

DESTINATION
FINLAND

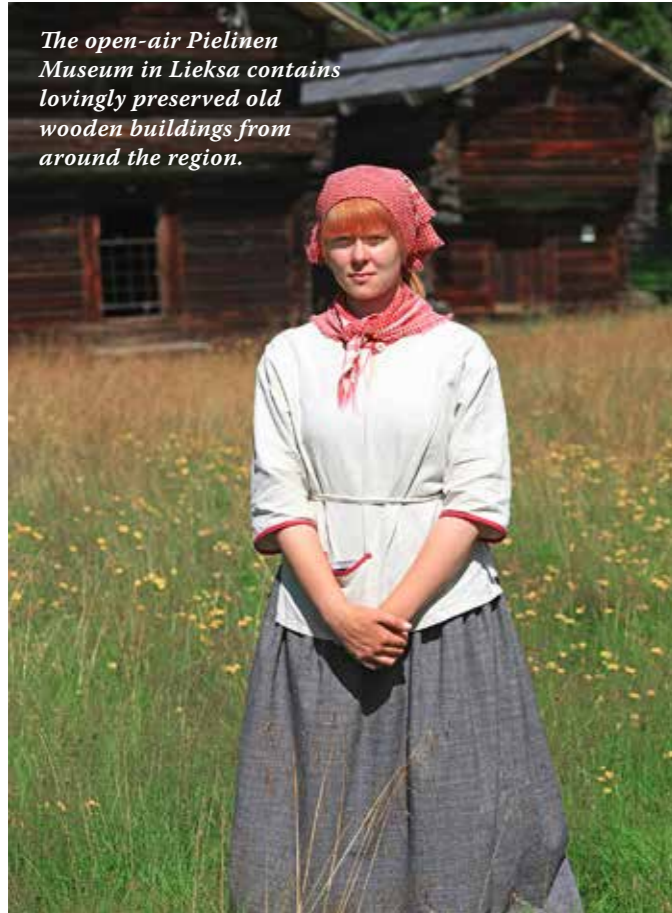
HOOKED ON KARELIA

A trip around Lake Pielinen – Finland’s fourth largest lake – can encompass thrills, relaxation, and memorable tastes of this distinctive region of eastern Finland.

TEXT BY FRAN WEAVER PHOTOS BY HERNAN PATIÑO

The lakes and rivers of Ruunaa Hiking Area make sublime settings for fly-fishing, whether you're an old hand or a novice.

The open-air Pielinen Museum in Lieksa contains lovingly preserved old wooden buildings from around the region.



Emerging from a muscle-soothing sauna we plunge into the refreshing waters of Lake Pielinen, and float serenely while watching the sun set behind the wooded hills that line the far shore. To compound our comfort, soothing herbal footbaths have been prepared by our hostess **Heta Nevalainen** from Herranniemi Guesthouse in Vuonislampi. This lovely lakeside retreat is an hour's drive from Joensuu – the capital of the Finnish province of North Karelia.

Local herbs also feature prominently in the guesthouse supper: in nettle soup made to Nevalainen's grandmother's recipe; in a wild plant pesto served with fresh lake fish; and in a "forest cocktail" containing birch sap, pine pollen, and the tips of young spruce branches – as well as juniper-flavoured gin.

OUT IN THE WILD

The following night we head out into the backwoods to a wildlife-watching cabin run by Erä-Eero near Lieksa. The forests of the eastern borderlands are home to bears, wolves, lynxes, and rare wolverines. Our guide **Eero Kortelainen** explains that the viewing hides are strategically located by paths used by these animals – though he scatters some dog snacks and other tasty treats in front of the hide to entice them to linger longer in view.

For the first few hours we only spot woodland birds, but then we suddenly sense a presence near the hide – an inquisitive wolverine, sniffing out the titbits

During the gloomiest part of the short summer night, a huge bear prowls onto the scene just a few metres away from us trembling watchers.

left by Kortelainen. Through the evening single wolverines boldly come and go, but during the gloomiest part of the short summer night, a huge bear prowls onto the scene just a few metres away from us trembling watchers.

The hide's notebook reveals that watchers enjoy exciting sightings on most nights. Wolverine sightings are the most frequent, with bears and wolves also showing up. "Wolverines are really our speciality," says Kortelainen. "Perhaps 20 live in this region – about 10 per cent of Finland's total population."

RAPID TRANSIT

We next move north to the Ruunaa Hiking Area, where the River Lieksanjoki winds for 30 kilometres through wild forests, placid lakes, and six sets of raging rapids. Rapids shooting trips start upstream of the hiking area, five kilometres from the Russian border. Instead of descending the river in rubber rafting dinghies, we choose to ride in a more traditional-looking wooden boat.

"These boats are based on what log-floaters used to row while guiding huge loads of logs cut in Russia down to Finnish sawmills by Lake Pielinen," explains rafting guide **Jarkko Peltola**.

Peltola admits that even after shooting these rapids for more than 20 years he doesn't know every rock in the river, but he somehow manages to guide our boat safely through even the most treacherous stretches. With spray flying everywhere we're glad to be clad in waterproofs.

FISHY BUSINESS

Having seen many fishers along the riverbank, I decide to try my luck in the evening – aided by **Juha Kärkkäinen**, a fishing guide from Ruunaa Hiking Centre. "The river has plenty of brown trout, grayling, zander, whitefish, and rainbow trout; and with good paths leading down to great fishing spots Ruunaa is a fine place for youngsters and beginners to learn new skills and get hooked!" explains Kärkkäinen.

Fishing from a rowboat in calm waters just above Kattilankoski rapids, I suddenly feel a sharp tug on my line and see a commotion in the water where I cast my lure. Kärkkäinen encourages me to firmly but calmly reel in the fish – a handsome rainbow trout. As



KEEPING UP KARELIAN TRADITIONS

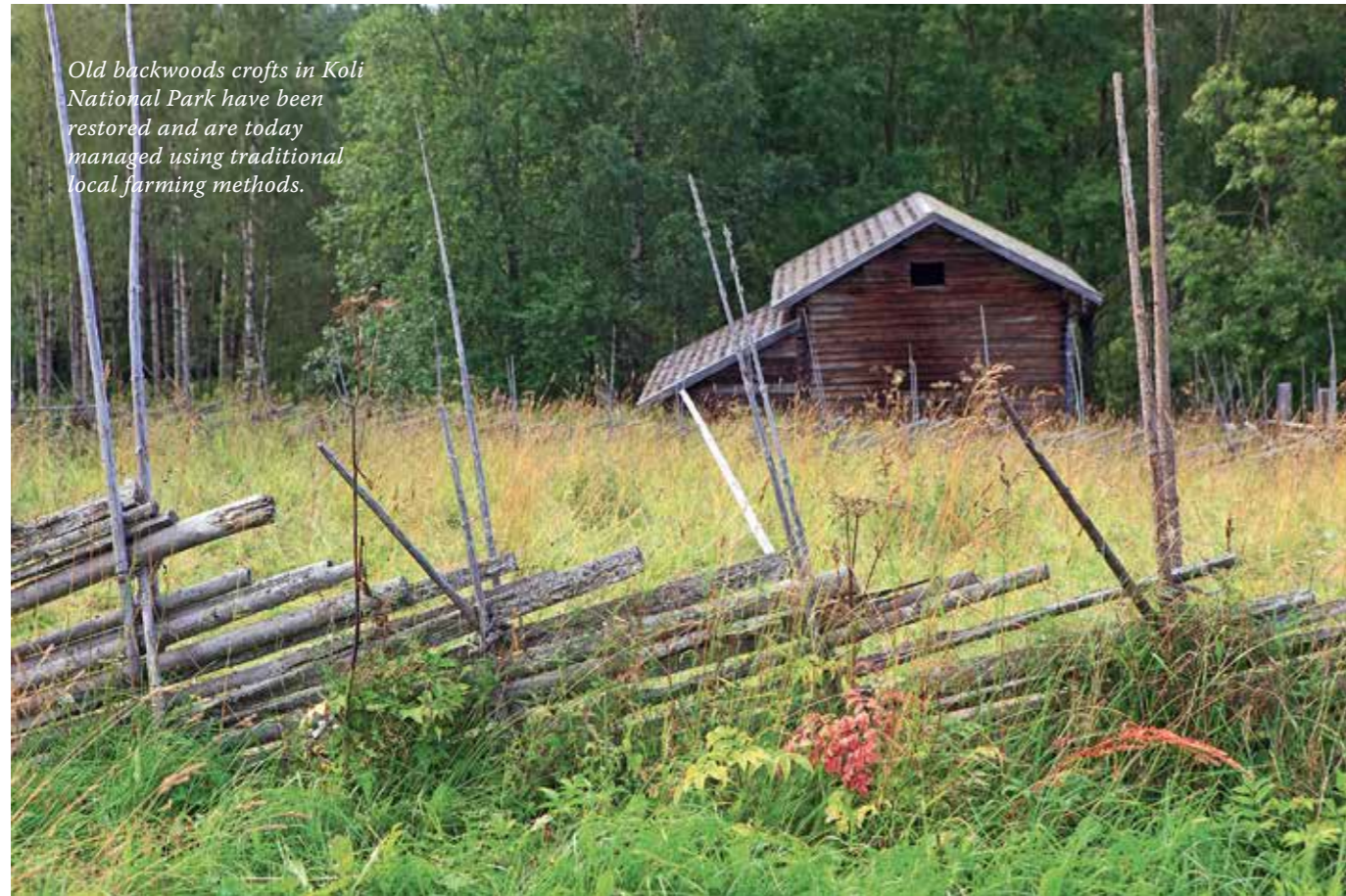
Karelia has its own distinctive cuisine and culture. An excellent place to sample delicacies including hearty Karelian stew and the region's famous pies is the ornately decorated Bomba House, just outside Nurmes. This huge wooden house forms the centrepiece of a traditional Karelian village recreated on the shores of Lake Pielinen.

"The idea behind Bomba has been to create a centre for keeping alive Karelian cultural traditions, so we regularly have events here including folk music concerts and dancing," explains **Pasi Tolonen**, manager of Break Sokos Hotel Bomba.

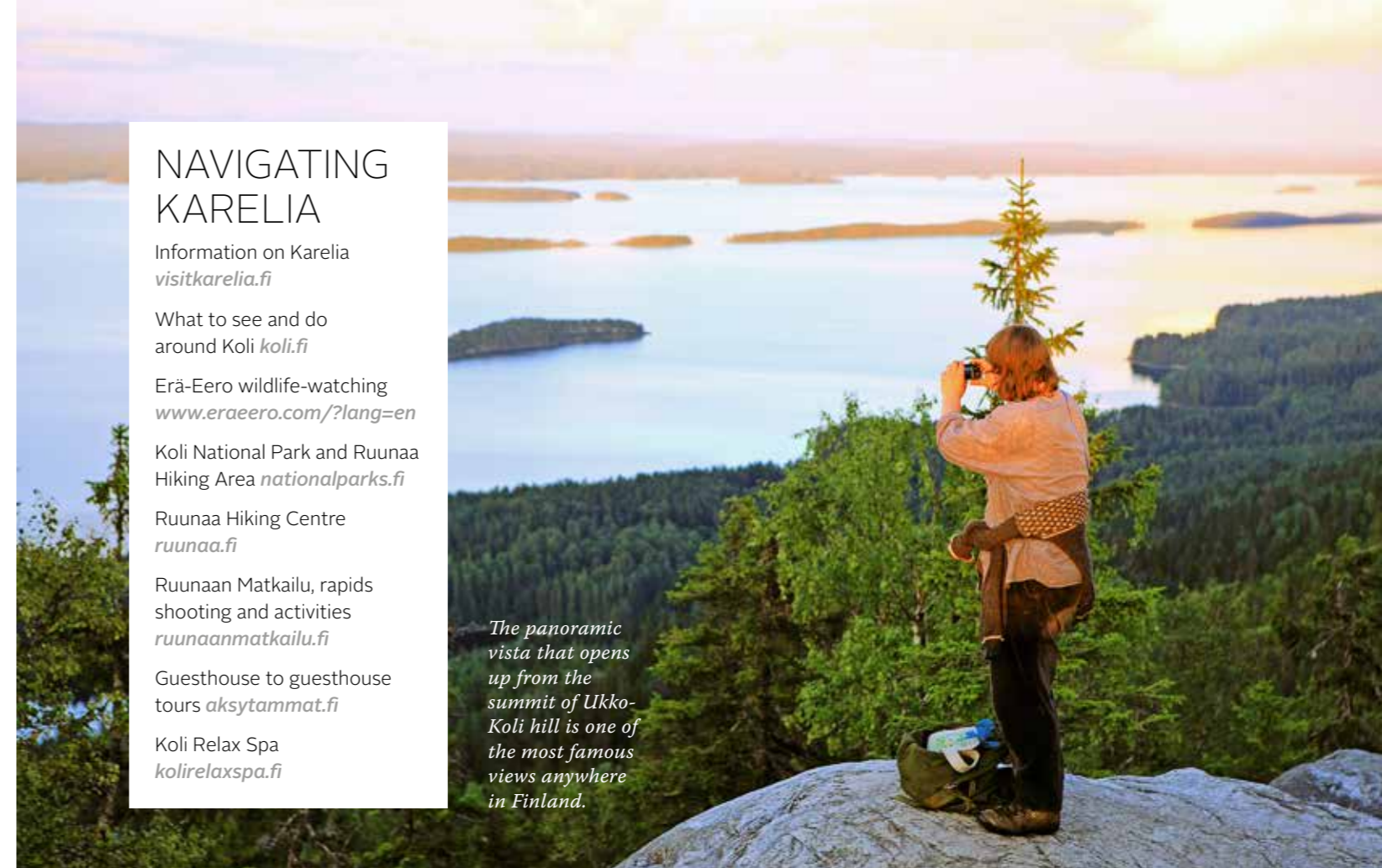
Expert wildlife photographers reckon that viewing hides deep in the forests of Karelia are the best place in Europe – if not the world – to see endangered wolverines.



A freshly caught rainbow trout grilled over a campfire makes an unforgettable feast.



Old backwoods crofts in Koli National Park have been restored and are today managed using traditional local farming methods.



NAVIGATING KARELIA

Information on Karelia
visitkarelia.fi

What to see and do around Koli koli.fi

Erä-Eero wildlife-watching
www.eraero.com/?lang=en

Koli National Park and Ruunaa Hiking Area nationalparks.fi

Ruunaa Hiking Centre
ruunaa.fi

Ruunaan Matkailu, rapids shooting and activities
ruunaanmatkailu.fi

Guesthouse to guesthouse tours aksytammat.fi

Koli Relax Spa
kolirelaxspa.fi

The panoramic vista that opens up from the summit of Ukko-Koli hill is one of the most famous views anywhere in Finland.



The old farmstead at Mattila in Koli National Park today houses a cosy summer café and guesthouse.

dusk descends we grill the deliciously fresh fish over a riverside campfire, and enjoy a perfect al fresco feast.

COUNTRY TASTES AND TOURS

The countryside north of Lake Pielinen is dotted with farms, several of which have clubbed together to set up “Guesthouse to Guesthouse” tours, where visitors travel by car, bicycle, or canoe, and spend each evening sampling fine food in convivial farmhouse settings.

“People love these types of tours, as it’s nice to do something active during the day, but then have a warm sauna and dinner waiting for you,” explains **Henna Nevalainen**, as we paddle our canoes along Karhujoki (Bear River) to her Laitalan Lomat Guesthouse.

The guesthouses also form part of a wider “Karelia à la carte” network of gourmet venues. At the next guesthouse, Puukarin Pysäkki, hostess **Anni Korhonen** welcomes us with a sumptuous feast featuring delicacies including swedes baked in a sour-dough rye crust, lamb smoked in a sauna, and a leafy salad of local wild plants. “We feel it’s important to use pure, fresh, organically grown local ingredients,” she says.

The region’s most famous delicacy is the Karelian pie (*karjalanpiirakka*). These small oval-shaped open pies consist of a thin rye crust folded intricately around a porridge-like filling.

Most of the Karelian pies sold around Finland are filled with rice porridge or mashed potato, but Korhonen insists the only truly traditional filling is



Purists insist that the truly traditional filling for Karelian pies is porridge made of locally grown barley.

slow-cooked barley porridge. Guesthouse cook **Jaana Pieviläinen** teaches me how to fold thin discs of rye dough around the dollops of barley porridge, using my thumbs to make the characteristic wrinkly crusts. After a quick blast in a traditional Karelian bread oven my perfectly formed pies are ready to be served with melted butter.

LOVELY VIEWS

With our rucksacks filled with pies, we head for our last Karelian destination: the hills of Koli National Park. The rugged peak of Ukko-Koli (the Old Man of Koli) offers superb views over Lake Pielinen and the vast forests we’ve been exploring. This scene is often described as a “national landscape”, since it has inspired countless Finnish artists, photographers, and composers through the ages.

In the heart of the park, we pause at Mattila, an idyllic old farmstead where Café Mandala serves organic, veggie, and vegan treats to hungry hikers in summer – and the Koli Oasis guesthouse hosts courses and retreats with themes including yoga, art, and dance.

Having earned a little indulgence after yet another healthy and active day, we head for Koli Relax Spa. Housed in the Break Sokos Hotel Koli, the spa’s huge picture windows offer pleasing panoramas over Pielinen. After dipping in bubbling baths and soaking saunas, we bliss out in a hot tub out on the terrace, sipping chilled wine while overlooking the lake. This luxurious experience makes a perfect end to an unforgettable Lakeland journey. ●



FRAN WEAVER is a Helsinki-based freelance journalist who loves to explore Finland’s wild places and savour local specialties like Karelian pies and rainbow trout.



HERNAN PATIÑO is a regular contributor to *Blue Wings* who never tires of visiting Eastern Finland. He lives in Helsinki with his wife and three children.