



Elyse

from Kitchener
to
Finland

"My year in Finland."

It feels like so little time has passed since my last BeaverTale. I really can't believe that this year is almost over. It feels like I belong here now and that this is my home. I can't even imagine what it will be like when I come back to Canada. I think that I will experience more reverse culture shock than anything I had here.



Since my last BeaverTale, I have experienced a couple of Finland's cultural special days. Back at the end of February, every year there is a formal dance that all the 2nd graders perform in just after the 3rd graders have graduated. It is something that the second graders prepare for over multiple months and it counts as an actual class that you get graded for. It is a really big deal and the students really go all out. All the girls wear gorgeous ball gowns and all the boys were matching tuxes. In my school there is an uneven number of guys and girls, so I was partners with another exchange student. We had lessons twice a week for multiple months. We learned how to waltz, tango, grand square, a bunch of other dances.

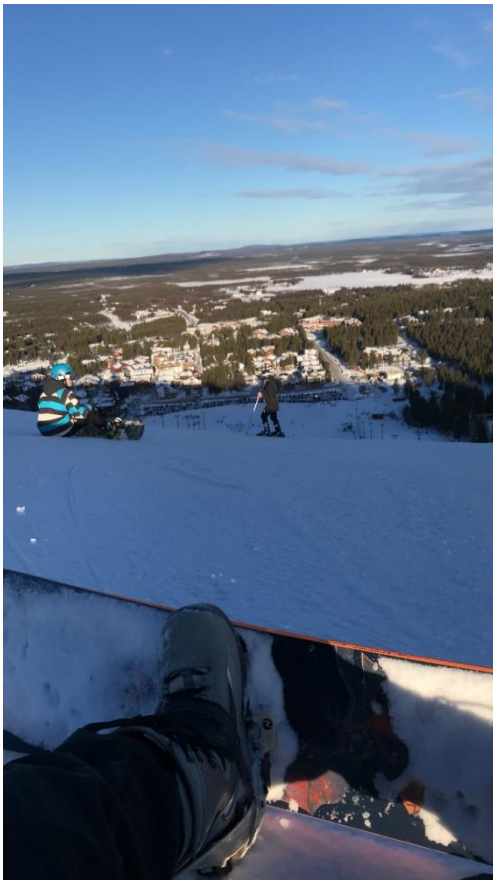
The whole day was amazing. All my friends and I woke up early in the morning to get ready. By 9 we had our first performance at the retirement home. We had two other performances that day, one for the younger kids at the elementary school, and our final performance. This one was for the parents and grandparents and friends, really anyone who you could invite. It was a really overwhelming experience, with the nerves, the stage lights, the large audience. It was something that has no Canadian equivalent.

You may remember from my last BeaverTale that I got the chance to go to Lapland as a Rotary planned event back in November. It was really an amazing experience and I was very excited when my second host family informed me that we would be going again in March. Similar to Canada, there is also a spring break in March and often families take that time to go on skiing trips. Where better to ski than the arctic “mountains” in Lapland. And so, we all climbed into the car Friday afternoon, to drive for five hours to a northern city, Oulu, where we visited and stayed with relatives for the night. The next morning we climbed into the car again to drive the next five hours to Lapland.

Thirty minutes from the ski resort we stopped at an ice hotel. The entire thing was Game of Thrones themed. Every wall was a masterpiece inspired by various episodes. My host dad made the funny observation that in each room there is a smoke detector and in each hallway a fire extinguisher even though the entire building is made of ice and snow, including the beds.

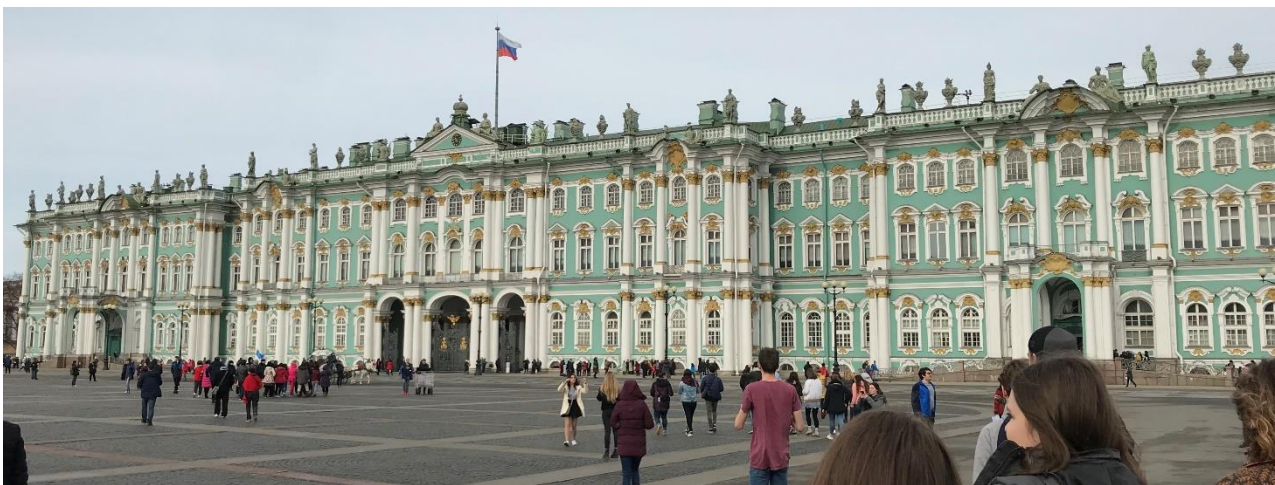


After 30 more minutes of driving we arrived at the ski resort. That evening we relaxed as a family in the chalet together. The next morning, the adventure began. My host parents were both big fans of cross-country skiing. I had only tried it once before at camp Wanakita, and I was not good at it whatsoever. With my family however, we skied for ten kilometers to a nearby reindeer farm where we had lunch around a bonfire. Once we were rested, we took the same path back to the chalet for another ten kilometers. The next day, all my muscles hurt. Muscles I didn't know I had hurt.

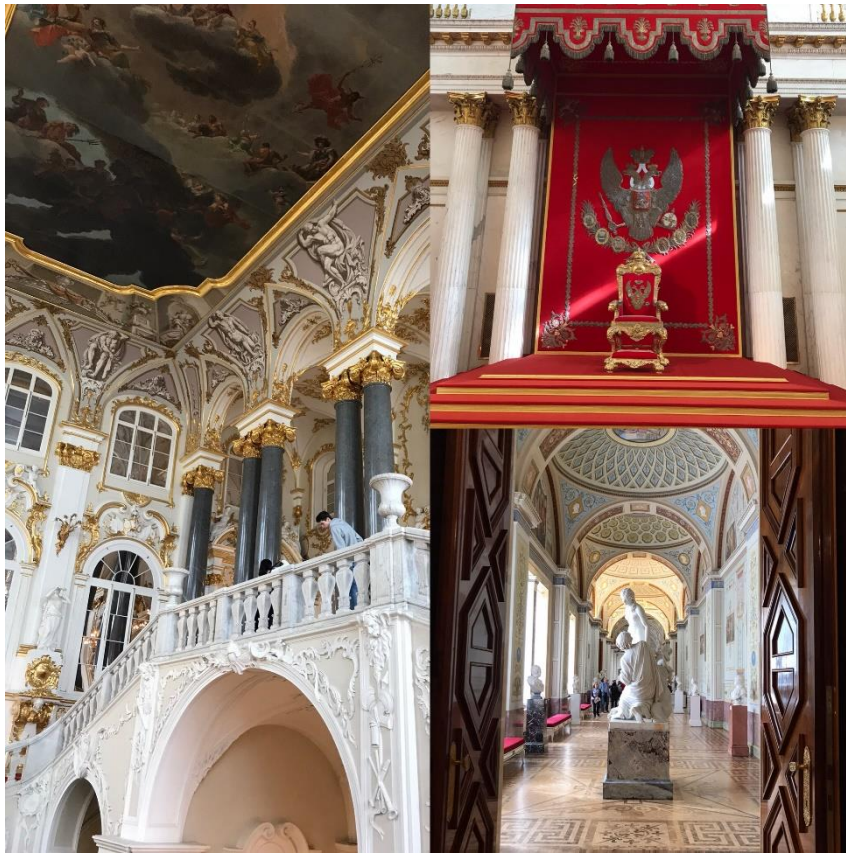


But this day started the snowboarding. With my host sisters and my host brother we snowboarded all day starting at eight in the morning when the slopes opened to nine at night when the slopes closed. This was my second time snowboarding ever, the last time being almost four months before, so I was a little rusty. We started on the easy slopes and by the end of the first day I was already good enough to do the red slopes. The next two days we continued snowboarding from early in the morning to late in the evening. It was so much fun but really exhausting. I was happy to sleep the whole ten-hour drive home Wednesday evening.

Similar to the Lapland trip in November, Rotary Finland also organized a trip to St. Petersburg. I had stayed the night at my friend's place in Tampere, and so we were one of the first ones to get on the bus in the morning. It was another long bus ride to the Russian border, about ten hours. When the bus arrived in St. Petersburg I was surprised by how large of a city it was. From the outskirts of town to the center where our hotel was, it took us 40 minutes with little traffic. Once we arrived at the hotel and had checked into our rooms, we had a couple hours of free time. It was about eight o'clock when a collection of my friends and I went out into the streets of downtown St. Petersburg to explore. We walked around a little downtown and took pictures. That first night, everyone was tired so we all slept well.



The next morning we had an early start. A bunch of my friends and I woke up in time to see the sunrise. We went to the hermitage museum which is one of the largest collections of art in the world.



This museum was started as a private collection of Catherine the Great in her Winter Palace. And so, the first art pieces were installed directly into the walls, and as it was a palace for the emperors, the building itself was gorgeous. Everything was gilded gold and there were beautiful romantic paintings everywhere. We got to see the throne room, and Catherine's personal chapel, as well as many other beautiful rooms. We got to see masterpieces such as the Madonna Litta, a collection of ancient Egyptian relics, and beautifully kept armour

pieces from around the world and from many different centuries.

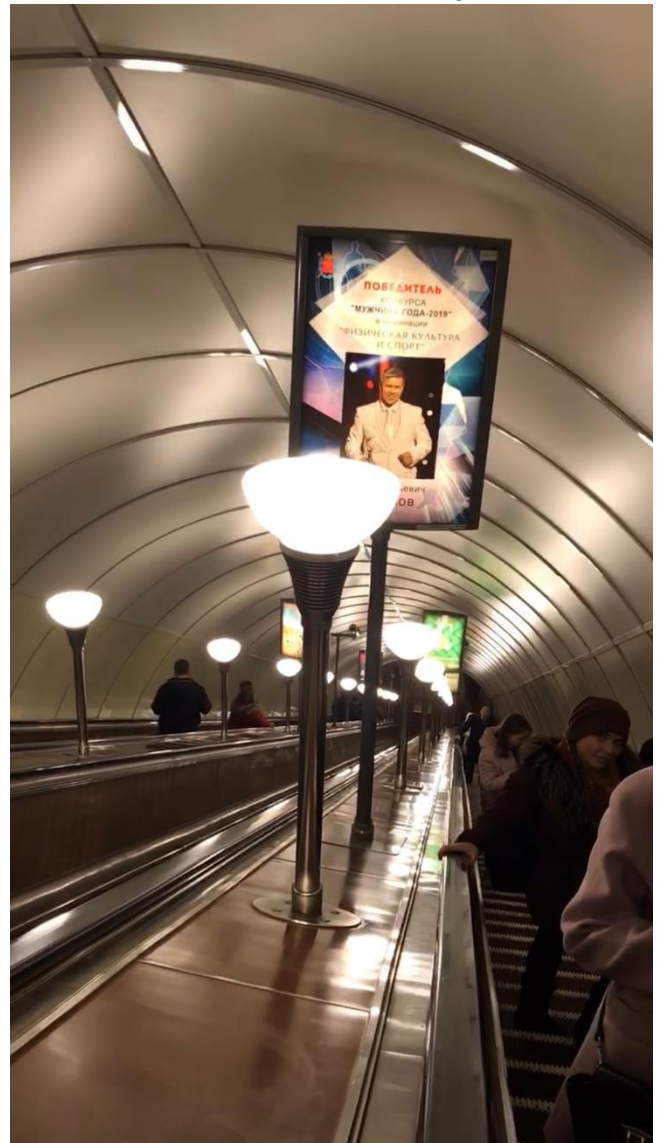
After lunch we went to the National Museum of Anthropology which was one of the first ever public museums in the world. The museum was filled with artifacts from cultures around the world dated back to long long ago, but our tour guide focused most of the tour on the collection of dead babies that were in the original collection. It was quite a strange experience. That night we went to a production of traditional Russian dances and music performances. It was maybe some of the most impressive dancing I have ever experienced. Barynya, Kamarinskaya, and Chechotka. If you ever get the chance to see this, I highly recommend it. Again, when we reached the hotel that night, everyone was very tired from the day of walking, so we were all happy to go to bed as soon as we could.

The next morning, my friends and I decided to wake up even earlier. In St. Petersburg in order for the transportation boats to get through properly, the bridges, and there are a lot of them, open in the middle of the night, and this was something that we wanted to see. So we all got up at four in the morning to go and see these bridges. Of course, it was Saturday, and the transport ships do not come through on the weekend, so we didn't get to see anything, but another beautiful sunrise, which was definitely worth it might I say. This day we got a tour of downtown St. Petersburg. We got to see many beautiful buildings and see many important monuments. Too many for me to list or show pictures of, but probably what was most interesting was after the tour, when we had some free time. A collection of my friends and I, found a church which we were able to take the stairs to the top and look over the whole city from a height. It was absolutely breathtaking. That morning it had been raining, but the skies cleared up just in time for our climb to the top.



We were all reluctant when it came time to head back to the hotel for supper. When we reached the bottom of the many stairs, my friends followed me for direction, which in hindsight they probably should not have done because we ended up going the wrong direction. This is how I ended up lost in Russia. After walking for nearly 40 minutes, we finally checked google maps to find out that we were still another 30 minutes from the arranged pick up point for the bus. We had 5 minutes until we were supposed to be there. We called the Rotex for our bus and informed him of the situation. After going through multiple plans, we ended up deciding that taking the metro back to the hotel ourselves would be the best choice.

Now the subway system in St. Petersburg is one of the deepest in the world. Because St. Petersburg has so many rivers, the land it is build on, is very marshy. When the subway was being built, the construction workers had to artificially freeze the ground in order to be able to dig underneath it. I knew none of this before I got into the station, so I was shocked when I couldn't see the end of the escalator from the top and ride lasted for what felt like 5 minutes.



When we finally arrived at the hotel, it was nearly time to leave again because that evening we were going to a Russian Ballet. We hurried to have supper and change and then we were off again. The ballet we got to see was the Nutcracker. It was truly an amazing experience. It's magnificence is difficult to explain in words, but the costumes were beautiful, the choreography amazing, and every time the flute played, it almost brought me to tears.

When we had to leave from Russia I was so very disappointed. I wish we could have stayed longer. It was really such an eye opening experience, not just from the beauty and the historic cultural experiences, but from what you could see of mundane life as well. I didn't think it before, but I definitely had in my mind some prejudices against Russian people from portrayasl in the media. Now I know that those are wrong and Russia and Russian culture and two things that I would like to learn more about in the future.

Another more weird thing about Finland, is the weather. Here, almost annually they have something called "takatalvi" which roughly translates to "backwards winter." It's your typical cold snap in spring, but here, it means snow in April. On April 7th, there was no snow on the ground and there was green grass. On April 8th, everyone woke up to heavy snow falling all day.



By the next day, everything was covered in snow again and we had a winter wonderland. At the same time there were warning for icy roads and forest fires. That's not something I am exactly used to.

As you may know, sauna is very popular here in Finland. There are more saunas than cars. Every family has one or has access to one. There are public saunas. It is a vital part of Finnish culture. Along with that in the winter comes avanto. Avanto is when you jump (or not really jump) into a frozen lake. If you start in sauna, usually reading 90 or 100 degrees, and then jump into a body of water that is nearly frozen, it gives your body a bit of a shock. But then everything is good when once again you run back into the sauna to warm up again. It's another very interesting experience that I would recommend to anyone brave enough to dip into a frozen lake. Just bring your portable sauna to the annual polar bear dip in Toronto and you'll be set. Everyone has one of those right? It's not just Finland?

Finally I want to talk about my friends. I have really made some amazing friends here in Finland and ones that I will not soon forget. This is one of the hardest parts about exchange, but it's also one of the best things. I know I will have friends that will last forever just from this year. They are not necessarily people that I will get to see often, since most of us live on different sides of the world. But we grow so close through all the experiences we share together, and these are not things that I will be able to share with anyone else. The friendships that you make on exchange are some of the strongest bonds and it really is amazing.



May 2019

Honestly this whole year has been an amazing collection of awesome experiences. From the people I have met to the places I have been, I will never forget it. Thank you to all who made this possible. It has been amazing and I am looking forward to my last couples months here with sadness but also looking back with fondness.

Kiitos,

Elyse

