

# Via Karelia – A Tourist Route in Eastern Finland

## One route, two roads and many reasons

Via Karelia is an tourist route in eastern Finland. As a matter of fact it is formed of two different parts; to begin with “Runon ja Rajan tie”, in English the Road of Poem and Border and, secondly, “Karjalan kirkkotie” like the Karelian Pilgrim Route.

The name of the road of Poem and Border indicates for the first to the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala and numerous other collections of folk poetry. Kalevala was collected in the northern part of Finnish and Russian Karelia in the 19th century and published for the first time 1835. It had an tremendous impact on Finnish intellectuals in the late 19th century, e.g. artist Axel Gallen-Kallela and composer Jean Sibelius.

Secondly, Karelia had become a battlefield between Eastern and Western Christendom by the 12th century at the latest. For the first time in 1323 it was divided between Sweden and Novgorod. Over the centuries, the political border dividing Karelia has shifted this way and that a total of nine times. The last change to date was confirmed in the Treaty of Paris in 1947, when the new frontier has been drawn up between Finland and the Soviet Union at the end of the Continuation War in autumn 1944. The name has grounds indeed!

The Road of Poem and Border will take you through Finland from the Gulf of Finland in the South all the way to Lapland in the North following the eastern frontier. Finnish lake scenery Saimaa, the largest lake region in Europe, and small towns are typical in the southern part of Via Karelia. Afterwards, the scenery is dominated by tree-covered hills and wilderness. Influences of Orthodox religion and battle fields of Winter War 1939-40 are present on this route. The total length is more than 1,000 km.

The Karelian Pilgrim Route starts in the Monastery of Valamo situated near by a small village of Heinävesi and ends in most eastern corner of Finland, where it joins to the Road of Poem and Border. Typical for the Karelian Pilgrim Route are the wooden orthodox churches and chapels called ‘tsasouna’. The churches are build in the 18th and 19th centuries and some are rich decorated and colourfully painted by the local joiners.

The Monastery of Valamo is the only monk monastery in Finland. The chronicles record that it was founded on the island of Valamo in Lake Ladoga in the 10th century. No consensus or certainty exists in this matter, but most people regard it as more probable that the monastery was founded around the mid-12th century.

The war led to evacuation of the monastery in 1940, but it was able to resume its normal life at its present site in later the same year. One of the most value-able treasures of Valamo Monastery is the miracle-working icon of the Mother of God of Konevitsa.

## Local Delicacies

Finland is the country of dark bread. Traditions and cultural influence from eastern and western neighbours have it's influence. In the western regions, bread was baked rarely and the stored bread was eaten little by little as the loaves dried out and hardened. In eastern Finland, on the other hand, people baked more frequently, about once a week and that's why Karelia is the country of pastries, pasties and pies.

A classic food is the Karelian pasty, whose crust is made of water, salt and rye flour. The dough is rolled thin and filled with rice or barley porridge or mashed potatoes. The skills needed for making these pasties are respected and difficult to acquire. The rolling, especially, is something that not everyone is able to master. The result must be thin and crisp.

The best Karelian pasties are found in the market places in small towns along Via Karelia. The pasty is best hot from oven, served with "egg butter", also with hard boiled eggs, chopped finely and mixed with softened butter. The pasty was originally an important and handy portable lunch and excursion food.

Further in the North along the route you will find a nice speciality, bread cheese. In olden days, milk was preserved for winter in the form of cheese. It was drawn and formed into round, bread-like slab, which were toasted in the fire before serving. There, as well in Lapland, bread cheese is eaten crumbled into coffee or, which is more common, as a delicious dessert, hot from oven and sweetened with cloudberry.

Lapland, all of Lapland, lives from reindeer meat; smoked roast reindeer, reindeer stew, reindeer tongue, reindeer chops, reindeer meat soup...When you add salmon and cloudberry, you have made it!

Reindeer meat is wonderful. It has a slightly gamey taste, is rich in nutrient but not too fatty. It's easy to digest and can be served in various ways. The reindeer tastes so good because it eats good food itself. One of the simplest, tastiest and most famous reindeer dishes is reindeer stew. The meat is cut into slivers while still frozen, put into a pot with a bit of water, and simmered until tender. The stew is served with mashed potatoes, seasoned with butter and onions, and with lingonberry purée.

So, there is many reasons to travel along Via Karelia, the most exotic branch of Via Baltica Nordica and, I'm sure, food is the most tasteful.