

Mad dogs and Finnish men

THAT MOST quintessentially English sport – cricket – has outposts around the world, but few are as prestigious – or pretty – as Suomenlinna, a sea fortress ten minutes’ ferry ride from downtown Helsinki.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the islands comprising Suomenlinna host an open prison, Finland’s biggest bell, what is believed to be the country’s largest sauna (a converted naval laundry), a church popular with couples seeking a beautiful wedding location and a brewery popular with players seeking refreshment after participating in this most social of games.

Cricket has been played in Finland since 1972. The Helsinki Cricket Club spent their first 20 years travelling to Moscow or Stockholm to get a game, but today more than 500 cricketers play indoors and outdoors throughout the year, a figure set to rise following the Finnish Cricket Association’s winning of an annual Pepsi award for junior development in March.

Earlier this millennium, the Helsinki City department for sport approved the playing of cricket on the island. Now, come summer, members of Navy MTS – a union of naval players and those belonging to the splendidly titled Men’s Thinking Society – don whites and protective gear to stage matches on a

gravel surface using a nylon mat in place of the traditional wicket used on grass pitches.

These thinking men come from a variety of backgrounds. President Juha Harjunpää is commander of the Seventh Mine Warfare Squadron and Heikki Mahlamäki, whose Finnish accent has a New York flavour from his time there as a child is a commodore.

Jukka Hytti is an executive producer in Helsinki’s Q Theatre and Johannes “Your Highness” Lassila is a film producer.

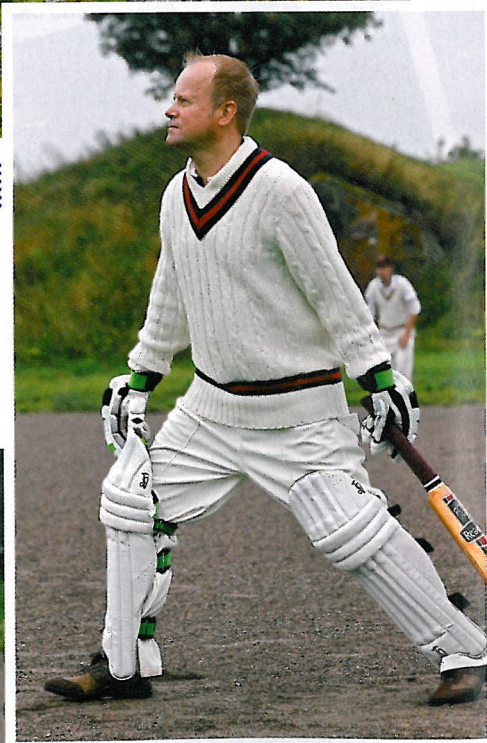
According to Lassila, “Finns are found in ice hockey, ski jumping and war – we’re good in sports for which you need a helmet!”

The playing area’s proximity to the sea’s waves means a big hit from a batsman can send the ball into the water, meaning fielders – outfield players responsible for returning the ball to the bowler – sometimes have to remove their whites. “I once fielded the ball from the sea,” says Lassila. “I was down to my under-pants and had to swim a few strokes out!” ■



FORTHCOMING FIXTURES ON SUOMENLINNA:

Matches will be played on
Saturday June 27 and
Saturday August 15,
weather permitting.
Finnish Cricket Association
www.cricketfinland.com



ABOVE
Juha Harjunpää, president of the Navy Academic team, in action.



LEFT
Cricket has been played in Finland since 1972.

Getting there

Regular Helsinki City Traffic ferries connect Suomenlinna to central Helsinki year round. Boats depart from Market Square between 6 am and 2:20 am.

www.ytv.fi/eng/transport/timetables

Time out

There are several excellent places to grab a bite to eat or a drink on Suomenlinna Island. Located in a small wooden villa, Café Piper boasts an excellent view over the sea from its sprawling terrace. Brewery restaurant Suomenlinnan Panimo features a beer garden tucked into the arched vaults of a jetty barracks that dates back to the Russian period. Café Bar Valimo is a laidback eatery located in a restyled former ammunitions foundry next to a quay.

www.suomenlinna.fi