

True blue and white

IN FINLAND we love our flag with its blue cross against a white background.

The Finnish flag, designed by Eero Snellman and Bruno Tuukkanen, is relatively young. It was approved by parliament in May 1918, a year after independence was declared.

Prior to 1917, our official flag was that of the Kingdom of Sweden (until 1809) and the Russian Empire (from 1809 to 1917).

There were variations of the Finnish flag before 1918. When the Finnish national anthem was first sung in 1848, writer and historian Zacharias Topelius kicked off a debate about the Finnish flag.

Blue and white quickly became the most popular colours, but no official proposal was dealt with in parliament before 1918.

Whatever time of year you visit Finland, chances are that you will see the blue cross on white flapping majestically in the wind. The reason is simple – we have many official and traditional days for flying our flag.

Yet, we are actually quite formal about using the flag. We even have a law about it, with specific days and times when it can be displayed. There are six official flagging days – February 28 (the day of *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, and Finnish culture), May 1 (Labour Day), the second Sunday of May (Mother's Day), June 4 (Armed Forces Day and the birthday of former president marshal Mannerheim), Saturday between June 20 and 26 (depending on which day Midsummer and the day of the

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Finnish flag fall) and December 6 (Independence Day).

In addition to these days, the blue and white flag will be flown during election days, referenda and the day the President of the Republic takes office.

Over the years it has become tradition to fly the flag on a number of other, less official occasions.

There are a total of 11 unofficial days; these include Runeberg's Day on February 5, Minna Canth's Day on March 19 (also known as the Day of Equality),

Mikael Agricola's Day on April 9 (Finnish Language Day), Veteran's Day on April 27, Snellman's Day on May 12 (the day of Finnishness), the

Day of Remembrance on the third Sunday of May, Eino Leino's Day on June 6 (the day of poetry and summer), Aleksis Kivi Day on October 10 (Finnish Literature Day), United Nations Day on October 24, Swedish Day on November 6 and the second Sunday of November when we celebrate Father's Day.

The flag of the European Union came into the picture through our EU membership in 1995. There are no official rules on its use, but we sometimes fly it next to our national flag on May 9 (Europe Day) and other select dates.

And it doesn't stop here. In the Nordic countries you'll find a flagpost in almost all backyards and outside cottages in the country. You'll see the national flag flown at the time of celebration (a wedding or birthday) or sorrow (a funeral).

All of this might sound a bit over the top for the casual traveller. But rest assured, the Finnish flag is not a symbol of "we-are-better-than-the-rest" nationalism. We are not nationalists or football hooligans who rip off their shirts to reveal a tattooed flag. We simply fly our flag because we think it's quite cool and we are pretty proud of it. ■■



Pekka Mustonen