



Photos by Simon Broughton

Sommelo Festival, Finland

Simon Broughton has the Finnish boutique festival experience, which includes saunas, lake dipping and plenty of intimate musical performances

All too often festivals are simply rated by numbers. The more people there are, the more successful they must be. Glastonbury with 175,000, Sziget with 300,000, Coachella with over 500,000... Yet some of the best festival experiences can be small and intimate. Sommelo in Finland falls into the boutique model. Its biggest venue is a world-class concert hall with 650 seats – packed for the iconic Finnish band Värttinä last year. Sommelo, by the way, isn't a place; it means a ball of something – straw, tree-bark and also, metaphorically, songs. "When you sing," says artistic director Pekka Huttu-Hiltunen, "the song can come out of a sommelo."

The home of the festival is the small lakeside town of Kuhmo, 600km from Helsinki and close to the Russian border. The main venue is the Kuhmo Arts Centre, a fine concert hall that is also home to the Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival. Performances take place here, in the church and other venues around the town, just a few minutes walk from each other.

Last year's international artists included bluegrass fiddler Ruthie Dornfeld and musicians from the highlands of Vietnam. They always feature a top quality *kantele* (zither) player, in this instance Pauliina Syrjälä. Alongside Värttinä, other Finnish artists included progressive band Alamaailman Vasarat, accordionist Markku Lepistö and wild *jouhikko* (lyre) player Pekko Käppi. His bowed *jouhikko* is decorated with a skull with red flashing eyes, he wears black nail varnish and has wild hair flopping over his face. "This is a hit song from Finland, maybe 250 years ago..." he says and launches into something pretty extreme, but thrilling.

Historically, Kuhmo has been Finland's gateway to Russia. It was from here that painters, poets and crucially the writer and *runo* song collector Elias Lönnrot ventured into what the Finns call Viena Karelia. It was in this region of Russia that Lönnrot gathered the poetry from which he created the *Kalevala*, the national epic, in the mid-19th

century. Inspired by this heritage, after three days in Kuhmo, the festival moves across the border for performances in different villages of Viena Karelia (you need a Russian visa).

The activities over the border have been developed with Juminkeko, an organisation in Kuhmo dedicated to the history of the *Kalevala* and developing cultural tourism in the region. They have a gallery and centre in Kuhmo where you can view films and buy books and recordings.

At the heart of Sommelo is runo song, the archaic folk style that inspired the *Kalevala* and is still an important inspiration for the contemporary folk scene. "The runo song tradition exists here still," says Huttu-Hiltunen, speaking about the Russian side. "When I went to the Sibelius Academy and told them I wanted to study the runo song tradition in Viena Karelia, they didn't believe there were still singers. This area is culturally very rich and it's important to expose and revitalise its culture."

From 1920 to the end of the Cold War the border was closed and the frontier region was a no-go area without a special permit. It means it's also very rich in wildlife and I went bear-watching with photographer Lassi Rautiainen. That evening we didn't see a bear,

but watched for a long time a wolverine and a wolf, which are much rarer.

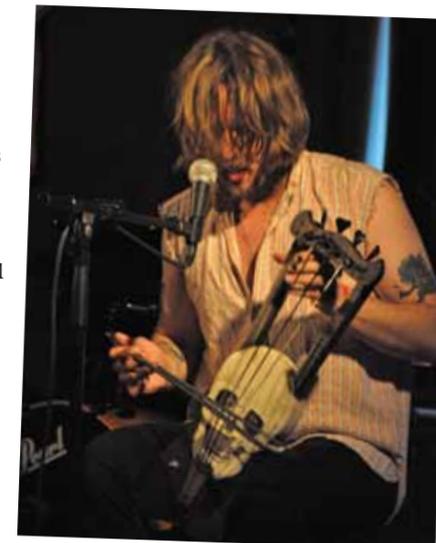
Very little was known about the folk culture on the Russian side. When Huttu-Hiltunen first went in 1991 and met some of the old singers, he thought they'd learned from books or recordings, but no, they'd grown up in the tradition. "In Sweden and Norway you can research the old traditions in written documents, but here literacy didn't come until the 1920s and we have an unbroken oral

At its heart is runo song, the folk style that inspired the Kalevala

connection to traditions going back hundreds or even thousands of years."

Not that aged runo singers are wheeled out for the festival. That wouldn't be appropriate or interesting. But younger artists come over from

Finland and there are local performers in the Republic of Karelia on the Russian side. The difference in performance styles is telling. The Russians organise a concert in Uhtua, one of the larger villages in the region. Apart from a couple of well-stocked supermarkets, the place is like a Soviet time warp. There's a statue of Lenin, a gloomy hotel and a culture house where the show is held. It has a rather fine mural celebrating the *Kalevala* with Väinämöinen playing the kantele at its



centre, but the show is Soviet folklorique with nylon costumes and fixed smiles. The contemporary experiments and fascination with the archaic tradition encouraged by the Sibelius Academy that the Finnish musicians bring is something else altogether.

On the Russian side, the highlight is the village of Haikola on a small island in one of the larger lakes, Kotijärvi. There are just a few wooden houses and an atmospheric cemetery. "This pine was already big when Columbus set out for America in 1492," says Markku Nieminen who runs Juminkeko, gesturing up at a magnificent tree between the wooden crosses. A decade ago, this village was deserted, but now after the regeneration that Juminkeko has brought, there are people living here permanently. There's a place to stay and it's an idyllic location for the final Sunday of the festival.

Singer and the accordio duo Puhti programmed music and events in different places around the cluster of cottages. One moment they were in a boat, then there were performances on a small wooden stage and – most remarkably – shamanistic fiddling on the beach from violinist Tuomas Rounakari. The vast lake, forests and intense music in the warm sunshine were unforgettable.

The most extraordinary experience in Haikola is the traditional smoke sauna – a small wooden hut close to the water's edge. The heat is soft but intense and jumping naked into the lake at 2am, when there's a red sky that never really darkens, sets you tingling. Aside from the music, it's things like this that make the Sommelo experience unique. ♦

+ DATES This year's festival is July 1-5
+ ONLINE sommelo.net, juminkeko.fi



Clockwise from this image: Shamanic fiddler Tuomas Rounakari; Puhti duo on stage in Haikola; Pekko Käppi with his customised jouhikko