

THE  TIMES

Saturday March 9 2019

Voyages

Travel special



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families**

6 Family cruises

On board with Moomintroll and Little My

A voyage between Helsinki and Stockholm brings Tove Jansson's charming children's book characters to life, says *Zoey Goto*

It's Friday night and we are on a ship somewhere deep in the Baltic Sea, swaying on the dancefloor as Moomintroll throws his paws in the air. A raucous Finnish pop song begins and the crowd of young revelers instinctively starts performing a dance routine that could rival the macarena, led by Little My on stage. It's the closest I've come to a rave in about two decades and, if I'm honest, my most fun night out in recent memory. Our first evening on the Moomin voyage had started with a bang.

I had signed up for the weekend-long trip on the insistence of Summer, my seven-year-old daughter, who is a big fan of the Moomin books. The series by the Swedish-speaking Finnish author Tove Jansson, first published in 1945, continues to capture young hearts with its whimsical tales of a family of white trolls and their eccentric friends.

Since we had barely set foot on a boat before, it was decided that this Moomin mini-cruise offered just the right amount of time on board to test our sea legs, without

overcommitting to a longer voyage. Organised by the Finnish cruise-ferry company Silja Line, the two-night trip runs every weekend throughout the year, departing from the main port in Helsinki on Friday evenings. Arguably it is more of an over-nighting ferry journey than a cruise, but it would give us a taste of a holiday at sea.

Silja Serenade and *Silja Symphony*, which can carry almost 3,000 passengers each, cruise overnight to Stockholm, where you spend the day at your leisure. On Saturday evening the ships sail back to Helsinki, arriving in the Finnish port shortly after breakfast. With the travelling taking place while we were asleep (always a good idea when you have children in tow), it seemed an ideal way to experience two Nordic cities in one weekend and get a dose of Moomin fun in the process.

As the official sea carrier of the fictional family, Silja Line makes every effort to ensure that these cruises are as Moomintastic as possible. As soon as you step on to the ship's central promenade, the friendly trolls are there to greet you. The Finnish children, having been raised on the fairytale characters from birth, are well versed in how to interact with a life-size Moomin. It did, however, take us a few attempts to grasp the etiquette, which involves fearlessly running at and enthusiastically hugging the furry characters.

Although British children may have become less familiar with Moomins in recent years, all is set to change this Easter with the launch of the new *Moominvalley* television series on Sky. The star-studded cast includes Rosamund Pike as the voice of the wise Moominmamma, Richard



Moomin World in Naantali, Finland. Right: the Moomin Café in Helsinki

Yoaode as the Ghost, Will Self as the orderly Mrs Fillyjonk. To get the children ready I would suggest that they start by reading *Moominpappa at Sea*, especially because it involves a waterborne adventure, while adults should try Jansson's *The Summer Book*, a beautiful tale of everyday life on a tiny Finnish island (without Moomins).

After our meet-and-greet we headed up to our compact family cabin, decorated with woodland scenes and illustrations of

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*EmeraldPLUS: Demonstration at a stonemasonry school
- Day 6 **Sibenik, Croatia**
This charming town boasts fantastic sights which exist from Venetian times such as the marble Cathedral of St. James (B, L)
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Visit the iconic Krka National Park famous for its waterfalls. Later, cruise to Trogir and learn about its rich history on a guided tour (B, L)
- Day 8 **Trogir - Split, Croatia**
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JENNI VIRTÄ (LINDEN LUTABO) OY

Need to know

Zoey Goto was a guest of Silja Line. A family cabin sleeping six costs from £499; a standard double costs from £250 for the Moomin weekend cruise, not including meals (tallinksilja.com/moomin-cruise). Information on Moomin attractions can be found at moomin.com



the Moomin characters. With only ten Moomin-themed cabins on each ship, these are the hot-ticket suites to book. That evening we managed to put a small dent in the plentiful buffet, then hit the Moomin-disco dancefloor before being swayed to sleep by the rocking of the ship. At dawn we braved the deck, the salt water spraying our faces as we glided past inconceivably small and remote islands with pretty wooden summerhouses perched on top, before docking in the port of Stockholm.

Our first Swedish stop was the charming Junibacken museum, which does a fantastic job of bringing children's literature to life through interactive play areas and live performances. There's a strong emphasis on the books of the Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren, so it's worth brushing up on the tales of Pippi Longstocking before you visit. Summer particularly loved the story train, which drifts

through stage sets of famous Swedish fairytales, managing to be just the right side of scary to thrill children.

After a meatball lunch in the museum's circus-themed restaurant we took a short stroll up the hill to visit Skansen, an open-air museum (in fact, it claims to be the world's oldest) showcasing traditional Swedish life, with houses and farmsteads from all over the country representing different eras from 1720 to the modern day. It also has a decent petting zoo and pony rides.

Then it was a quick dash back to the port before we boarded the cruise ship and relaxed in the penthouse whirlpool area, surrounded by kitsch palm trees. Our Moomin-fest continued the next morning as Summer eagerly jostled in line to have Little My painted on her face, with Moominmamma on hand to judge a drawing competition. Although the dialogue is mostly in Finnish, Summer seemed unfazed and got the gist of the activities — apparently, when you're a fan, Moomin is a universal language.

Giving the Moomin characters a farewell hug, we left our ship in Helsinki on Sunday morning to continue our adventure. We headed over to the cheerful Moomin Café in the Lasanen department store, which blends Scandinavian design with child-friendly facilities, including a Jansson reading corner, and quirky touches, such as cappuccinos embossed with Little My's face in chocolate.

Helsinki is also home to four official Moomin shops, selling everything from

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collectable mugs by the Finnish porcelain brand Arabia to Snufkin's chocolate bars. The Moomin brand has become big business globally and generates an estimated €500 million (£434 million) annually. Many of these unusual products can be found in Helsinki's boutiques and department stores, and we found ourselves cramming Moomin-shaped biscuits and Snork Maiden socks into our hand luggage as keepsakes.

Should you want to extend the Moomin theme beyond a weekend, Finland is also home to Moomin World in Naantali, near the southwestern city of Turku, a two-hour train journey from Helsinki and open from June to August, as well as set periods in autumn and winter. We had the pleasure of visiting the rideless theme-park island on an earlier trip and found it to be a genuinely magical experience, with interactive performances, theatre shows, parks, cafes and buildings to explore.

Moomin fans in Japan have a Moomin-valley Park opening in Saitama this month, and closer to home there are two Moomin-themed shops in London, with talk of a Moomin café opening imminently in the capital.

So, had our Moomin-extravaganza weekend left us with Moomin overload? Strangely enough, it hadn't. There is something in the timeless Moomin tales that resonates today as much as ever: the message of finding pleasure in the small things in life, not always playing by the rules, and the joys that a family adventure can bring.

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