

Teemu Ahola/ Visit Finland

Interviewed by Susanna Saari / Turku UAS

Welcome to Turku Tourism Academy's "I'm in tourism industry too" podcast series, which discusses career paths, job profiles and current phenomena in the tourism industry. My name is Susanna Saari and I am a Senior Lecturer in Tourism and Wellness Business at Turku University of Applied Sciences. Today we are going to discuss with Teemu Ahola, Director of International Operations at Visit Finland as well as an alumni of Turku UAS with a Bachelor Degree from Hospitality Management.

Teemu, I know that after graduating from us you went to further your studies. Tell us a few relevant things about your educational background.

First, of course, thanks for inviting me. It is great to be here. I graduated from Turku University of Sciences in 2005. During the studies that the University of Sciences, I actually I did an exchange programme to Vietnam in 2004. That was one of the additional highlights of my study path then. Also at that point and still I am really into in Asia is a business is a culture. So while studying, I also did some additional production that did Turku. First team, there was an east and Southeast Asia study programme that I that I completed during my bachelor studies. After graduation, I did continue to UK to Sheffield Hallam University for one year Master Study Programme 2005 to 2006, where I graduated as a Master of Science in International Business and Management in late 2006.

OK, excellent. Sounds very interesting. Tell us about your career path. I mean, obviously, after you studied, you have been working. So what have been the sort of turning point points in your career so far?

So after returning from UK back to Finland, I was looking for an international business opportunities well. I ended up on working for a steel importing company, so totally outside travel yes, but it was in the national business. But quite soon after I realised that my passion is travel in tourism and after one year I changed for Kaleva Travel. Nowadays known as Carlson Wagonlit Travel, as a sales manager there. In 2007, actually I worked nine years at Carlson Wagonlit Travel, first few years in sales and then in account management responsible for corporate large accounts. So nine years at Carlson Wagonlit Travel. In 2017, I was appointed for Visit Finland at that point it was still Finpro, nowadays part of Business Finland, and there I started as an account manager responsible for Asia market. That was a really interesting position at that point; 2017, 2018 until 2019 before the pandemic Asia market was booming a lot, and it was busy days. We had great budgets and a lot of activities in in the region and with that also a lot of travelling involved. So basically for two years I spent one week in a month approximately in Asia, taking part on different sales activities and workshops and travel fares. Really interesting

times. And since 2021 until today ongoing, I'm now a Director of International operations at Visit Finland, responsible for a team of 11 people in eight different markets. My team works with the travel industry stakeholders in Visit Finland's target markets. Responsible for tour operator partnerships, airline partnerships, organising sales events, workshops. Visit Finland is to facilitate business between Finnish suppliers and international buyers. So that's my role today leading a team and really enjoying.

Congratulations for achieving this. This position at visit Finland sounds really interesting as well. Well, we all know that we had these past few years quite turbulent times or maybe not even turbulent times but very quiet times with COVID-19. What keeps you in the industry still?

Well, of course, passion for the industry, that is one and definitely the opportunity in my position to work in truly global international position, so that that is the biggest driver I think that. That's part of travel industry as a whole that you have a great possibility and chance to work with different nationalities, different cultures. Also my team consists of many different nationalities and different cultures, but also business cultures. Now also one big driver is to support Finnish industry and really to work for Finland. I would say that the pandemic is over. People are people are back travelling but now with the situation in Russia and of course, the Asia, which is, also we lost huge source market China, which is only now slowly returning. So this one and also that there are for example in Finland, the Eastern Finland which was strongly focusing on Russian business, we need to reshape the whole region and bring new business opportunities for those suppliers. We work really strongly also for our Lapland partners because we know we all know that winter is really, really strong. But we aim for more year round travel so that the seasonality wouldn't be that strong. So now, we work for summer so that people actually would not only be seasonal workers, but they could actually work throughout the year and have. Of course, that has an effect on service levels and all that. So driving Finland those less known destinations and making business as possible for as many as possible.

So you already opened a little bit this I wanted to ask you what is what would be a sort of a current phenomenon you think is the most relevant to the tourism sector at the moment would it here in Finland be seasonality or can you maybe highlight some other phenomena as well?

Well, indeed, seasonality is one. That is what we are aiming for to, to promote those less known citizens we call also soldier citizens as to say autumn, spring. Summer is good in in some parts of Finland winter is good in some parts of Finland. Autumn, there is a lot to do for all regions or all destinations. The same applies for spring, so lengthening the lengthening the seasons definitely is one I would say

also. Even though travel travelling behaviour that did not change that much after pandemic, there are still some phenomenon. Maybe the sustainability could be one to highlight. People want to stay longer in the destinations also. We can see that respecting the local culture, using the local services. This is something that we truly are happy to see. Also avoiding mass destinations, so this is something that we see and then then there we have. A lot to offer. Of course, AI is kicking in so all the possibilities that that that enables plan my trip. You just ride it and you have the whole programme ready for you. Influencers, they have such a huge impact on decision make people and they go individual over the group travelling so maybe highlighting a few of those.

So from your point of view, it seems that there are quite a few phenomenon happening at the same time which you think are sort of changing the customer scene and we will see how it will be in the future. Now well, if I was a young person now thinking maybe considering getting a student position in an applied science university, or on vocational level, or perhaps thinking of a job in the industry. How would you convince me that it a right decision to make?

This industry offers millions of opportunities. I mentioned that this allows you to work with different nationalities, different cultures. This is a big industry for Finland. Also, it employs over 140,000 people to service industry and huge industry. Endless opportunities, then, if you seek opportunities to go abroad, it is one of the biggest industries in the whole world. So yes, asset, endless opportunities. So, I think that convinces you know.

It is like listening to myself, you know, when I talk about the tourism, I think it is absolutely the best industry in the world. OK, so finally we are getting closer to the end. It's summer season, it has already kicked in while we are doing this podcast. So what would you recommend as a sort of a domestic tourist destination? Where would you definitely visit during the summer season here in Finland?

Well, there are of course loads. Now talking with you - you have an amazing archipelago outside of Turku, so that is one of my favourite destination regions in the whole of Finland, especially for the summer. Going just for a "Ring Road" whether you take it with your bicycle or whatever. Or exploring those beautiful islands, it is one-of-a-kind in the whole world, so maybe I would point that.

Is there any particular place here at the archipelago, an area where you have already been or where you maybe would like to go now?

Outside the Turku archipelago towards Helsinki, there is one destination that I have not explored - actually a hotel, "The Barö", so that that might be one that I would really like to go and see.

Now, yes, I know about it, yeah. Yes, actually this is a good hint also for our listeners of the future other episodes, because we will be interviewing one of the directors of “The Barö” also. So you know if you have the chance to revisit the podcast series then maybe also listen to this interview.

OK, I think we are coming close to the end now. So it's time to thank both you Teemu for being with us, and also you, the listeners and also welcome to listen to our other episodes of the series. Thank you very much.

Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

Thank you.