



Samantha

from Waterloo

to

Finland

"I finally fulfilled my lifelong dream of meeting Santa"

An exchange student once said to me: "You spend 17 years building a life, and then leave everything for 1 year. You spend 1 year building a life, and then leave everything without knowing when you will return." I have now spent over 6 months exploring, learning and living in Finland, and I have come to understand how true this really is. I recently noticed that when people ask me about Canada, I no longer refer to it as my home. Not because it isn't home to me, but because now I have more than just one place to call home. This change, no matter how small and trivial it may seem, was a pivotal point in my exchange year. It was when I realized that I was no longer a tourist or a visitor. It was when I realized that I had built a life in a new country, with friends, family and a routine. It was when I realized that I found comfort in the streets of my city, in the route of bus 143 (and also bus 145 if I don't mind the extra 2 minute detour), in the company of Finns (both stereotypically quiet, and hysterically loud), in hearing Finnish conversations *and* in hearing English spoken with a Finnish accent. This level of comfort- the level at which I realized that I was home- was what made me realize that there is not just one place in the world that is my home, because while I do have a home in Canada, I also have a home here in Finland. Not only that, but I have found home in my school community, in my friends, in nature, and in myself. For this reason, I am torn between feelings of constant "homelessness" and having a home in everything and everyone around me. This confusing and equally rewarding feeling has left me more grateful than ever about my exchange, and pushes me to make the most out of every opportunity to come.

With that cheesy exchange-student jargon out of the way, I am more than happy to update you on what I have been doing over the past 3 months.



The end of November was full of excitement for myself and other exchange students as we were preparing for our 5 day trip to Northern Finland, an area in the Arctic Circle called Lapland.

More specifically, we stayed in Muonio, a town sitting at latitude 67N, and only 1000m from Sweden. The 16 hour bus ride to Muonio was tiring and long, but it was spent singing songs with friends from around the world. Coming from Canada, I doubted that there would be any winter views that I hadn't seen before, but driving through Finnish Lapland- with massive snow covered trees towering over you and reindeer roaming the forest- I realized immediately how naive I had been, and just how different and magical everything was.

We spent the next few days going on husky rides, reindeer rides, going to reindeer farms, nature centres, skiing, learning about the Sami people (the only indigenous people in Scandinavia), experiencing days with only 3 hours of light, sneaking across the border into Sweden for a few minutes, and most of all- spending quality time with friends, both new and old.



On our way back home, we drove through Rovaniemi, which is home to the REAL Santa Clause (Joulupukki). I finally fulfilled my lifelong dream of meeting Santa, and it was incredible. It was a perfect trip filled with laughter, love and spectacular views and I can't wait to return to Lapland in the near future.

Moving on into December, I had a busy month with many upcoming activities. I began the month by moving to my second host family. The move was emotional as I had an incredible first family, but my current family is equally as amazing and made the transition easier than I could've imagined. Though I moved, I only moved around 200 metres down the street, so the surroundings are still quite familiar to me and I can visit my first family often. The beginning of the month brought a very special day for Finland. On December 6th, Finland celebrated 100 years of Independence. For months prior, countless "Suomi100" promotions and advertisements were found on flags, on television, in stores, and everywhere in between. It is an honour to spend any country's Independence Day amongst it's residents, but it is even more special to celebrate a milestone such as 100 years with your new Finnish family. I spent the day baking "pipari" (gingerbread) with my host mom and sisters, and spent the evening with my aunt, uncle and cousins. On Independence Day instead of loud celebrations, Finns have a tradition of sitting at home and watching a live broadcast of the President's Independence Day Ball. All of the notable Finns attend, and people love to watch them shake hands with the president, and love to vote on the best dressed. It is a tradition that I never imagined I would experience, but am so glad I did.



Throughout the following weeks I watched the Nutcracker ballet with my mom and sisters, visited Porvoo with my first family (a charming old town about an hour from where I live now), I celebrated my little sister's birthday, I started dance practices for prom at school,

attended "pikkujoulu" Christmas parties, baked countless treats, visited Christmas markets, skated (a LOT), and learnt Christmas songs. Finally, it was time for Christmas. My family travelled to Pori, a town in Western Finland where both my parents grew up. We stayed with family there for 5 days, eating, going on walks, watching Christmas movies, going to the sauna, going to hockey games and eating some more.

On Christmas we began by having a sauna, then went to visit graves of relatives and friends. At noon we watched the Christmas Peace speech on TV that signaled the official beginning to Christmas day, and in the afternoon, Santa visited our home to give everyone their gifts. It was one of my favourite days so far this year, and I cherished every moment spent with my new family. From Pori, I went to visit my good friend Valtteri (past exchange student in Waterloo) in his home town of Vammala. I stayed with him for a few days and got to meet his family, work in the family bakery, and spend time with his friends. This was really special as we spent last year exploring my hometown in Canada, and this year we got to explore his.



To kick off the New Year, I travelled back to the capital to celebrate with friends. I spent part of my day in Helsinki watching fireworks and meeting exchange friends, and spent the rest of the evening in Espoo with friends from school.

Ringling in 2018 in a new country is something that I will never forget.

As December provided a holiday from Finnish lessons and other responsibilities, I was actually looking forward to getting back into things. I began the second level of Finnish courses, and language development -while slow- has been steady with help from my host sisters (who don't speak English) and friends at school. I have also begun taking ballet lessons in Helsinki, and I have loved being active and sharing my passion for dance again. On top of that, I have been active in the newly established Espoo Rotaract club as Vice President and Secretary, and look forward to what this opportunity will bring. Other than these commitments, I have been spending time with family, attending weekly Rotary meetings, going to museums, skating on the Baltic Sea, travelling to Turku for a weekend (a city on the West Coast), speaking about Canada at other schools, and spending time with friends.

In a few days, I will be having my Finnish “prom” or “Wanhat” as we call it here. This is a celebration of the 2nd year students moving into their senior or “Abi” year, and it is done so by performing 10 dances that range from Waltz, to Tango, to Rock and more. We have practiced for almost 2 months and will perform these in ballgowns and suits for our parents and school peers. I am extremely excited for this, but I guess you will have to wait until my next Beaver Tale to see how it went.

Again, I will end my report by saying thank you. Thank you to everyone involved in making this exchange possible. The Rotarians in District 7080 and in District 1420, the Rotary Club of Waterloo and the Espoo-Meri Rotaryklubbi, and to my families and friends in Canada and in Finland. I am so grateful for what I have experienced and for what is to come. I get to live a very colourful life, rich in experience and daily challenges, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Kiitos, ja nähdään muutamassa kuukaudessa

(Thank you, and see you in a few months) !!

Sam

