



Elyse

from Kitchener
to
Finland

“I am super excited for the adventures yet to come”

So I've been in Finland for 3 months now and after reading the beaver tales from the past couple years, I'm going to try to not talk about the same things. I arrived a couple days earlier than everyone and so I got to meet my host parents

when they picked me up from the airport. Those first couple days with my family were amazing. Within the first two hours in the car with my host parents, my dad said I was part of the family and I really did feel it. Even within a couple hours, these people really reached out to me and I feel like I have a lifelong connection.



Karkku, the language camp, was amazing. It was a week to remember. I made friends who I know I will stay in contact with for my entire life, people from all over the world. I wasn't able to connect with all 103 other exchange students of course, we have a fairly decent sized family of Canadians and "honorary Canadians" who still keep in touch daily.



But through language lessons and culture lectures, we learned what the Finnish people would be like when we met them. And to be quite honest, they terrified us. Even though I had already met my host family, I was still nervous when they came to pick me up a week later and for the 2 hour drive back to Muurame, my new hometown.

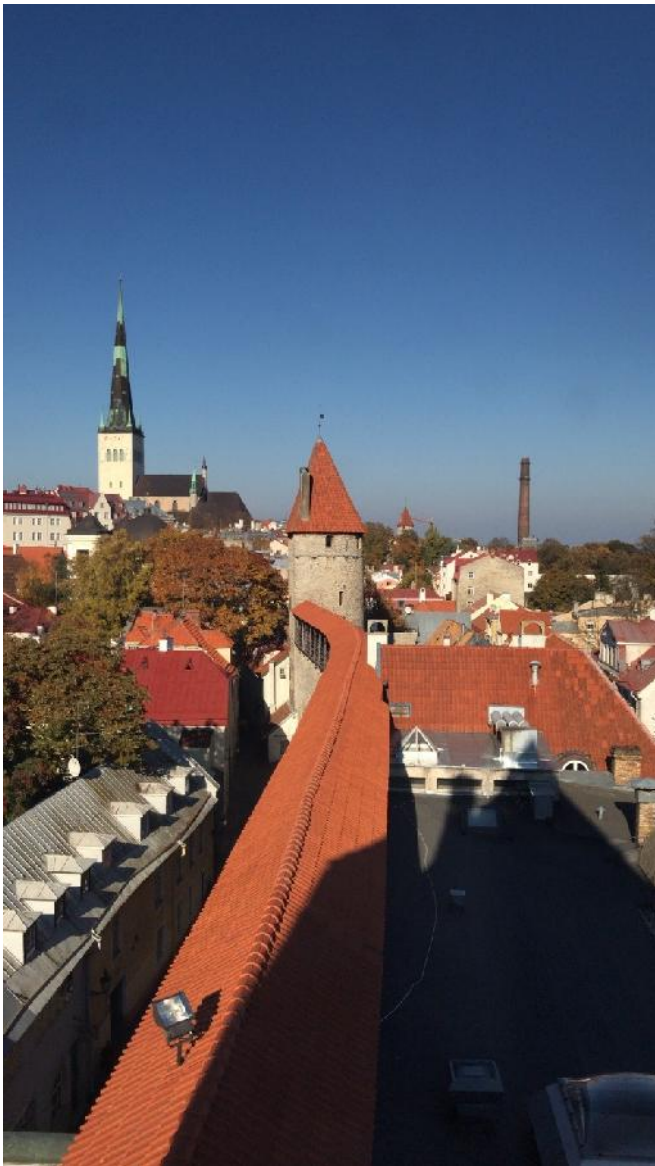
In my school, I have 4 other exchange students with me, three of them are staying the whole year, and one of them is leaving in January when we are getting a new exchange student from Australia. In a school of 250, that is a lot of exchange students. At this point, we all have our group that we all hang out with together and have fun. We go on walks in the forest, we celebrate birthdays together, we go bowling and out for dinner.



They are a really fun bunch. I also get to travel around to visit other exchange students that I met back in Karkku, and visit other cities in Finland to learn more about the history and culture. I find that Finnish people are not at all like what we had been warned about. Even though I was terrified to walk into class, not only a stranger to everyone in the room, unable to speak the language surrounding me, and a week late, these people wanted to talk to me and were always willing to help. Within the first couple weeks, there was a group of girls who were always there to support me and answer any of my questions.

I met my first good Finnish friend in math class. We were told at Karkku that the best way to talk to Finnish people is over "real things." Ask for directions, talk about homework, plan to do things together. So one day, I needed help with a translation, and the friends sitting around me couldn't help so I went over to a group of guys who I had never talked to before, sat down, and said, "what does this mean?" They all were surprised and gave me deer in the headlights eyes. But after talking to them for a little while, one started explaining the math in Finnish to one guy, and that guy would translate into English. The translator ended up being my best friend in Finland so far. After that day we worked on our homework together, went on adventures, and hung out in cafes. This is a friend I know I will have for a very long time.

Every once in a while my Rotary District gets together to catch up with each other, usually about once a month. Our last Rotary get together was a weekend long camp where we got to participate in group activities. We had a bonfire together with traditional Finnish sausages and other typical Finnish treats. We went on walks and hikes through the woods. We saunaeed and jumped in the freezing cold lake (keep in mind it is 10 degrees at the time). And we had a three hour dance party while playing international music from Italy, Canada, Japan, Brazil, US... Everyone was having the time of their lives. Everyone was jamming out and dancing and having fun. We were all having such a good time, but in the end, everyone became really tired and it turned into more of a singing party than a dancing party. We were all on the floor singing along to some camp classics, Riptide, Africa, and Kaksi ihmistä.



A couples weeks later, everyone got a week off of school for Fall Break. My family went on a short trip to Estonia, just across the Nordic Sea. It's a common trip for Finnish families. There's an ongoing cultural joke that they do it to buy cheap alcohol. We went to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, for 2 days. The first day we spent in the new city, shopping, another thing Finnish people come to Estonia for because everything is so much cheaper. In the middle of Tallinn, on one side of the street, the city looks like a typical modern American city; high rises, big screen advertisements, busy roads and congested streets. And on the other side of the main street it looks like a medieval city; cobblestone roads, old cathedrals, touristy cafes looking out of the town square. It is a very stark difference just by crossing one street. The second day we got to tour the old town. We walked past flower markets, and the old town hall, and along the old town wall, looking across red ceramic roof tiles, and beyond the city, the water of the Nordic Sea.

One of the more difficult things about Finland is the darkness. Because Finland is so far north, it gets much less sun in the fall and winter. But Finnish people know how to take advantage of that. There are always lights up in the streets and wrapped around trees. Every year, in all cities, there is a competition called the festival of lights. Near my small town of ten thousand people, there is a university city around the size of Kitchener, and every year, that city, Jyväskylä, wins the competition. For a whole weekend, the entire city is lit up. Every tree in every park is covered in lights of every colour. Between trees are moving sculptures similar to huge butterflies and birds. There were lit art works. Every bridge was mounted with colourful moving lights. There were dancers moving around in the dark with lights on their arms and legs so you could see only their movements. Everyone from the surrounding area was out to witness the spectacular show of lights. The night was no longer dark but lit up with the smiles of the entire community out to see the beauty of the city.



As much as this exchange is about my experience of Finnish culture, I am also an ambassador of Canada and want to show Finnish people some of the Canadian culture. And so, the American exchange student who goes to my school and I teamed up to show the Finnish students at my school what Halloween celebrations look like in North America. We planned this event for a month and half, had to ask around for private funding, and put in hours and hours of hard work. In the end it all payed off. We had mummy wrapping races, bobbing for apples, pumpkin carving contest, and a costume contest. We made 150 candied apples for the students who showed up dressed up and free candy and pumpkins seeds for everyone. We had an amazing turn out and more people than I expected dressed up. Even the teachers dressed up! Everyone seemed to be excited about something that they had never experienced before.

November 2018

I am really excited for this year to come and to get to experience and understand more of the Finnish culture. In a week I get to experience the magical north of Finland where Santa lives with wild reindeer in Lapland. After that I am excited to experience the Finnish Independence Day, which is a somber day of remembrance. And after that it's Christmas, something that is celebrated with much enthusiasm here. I am super excited for the adventures yet to come and just want to thank everyone who has taken a part in giving me this opportunity of a lifetime. Thank you all so much.

Elyse

If you want to follow my travels more precisely and see more pictures, I have an instagram account for my exchange that is [converse.around.the.world](#). I post pretty frequently with all the fun activities I have done so far on my exchange and from there there is a link to my blog.