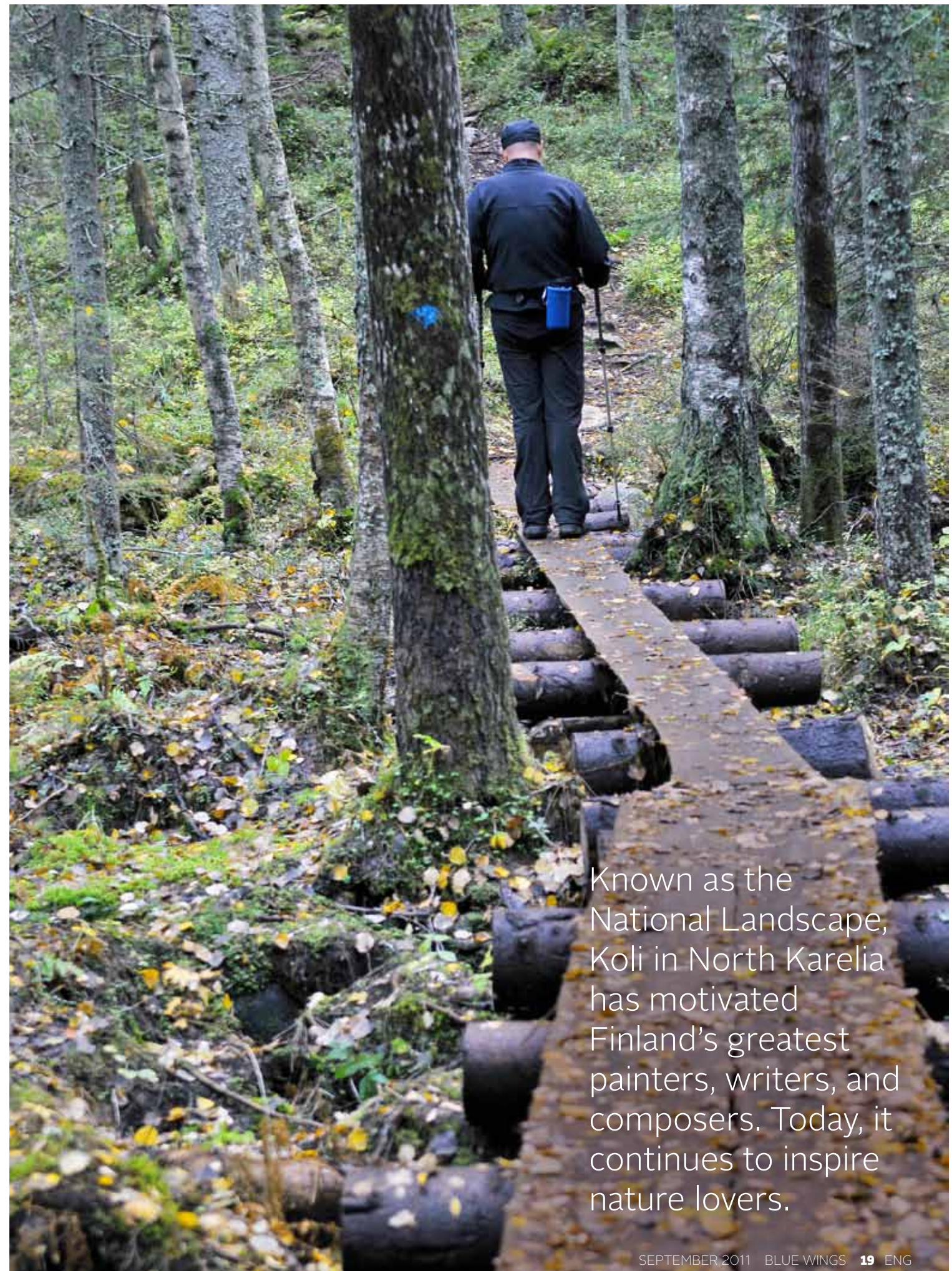


TEXT BY PETE BALDING : PHOTOS BY HERNAN PATIÑO

# EPIC INSPIRATIONS



Known as the National Landscape, Koli in North Karelia has motivated Finland's greatest painters, writers, and composers. Today, it continues to inspire nature lovers.





A pastoral scene at Kiviniemi croft

#### AUTUMNAL MAGIC

An ideal time to visit is in September and October when the foliage turns bright shades of red, orange, and yellow. The turning of the leaves, or the autumn colours, what the Finns call *ruska*, rival the famed shades of Lapland in the fall. But here they appear a few weeks later and can last longer.

“People discover themselves here,” says local guide **Minna Saarelainen**, who in true Finnish style pauses for reflection. “You can hear your own thoughts. It’s pure silence and peace,” she says while gazing at the patches of yellow aspen on the fir-covered hillside in the distance.

Her insight brings new meaning to Sibelius’s compositions, especially his Symphony No 4, the masterpiece that was directly inspired by his visits to Koli. The spaciousness and grandeur of the area is directly reflected in his music.

Saarelainen also likes to point out the magical and mystical aspects of Koli. Looking at a big head-shaped burl protruding from a large tree beside the trail, she cautions that these are favourite hiding places for trolls. A deep and narrow crevice not far away is what she calls a “sacrificial fissure” where in earlier times people dropped coins and rings to appease the “spirit of the hill.”

#### HEAR THE MEWS

Inspiring wildlife abounds in the national park as well. This part of Finland has the highest concentration of lynx in the country. While it’s not impossible to spot one of these elusive felines, it’s likely to see its tracks or to hear its mews in the autumn dusk.

Wilderness guide Jari Reinikainen has often seen lynx in the area. He and his partners operate the old croft at Kiviniemi at the southern end of Koli. The buildings have been renovated and converted into a guest lodge with accommodation and dining.

Sheep graze in the lakeside pasture which adds to the authentic atmosphere of the old slash-and-burn agriculture that, 100 years ago, was the primary livelihood in Koli. While the sheep are probably too big a target for lynx, Reinikainen makes sure they are safely tucked away in their enclosure at night just in case.

Bear, beaver, and moose also reside in Koli, and the old-growth forests are home to the rare and equally elusive Siberian flying squirrel. An abundance of flora and fauna unique to the hill country of Eastern Finland flourishes unhindered in the 30-square-kilometre park and its surroundings.

#### ANCIENT MOUNTAINS

The pristine 300-metre-high hills of Koli are remnants of the two-billion-year-old Karelides, an ancient mountain range that once stood as tall as the Alps. Only the hard quartzite survived the ravages of countless ice ages. Boulders the size of city buses appear tossed among the hills, and twisted but muscular pines somehow survive clinging to the rock edges.

The highest point in the park is the famous Ukko-Koli hill. Named after Ukko, a Zeus-like god from *The Kalevala*, it is a must-see. A short and easy walk from

Metsähallitus’s Visitor Centre Ukko, it offers the quintessential view over the impressive Lake Pielinen.

At 120 kilometres in length, it is the largest lake in North Karelia and the fourth largest lake in Finland, a country famous for its big lakes. A popular recreation site in its own right, Lake Pielinen attracts pleasure boaters, fishers, and paddlers. Cruises and charter fishing trips are available, too. The lake abounds in vendace, pike, and zander. Salmon, brown trout, and grayling are also regularly planted.

#### THE COMPLETE NATURE EXPERIENCE

Nearby is the much smaller Herajärvi Lake. Like Lake Pielinen, it is far longer than it is wide, 14 kilometres by one kilometre, which makes it ideal for kayaking and canoeing. For the complete nature experience, try camping at one or both of the two campsites on its shore. There’s also a rental cottage, *Metsäpirtti*, available on the eastern lakeside.

It’s also possible to hike to Herajärvi Lake from the Visitor Centre Ukko. There are more than 70 kilometres of well-marked hiking trails in Koli including the 40-kilometre-long Herajärven kierros trail which encircles Herajärvi Lake. It’s somewhat challenging in places with some steep and rocky bits, so proper footwear is essential especially if trekking with a backpack.

In the autumn months, the trails are very quiet and it’s possible to hike for hours without seeing anyone. The mosquitoes and other insects, which can be a bit of a nuisance in the summer months, are also long gone.

#### MARATHON OF DANGERS

These trails are also the setting for the annual Marathon of Dangers, *Vaarojen Maraton* in Finnish, held every October for the past five years.

“The number of participants has practically doubled every year,” says race director **Heikki Hamunen** of Karelian Seikkailu-urheilijat Ry, the local sports club which organises the event. “Last year, the number of participants was 420,” he says, explaining that people who love to run on trails really enjoy the event.

The 86-kilometre race is a qualifying race for the premier ultramarathon in the world, *Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc*, held every year in the Alps. This is one reason why more and more international ultra-runners attend the Koli event.

#### AUTUMNAL BLUES

Ruska Blues is the other premier event. This two-day festival at the end of September has also grown quickly since it started seven years ago.

“The first year we sold two tickets, but every year it’s bigger and bigger. It’s grown mostly by word of



Lake Pielinen, Finland’s fourth largest lake, viewed from Ukko-Koli hill



## KARELIAN CUISINE

**DURING** the Northern Crusades of the 10th and 11th centuries much of Karelia fell under the influence of Russian Orthodox invaders. The Orthodox faith remains Finland's second largest religion, and most of its followers in Finland are of Karelian origin. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the distinctive cuisine of Karelia which has also had a major impact on the eating habits of all Finns.

According to **Johanna Rinnekari** of ProAgria North Karelia, Orthodox traditions such as Lent had a large influence. "Fasts gave a natural rhythm to the annual diet," she says. Special emphasis was put on baked goods such as sourdough rye bread, savoury pies, and pasties. And Slavic-type *vatruska* pastries and other types of sweet baked goods from the east are also popular in Eastern Finland, she says.

The ubiquitous Karelian pasty, *karjalan-piirakka*, has become a staple of the Finnish diet. The small, rice- or potato-filled rye-crust pies are available in every supermarket in Finland and are a popular breakfast or lunch option, or as an easy snack anytime, and a quite healthy one at that.

Wild forest mushrooms and berries grow in abundance in North Karelia and are regular ingredients in Karelian cuisine along with the equally healthy root vegetables. "Karelian stew is the best known of the Karelian meat dishes, and *lanttukukka*, a swede-filled pie, is still a popular dish in North Karelia," says Rinnekari.



Pasties and savoury pies dominate the Karelian menu.

mouth," says concert impresario **Joke Leppänen**. At last year's Ruska Blues, which featured Finnish guitar legend and world-music innovator, Hasse Walli, several hundred eager spectators packed the main hall of the Sokos Hotel Koli.

The historic Hotel Koli, one of the few full-service hotels located inside a Finnish national park, also has a fine restaurant which specialises in Karelian cuisine, world-class dishes made from exotic local ingredients. A typical Karelian dinner is comprised of a three-course meal that features lightly smoked salmon filets and cheese-potato cakes served with lingonberry sauce.

The Sokos Hotel Koli is a stone's throw from the Visitor Centre Ukko which is the recommended first stop upon arrival as you can get information about local services and accommodation, and there are also exhibits on the flora and fauna of North Karelia and Koli's history, as well as a gift shop and café which features locally grown organic food.

### CULTURAL KOLI

As Koli continues to develop as a major travel and recreation destination, plans are underway to build the Koli Cultural Centre for Nature and Culture just outside the national-park boundary. Set for completion in 2015, the nine-hectare complex will include accommodation for 1,000 people, conference facilities, restaurants, and a campground.

The designers have worked closely with the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme to ensure that the project will meet the goals of sustainable nature tourism. ●



**FINNAIR FLIES** nonstop several times daily to Joensuu. Koli is about 70 km north of Joensuu, the main urban centre in North Karelia. A reasonably priced shuttle taxi runs between Joensuu and Koli several times a day. Reservations required: **TAKSIKOLI.FI/KIMPPAKYYTI**

## KOLI'S AUTUMN ITINERARY

### RUSKA BLUES

**September 23-24**

Artists include (subject to change) Mark Hummel (USA) & The Backscratchers, Root Remedy, Color Me Blue, Micke & Lefty feat. Chef, Hojas Blues Band, Eccu & Cane

**WWW.KOLIFI**

### KOLI 347

**September 30-October 1**

This brand new event motivates personnel from organisations (on Friday) and families (on Saturday) to spend a day out of the office or home and in beautiful nature on guided group walks instead. Information (in Finnish) at

**WWW.POKALI.FI/KOLI347**

### MARATHON OF DANGERS (VAAROJEN MARATON),

**October 8**

This trail-run includes several categories from 15 kilometres to the 86 kilometre ultramarathon

**WWW.KARSU.FI/VAAROJEN-MARATON**

## WHERE TO STAY

**SOKOS HOTEL KOLI** is a 75-room, full-service hotel and restaurant located inside Koli National Park

**WWW.SOKOSHOTELS.FI/EN/HOTELS/KOLI**

**PAIMENTUPA FARMHOUSE AND STABLES** offers accommodation, dining, and tours on Icelandic horses

**EN.PAIMENTUPA.FI**

**KIVINIEMI FARMHOUSE** offers accommodation, dining, and wilderness tours

**WWW.KORPISOTURI.FI**

**THERE ARE FOUR CAMPSITES** inside Koli National Park and six rustic rental huts.

For extensive information on the national park visit Metsähallitus's award-winning website:

**WWW.OUTDOORS.FI**

**FURTHER INFORMATION** on local accommodation and services

**WWW.KOLIFI**