Between last Saturday night, when I wrote my last entry, and tonight, our days have been bookended by trips to islands. Last Sunday we traveled with our Finnish friends, the Haario’s, to Villinki Island. Villinki Island is worth the small amount of trouble it is to get there for a number of reasons. I’ll give you just a few. First, the island is little visited, though it is within the limits of the city of Helsinki; even on the weekends, a small ferry visits the island only a handful of times a day. This gives it a distinctively local, i.e. not a touristy, feel. Second, it has a truly unique rock shoreline that is good for picnics and swimming (see Alex below) and that is owned by the city and so is free to all.

Third, the trip to the shoreline requires a pleasant, forested walk from the ferry dock. And finally, there is a large complex for the blind people of Helsinki on the island, many of whom visit on the weekends during summer. This is interesting in and of itself, but it also means that there is a café at the ferry dock that serves ice cream and drinks, including, importantly, beer (see the picture).
Our day on the island was highlighted by our company with our Finnish friends (who were having their thirteenth wedding anniversary), our first view of the open sea while we’ve been in Finland, and the exciting swimming in what was, for us, sizable surf.

We’ve heard from several locals that we must “enjoy Helsinki while we still can”. And they say this in a very serious tone. Apparently the winters are a challenge in Finland even for those who are used to it. Bolstered by this, we’ve committed ourselves to an outing of some sort every weekend while the weather is good. This weekend, yesterday in fact, we decided to visit Suomenlinna Island. Contrary to Villinki Island, Suomenlinna is a major stop for tourists visiting Helsinki, it being extremely interesting, beautiful, and only a fifteen minute ferry ride from the city center. It is a great place to spend a summer day. Its beaches (both stone and sand) are great for swimming, but the island’s main attraction is a massive Swedish military fortress from the 1700’s. Apparently, during the time that the fort was constructed, Sweden had claims to being the biggest power in Europe, and Finland was a part of the Swedish empire. The Swedish name for the island was Sveaborg (the Fortress of Sweden) and it was meant at the time of its construction to be the rampart of the empire’s eastern border. The fortress is massive, took 43 years to complete, and remains the second largest construction project ever taken on by Sweden. I cannot do it justice in these few lines. You can visit the web, or the island itself, for more information. The day was great. We swam and the kids and I explored the many tunnels (see the picture) that still give safe passage to visitors and are within the walls of the fort - those that weren’t blown to bits in some battle, anyway.

INFO: This week, the kids started school, and I started work – so far, so good.