourism congestion is typically concentrated in the city centre. Currently Helsinki faces a [problem with the city centre getting "deserted"](#) as retail shops are vacating the city centre due to the emergence of several new shopping malls outside of the city centre and rise of online shopping. In the light of the situation, tourism is being considered as a potential solution to address this phenomenon. Therefore, considering these factors, it can be reasonably argued that overtourism is not the primary concern for Helsinki.

As a well-developed urban area, there are very few areas considered fragile which would receive high numbers of visitors. Among these, the Suomenlinna Fortress might seem the most obvious one. As a designated UNESCO site, [The Governing Body of Suomenlinna](#) maintains a proactive and well-prepared approach to manage visitor impact. The strategic location of the fortress, accessibly only via ferry, helps mitigate the risk of excessive pressure. Furthermore, Suomenlinna has a [sustainable tourism strategy](#) and [management plan](#).

Likewise, the entire Helsinki archipelago is fragile. The city of Helsinki is seeking to open more islands for the citizens and tourists to visit. This action aligns with the [Helsinki maritime strategy](#) which takes sustainability concerns into account.

The Senate Square and the Market Square are probably the most visited sights in Helsinki. As an open city space, there are no exact visitor numbers available (although there was a [pilot for measuring this](#)). Occasionally, the pressure may be elevated, but these are very limited days. Also, the area doesn't have citizens living there – it is mostly commercial, offices or other public venues.

The Temppeliaukio Rock Church is another area which receives high pressure. The issue is especially with tourist busses and their parking. Helsinki has created a [development plan for tourism buses](#).

The Sibelius monument is also on the top of visitor pressure spots. The city has done a [major development for the park](#) surrounding the monument and traffic moderations have been done to make sure the bus traffic is reasonable.

## Additional visitor pressure management

- The Suomenlinna Fortress UNESCO site has a comprehensive plan for controlling visitor pressure. The ferry connection automatically controls the visitor pressure, as the ferry itself has limits.
- Senate Square is probably the most visited tourism sight in Helsinki. Helsinki operates extra traffic control around the square in order to manage the visitor pressure during the busiest season. The traffic controllers are scheduled mostly by the international [cruise liners timetables](#). The same goes with the Rock Church (Temppeli aukion kirkko) which is another highly popular sight in Helsinki.
- Helsinki Port and City of Helsinki operates jointly the Helsinki Cruise Network which has all the relevant parties involved, including tour operators, bus companies, tour guides, sights, etc. This network addresses also the visitor pressure on the most pressurised spots. The bus routes are jointly planned so, that the pressure can be limited. Obviously not all the visitors come from the cruise liners.
- Parks and Wildlife Finland does an [agreement on cooperation or rights of use](#) with the tourism companies operating in the nature destinations. This ensures that the whole ecosystem works in a sustainable manner in these fragile areas.
- [Temppeli aukio Rock Church](#) and the [Helsinki Cathedral](#), have adopted an entrance fee in order to manage visitor pressure. These are the most visited churches and among the most visited cultural sites in Helsinki.

## Geographical spread

- Visitors are encouraged to visit also other areas than city centre. The [Neighbourhoods website](#) is available on MyHelsinki.fi website.
- Tourism Information Centre encourages visitors to visit areas outside of the city centre. The Tourism Information Centre sustainability plan is [here](#).



Picture: Jussi Hellsten

## **Guides for visitors**

When the visitors have the proper knowledge and guidelines, they can have a significant impact for the visitor pressure, and it's impacts on the city.

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland has a comprehensive [guide](#) for Finnish culture and customs.
- Helsinki has a "[Guide for sustainable visit in Helsinki](#)". This guide steers the visitors towards sustainable behaviour while in Helsinki. **For example, it suggests longer stays and visits outside of busiest season.**
- Helsinki has a [guide for a responsible nature visit](#).
- Parks and Wildlife Finland has a guide for the visitors for a proper [outdoor etiquette](#).
- Suomenlinna Unesco sight has [a guide for the visitor](#) for a sustainable visit.
- Also, a [guide for the customer service personnel on how to communicate sustainability issues](#) has been made. This affect directly on how these issues are communicated to visitors.
- Sauna is one of the key aspects of Finnish culture. The [sauna etiquette](#) helps visitors to behave in a correct manner. Also the Sauna society provide [sauna guidelines](#).

## **Tour guides**

Tour guides are in pivotal role when visitor flows and behaviour is being managed. Most of the issues related to visitor pressure can be managed with professional guides working together.

- The [Helsinki Guides](#) is well established organisation in Helsinki with over 350 guides. For membership, the associations require the completion of one year's guide course. Helsinki Guides has the Green Activities certification and the Sustainable Travel Finland -label. They are part of the Helsinki Makers – network. They also participate to the Helsinki Cruise Network and other collaborations, such as being part of making the development plan for tourism buses. City of Helsinki uses guides e.g. in Oodi central library from Helsinki Guides.
- The Helsinki based Perho Culinary, Tourism & Business College has a [degree for tour guides](#).

## Seasonality and length of stay

As a capital city Helsinki has a fairly good situation when it comes to seasonality. The following factors and action are contributing to this:

- Helsinki has multitude of events all year round and special emphasis is given to spreading the season with events.
- Helsinki has roughly 50% of all registered overnights from business travel, which spread over the year.
- Meetings and congresses are highly important and a significant part of tourism and events strategy.
- Helsinki is a major hub for all tourism flows in Finland. For example, during winter season many tourists visit Helsinki on their way to Lapland.

Nevertheless, summer is still the busiest month, and the previous actions need to be further pushed.

Increasing the length of stay, especially in off season, can help the balancing of seasonality. An action plan for increasing the length of stay is [here](#). Due to the beforementioned aspects of business travel, gateway status and events, the length of stay has been the same for 30 years, that being between 1,7 and 1,8. The increase in bleisure travel provides a new opportunity to increase the length of stay.

### The difference between holiday times in Europe

Finland and the rest of Nordic countries have a unique aspect in terms of holidays. Unlike rest of Europe, Finland has its school holidays from beginning of June until beginning of august. There's of course variation between elementary school and universities. This poses a specific problem with workforce. As the central European customers have their holidays in august, the Finnish holiday destinations start to close their doors due to lack sufficient number of guests and employees. While this is a major problem in Finland it doesn't affect Helsinki so much due to being the capital city and not a small rural destination. Only small number of businesses are open merely during summer season.



Picture: Mika Ruusunen

## Social carrying-capacity

The main components of analysing the social carrying-capacity of tourism are the following studies and tools:

- The resident sentiment study, which is conducted every two years. It studies both tourism and events. All the studies are available [here](#).
- The Helsinki [visitor experience survey](#).
- The tourism impact assessment [tool](#).

Additionally, the possible overcrowding is followed by the Tourism and destination management unit employees, which includes Tourist Information Centre employees and the Helsinki Helpers who are mobile around the city. The TIC is located right next to Senate Square, which is probably the most visited sight in Helsinki. The overcrowding is a “fluid concept” and is thus evaluated best by observing. To demonstrate the effectiveness of this is the recent decision to [ban tourist busses](#) from the senate square, to reduce the pressure and give more room for the pedestrians.

The resident sentiment is on a very high level in Helsinki. The locals feel very positive about tourism and are happy to increase it. Also, the visitors are giving positive reviews about the visit in Helsinki and raise no issues about overcrowding or any other carrying capacity related issues. The local culture and history are under no pressure because of tourism.

## Environmental carrying-capacity

The main tool for analysing the environmental carrying-capacity is the [tourism impact assessment tool](#).

Based on the tourism impact assessment tool and on the [Helsinki environmental report](#) it can be argued that tourism does not affect the environmental carrying capacity in any significant way. There are some specific fragile spots especially in the archipelago, but these are well maintained and “under the radar”. By far the biggest pressure comes from the locals on these areas.

Helsinki tourism can also affect areas outside of Helsinki, e.g. the Nuuksio National Park, Sipoonkorpi National Park and others. Especially some areas in Nuuksio are receiving high numbers of visitors and can cause significant wear and tear on the environment. [Metsähallitus](#), the national governing body of national parks and other state-owned nature areas, is in charge of the management of these sights. Helsinki is part of the Nuuksio National Park sustainable tourism development group.



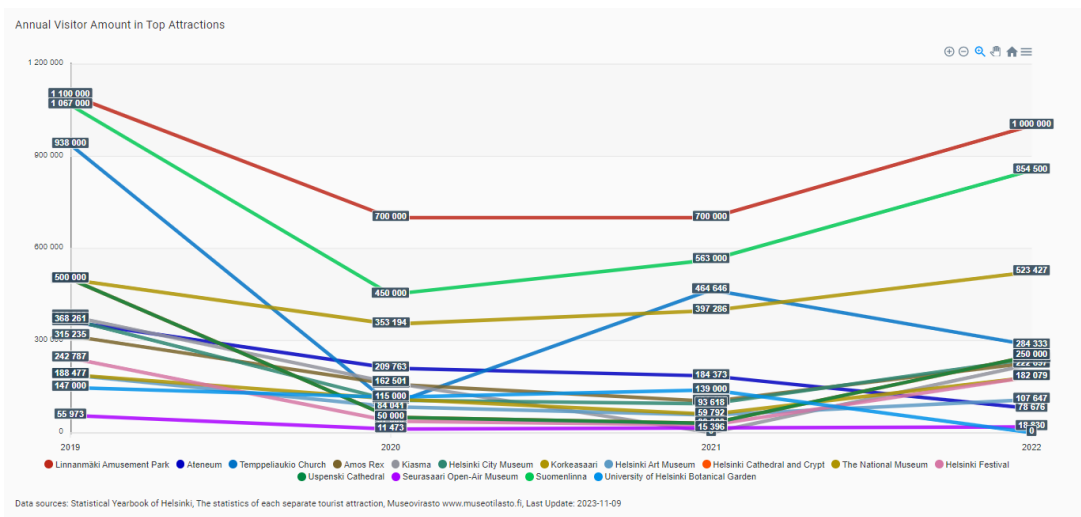
## Measuring the pressure and its effects.

### The daily volumes of the visitors are followed with the following tools:

- City of Helsinki has a [comprehensive system](#) for measuring traffic in the city.
- Hotel overnights on daily basis – Benchmarking alliance (DataLokki)
- Tourist information centre visitor volumes – own data (DataLokki)
- Lammassaari nature trail (popular tourist destination) and other destinations at [Helsingin seutu counters](#).
- Suomenlinna fortress (UNESCO) [ferry passanger numbers](#)
- Korkeasaari Zoo [daily visitors at HRI](#).
- City Museum [daily visitors](#) (open only for City of Helsinki employees)
- International Cruise Liners – Port of Helsinki ([public Datalokki](#))

### The yearly or monthly visitor numbers

- Yearly and monthly overnights are monitored in DataLokki. Part of the data is available on the [public version of Datalokki](#), the rest is only available for partners and/or city of Helsinki employees.
  - This data also includes length of stay and seasonal spread.
  - The locations of the hotels are known and an estimate of geographical spread of visitors is an easy task.
- Also, the Short-Term Rentals are available in DataLokki.
- Helsinki Airport and Port of Helsinki visitor numbers are monitored and available at DataLokki.
- Tourist information centre visitor numbers are also gathered to DataLokki
- Vallisaari island [visitor numbers](#).
- The yearly visitor numbers of the 15 most important attractions (e.g. Linnanmäki amusement park, Ateneum art museum, Uspenski Cathedral, etc.) are available at DataLokki.



### **The opinion of the locals towards tourism**

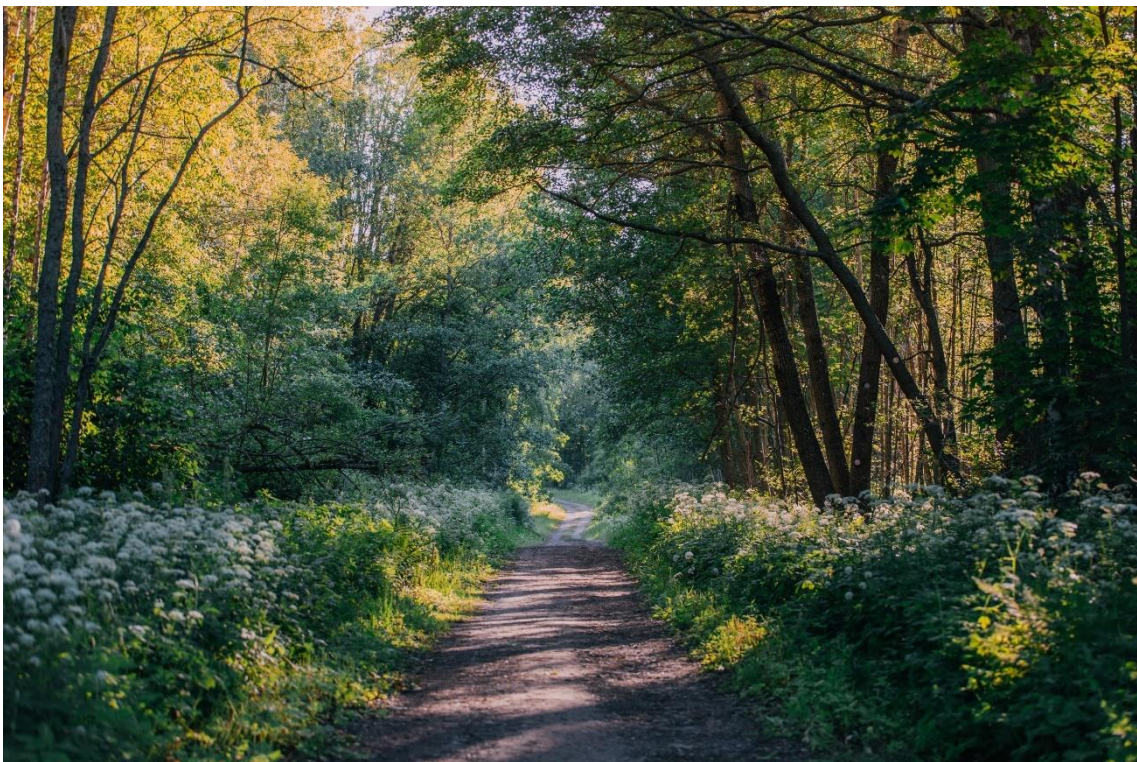
- The action plan for engaging the citizens to tourism development is [here](#).
- The report from 2023 is [here](#).
- The resident sentiment study results are available in DataLokki. All the studies are available [here](#).

### **The opinion of the visitors**

- The opinion of the visitors is collected via [Helsinki visitor experience survey](#). The survey is ongoing, and the results are in DataLokki.
- Also, the Visit Finland operated [Matkailijamittari](#) -survey is important.

### **Tourism intensity and density**

- Also, the [tourism intensity and density](#) are followed based on overnights on monthly and yearly basis.
  - Tourism intensity: Number of nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments per 100 permanent residents per day.
  - Tourism density: Number of nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments per day per square km.



Picture: Julia Kivelä

## **Further development**

While Helsinki follows the visitor pressure with multiple different tools, the actual decision-making process is still not very comprehensive. When do the numbers reach a point when something needs to be done? This is obviously impossible question since all attractions and other areas in the city have different capacity and “breaking points”. In the end the decisions come down to four main points:

- Opinion of the locals
- Opinion of the visitors
- Visual estimate of the tourism professionals amended by the before mentioned data sources.
- The strain to the fragile nature sites

A visitor pressure management model with more comprehensive data has to be developed. We have to decide what are the possible measures that can be taken if for example the city centre is too congested with visitors or if the housing costs rise too high due to short-term rentals? Or if fragile nature or cultural sights are in danger.

### **Specific actions to be taken**

- On the resident sentiment study, a more neighbourhood focused questions should be asked. Although, this could be really hard to implement due to the current panel study research method.
- Specific thresholds should be decided for number of datapoints in order to decided when the numbers are too high.
- Data should be gathered in to one place in order to see the whole picture. Data should be cross referenced.
- Awareness of the tourism flows and potential overtourism should be raised on the city development side.

*Helsinki 17.5.2024*

**Helsinki**

**City of Helsinki  
Business Helsinki  
Tourism and destination  
management unit**

Pohjoisesplanadi 11–13  
00170 Helsinki  
PO Box 1  
00099 City of Helsinki  
Phone 09 310 1641

[www.hel.fi](http://www.hel.fi)