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Jarmo Paussu and Sari Niinikoski say.*

Accidental Shopkeepers on the French Riviera

Sari Niinikoski and Jarmo Paussu first decided to move from Sweden to balmy Madeira. Along the way their plans changed and they now run a Nordic shop and café on the Côte d'Azur in the southeast corner of France.

“We'd dreamed about Madeira for quite a while and had visited the island on vacation to check if it was really our place,” explains **Sari Niinikoski, 47.**

“We'd spent several years in Sweden and wanted to try something new. So we packed our stuff and dog into a car and headed to the South of France to visit our friends.”

As it happens, the couple became so enchanted by Antibes, a small coastal town on the Côte d'Azur – also known as the French Riviera – that they decided to settle down there permanently.

An Intuitive Decision

“I'm originally from Hämeenlinna, and when I moved to Stockholm I swore that I'd never live in a small town again,” Niinikoski says. “Antibes is indeed small but it has a nice international atmosphere and a lovely climate.”

The Côte d'Azur has about 15,000 Nordic residents. The local Finns and Swedes have their own associations: the Finnish Club on the Riviera and Rivieraklubben. There were few Nordic products available, however. The couple saw here a good market opportunity which influenced their decision to stay in Antibes.

“Some people thought we were crazy,” Niinikoski recalls with a laugh.

“We didn't speak much French and had no experience in retail. And we didn't have

“My advice to others dreaming of starting a business in France is to learn the language first,” **Jarmo Paussu, 43,** says.

“It makes it so much easier since the French speak only French. Another important thing is to find a reliable local partner to help in the jungle of bureaucracy. We took care of the red tape connected with starting a business through an accounting company.”

Exhausting Culture Gaps

Niinikoski says that the Nordics and the French differ in their working styles. This could be seen in the process of setting up the company, which dragged on as papers were sent to the wrong places, e-mails were left unanswered and real estate agents were hard to reach.

“Finding the business space alone lasted four months, since a service mentality doesn't seem to be a part of real estate agent's job description. It seemed that many agents just didn't feel like dealing with a client who spoke little French, or to bother to understand a bit of English. It took a long time to take care of banking business as well, and you couldn't always trust people's word. Our bank promised to take care of an important matter within a week, but it eventually took nearly a month. This is frustrating when your livelihood is at stake,” Niinikoski explains.

“The whole process took almost a year and exceeded our worst imaginations. But

we didn't give up. At times it was quite funny – like when I was at the police station dealing with permit issues and knew more about them than the police, after just surfing on the net.”

“And some things just don't make sense here,” Paussu adds. “When we were applying for the local social security card, *Carte Vitale*, one official demanded to see additional documents, while another said the following week that they weren't needed at all. Papers you'd already sent in were asked for again – and the process just went on and on.”

Happy Customers

The eventful journey is finally over and the shop and café have been welcomed with such enthusiasm that it made all the trouble worth it. The couple has received a lot of positive feedback and comments: finally somebody dared to set up a Nordic shop.

“There was clearly a demand for this, as we've had a steady stream of customers since we opened last December,” Paussu says.



Knit socks can be bought in the shop. But



Serena and Laura enjoy coffee.

There is a vast selection of both Finnish and Swedish products, such as rye bread and crackers, cheeses, sausages, canned products, salmon and candy. Exotic game products – canned elk, reindeer and bear meat – are available mainly for French customers, while the local English community comes to the shop to buy Nordic sill (pickled herring).

The gift assortment ranges from hand-knit woolen socks and wooden Mõlky garden games to Reino slippers, Iittala glass and products by the Swedish housewares company Sagaform. There are plans to extend the selection to include Danish and Norwegian products, mainly as a gesture of goodwill. Logistics are difficult and expensive. The couple tries to purchase the items wholesale as far as possible and import all products exclusively from Finland or Sweden.

“It’s great to watch customers who visit us for the first time and find their favorite products on our shelves,” Niinikoski says. “Sometimes we get foreigners with roots in Finland or Sweden. They exclaim happily when they spot things familiar from their trips to visit relatives back home.”

Most of all, Niinikoski misses good milk from Finland. However, she cannot have it in the selection because of the long delivery time.

The couple has divided the work so that Paussu stays in the kitchen and Niinikoski behind the counter. Paussu conjures up Karelian pies, jelly doughnuts, cinnamon rolls and meat pies. These treats are in great demand, as are the meatballs and shrimp sandwiches, which are particularly popular among the Swedish customers.

The shop’s website features a baking schedule, telling customers when their favorite pastries will pop fresh out of the oven. For bookworms, the café has a small library with Nordic literature.

The couple works from morning to evening, five days a week. The shop is open all day, without a lunch break, as is typical for French businesses.

The selection includes the wooden Mõlky garden game, which is gaining popularity in France.

“This is not a hobby or an experiment. We’re 100-percent invested in this. And it feels like a good decision,” Paussu says.

Beach Walks with Åke

Niinikoski regrets that the couple has not had time for hobbies and social life so far.

“We’ve met lots of people through the shop, and some of them will probably become friends over time. But we don’t really have a clear day rhythm yet, and the work has been so hectic that we haven’t had energy for anything else,” she says.

Thanks to their English bullterrier Åke, the busy couple must find time to exercise daily. Their home is within 10 minutes’ walk of the beach.

“Åke loves swimming and running on the beach, but it’s often too hot for him here in the summertime,” Niinikoski says. “On those days, we take a walk early in the morning or after the sunset.”

The couple enjoys their life in France despite the linguistic and bureaucratic difficulties.

“It’s beautiful here and the climate is lovely,” Niinikoski says.

“People are friendly and polite and it’s nice that even strangers greet each other. It feels, however, that our relationship with the locals often remains on a superficial level. That will certainly change when we learn the language better and people learn to know us.”

The longer the couple has lived abroad, the prouder they are of their Finnishness.

“Independence and freedom – and how much our grandparents have worked for them – are great things,” Paussu says.

“Finnishness is connected with honesty, diligence, sense of responsibility and a high quality of work and products,” Niinikoski muses.

Text and photos by Kaarina Griffiths

<http://www.nordictemptations.com/>



Active Club Members

The 600 members of the Finnish Club on the Riviera have a huge assortment of activities to choose from.

“The French national game, *petanque*, is definitely the local Finns’ favorite,” says the club’s chair, **Elisa Aspholm**.

“It’s played weekly in Nice and Antibes and we arrange a tournament with other Nordic teams once a year. Members who spend their summers in Finland can’t stay away from it there, either, so they meet in Tampere and Helsinki to play the game. The society’s golf club, yoga and literature circle are popular as well, and you can chat with other Finns at the weekly coffee and lunch meetings. We’ve even made bus trips around France and Italy together.”

Club events featuring Finnish guest speakers are true magnets. Poet **Heli Laaksonen** visited Riviera most recently to talk about her work. The club has also hosted eminent speakers such as **Erkki Liikanen**, Governor of the Bank of Finland, and Professor **Esko Valtaoja**, author and astronomist.

“We listen to our members’ requests and try to find interesting people from different fields to visit us here. It’s fun to arrange these events since they are always well-attended and the reception so enthusiastic,” says Aspholm, who was drawn to Nice by the light and warmth in 2000.

Text by Kaarina Griffiths

www.rivieran-suomi-seura.org