

Escape: Short haul
Sauna yoga and bellowing in the dark will restore body and soul in the beautiful north

A HEALTH FIX IN FINLAND

by MARGARET HUSSEY

PITCH black and it's about 1c, yet I'm strangely calm and relaxed lying down in the middle of a forest. Earlier, I even hugged a tree.

That's what you do in Finnish Lakeland, where nature governs everything. We're near Lake Saimaa, three hours north of Helsinki and just two hours from former Russian capital, St Petersburg.

Our meditation with wellness coach Tero Vantinen, from Hotelli Puumaharju, Finland's oldest hotel, aims to ground us in the natural world and open our minds.

Once upright, Tero encourages us to bellow from our diaphragms as we stand in the dark. Apparently it will rid us of any stress.

'Don't be afraid to let go,' he says. I manage a loud yawn — more sleepy cub than roaring lion.

This might all sound quite happy, but for Finnish people, the lakes, nature and being outdoors, even winter, is part of their psyche. One of the biggest parts of this is sauna. It's the only Finnish thing to make it into the English lexicon. I have one nearly every day. It's how we are.

Next in line is stress-repelling sauna. Lasting in 50c, you'll turn your



Healing: Lake Saimaa — and a traditional sauna — will help you de-stress on a wellness break



Picture: GETTY IMAGES/PHOTO, KLMAY

body, stretching and rolling as he gently nudges us into position. After a 30-minute session, I can feel my posture improving.

Walking back to the hotel in the dark, it's handy it is painted an eye-catching pink. Lovingly restored by Finnish top model Saimi Hoyer, it's packed with retro, vintage and fashion finds.

Saimi loves foraging for wild mushrooms and our four-course tasting menu dinner is a revelation in the versatility of fungi.

The region is becoming well-known for its gastronomy and the D.O. Saimaa mark is the first

Finnish regional quality label for food. Local sourcing is apparent at Tertti Manor, an Ibsenesque country house packed with sepi family photos, stuffed birds and samovars, where we stop for dinner.

Owner, Matti Pylkkanen, has taken inspiration from Sissinghurst and Ballymaloe, so the menu is farm and garden to table: pickled celeriac, beetroot, pike and a riot of colour on the plate.

Leaving tradition behind, we move on to the uber-stylish Kuru Resort, a private retreat for adults. The cabins all have a sauna, views over the lake and no televisions.

'Your window is your viewing,' says the manager.

The food, too, is a big draw, with chef Remi Tremouille blending his experience of working in Asia and Australia with Finnish produce.

Kuru has yoga classes and a Sisley spa. Here I try a sound bath. Lying on the floor, snuggled in a blanket, with the sound of chimes, my mind empties and I drift off.

Kuru is linked to the neighbouring Jarvisydän Hotel & Spa, where you can try 'fat' bike riding (with big tyres) or take forest or lakeside strolls. I opt for another sauna.

The Finns, often viewed as intro-

verted, in the sauna seem liberated. I chat to a woman celebrating a family birthday with everyone from granny to son-in-law in the swimming cossies. It's Saturday night and a chance to get together, get a sweat on and drink beer.

'You feel so much better when you come here,' she says. I can only agree.

TRAVEL FACTS
MARGARET was a guest of Visit Finland (visitfinland.com). Saimaa (saismsaimaa.fi/en/Finnaire (finnaire.com, 020) which flies between Heathrow and Helsinki from £100 return person. Rates at Hotel Puumaharju (hotellipuumaharju.fi) start at €146.