



Elyse

from Kitchener
to
Finland

"It's the mundane everyday life things that is the exciting part."

Six months seems like a long time when you are planning in to the future, but no amount of planning would have gotten me here. Arriving in Finland feels like forever ago. As I am sitting here eating muunki and drinking glögi as an afternoon snack in the little cafe across from my school, I could never have imagined this. I knew about the big trips that I would get to go on, and about the exciting new activities that I would get to do, but it's more the mundane everyday life things that is the exciting part. That's what has changed me. That's the amazing life changing part about exchange.

At the end of my last beaver tale I was very excited for my upcoming trip to Lapland. In late November, Lapland usually is covered in snow, but because of the excessive heat last summer in Finland, the winter was slow coming and there was only a couple millimeters of snow on the ground. It was still it was really exciting. I got on the bus at one in the morning. On that bus ride was the first time seeing some of my friends since my first week here in Finland, so you can guess that we did not sleep very much that night on the bus ride. It was a 10 hour bus ride from Jyväskylä to Muonio, a small skiing resort town north of the arctic circle right beside the Swedish border. In total there were 150 of us exchange students.

When we finally arrived in Lapland we were given a couple hours to get settled and catch up with everyone before we went to one of the ski slopes to try on our boots for the next days activities (either cross country skiing, downhill skiing, or snowboarding). Once that was done, since we were at the ski hill and it wasn't open for public use, we took advantage of that and had fun sledding down one of the beginner slopes. To some of the exchange students who hadn't been in snow before or in a

country that experiences winter like Canada, this was a completely new experience. For me and the other Canadians, it was just another fun day with normal winter activities with good friends. And of course we pushed the limits of the sleds and went down the hill head first, or standing. We even made a long chain of exchange students and all went down together and attached, everyone holding onto the feet of the person in front of them. It was lots of fun. It resulted in many bruises and lots of snow in the face but was entirely worth it. That night was just a relaxed chill night for everyone to hang out together and catch up.

The next day was busy right from the get-go. We had to wake up early to get ready for a day on the slopes. I had cross country skied and downhill skied before in Canada, so I wanted to try something new. Snowboarding it was. We were given 5 hours on the slope, the only time that Lapland gets light in the winter. There were no instructions for those who chose to snowboard, so I was left on my own to figure out what to do. It took lots of falls, but after a couple hours I pretty much had it down.

After a long morning and afternoon of snowboarding, we went to visit a reindeer farm when the sun was already setting. Reindeers are semi-wild creatures and so they sometimes stay in enclosures and other times are left to roam free(ish) in the Finnish forest. While waiting for our turn to take rides in a reindeer carriage, we were able to visit with and pet the reindeers, although we had to make sure to stay quiet because they are quite nervous animals, not being used to humans.



On the third day we got to visit with some husky dogs and puppies before going on a dog sledding trip. It didn't last very long but it's been something I have wanted to do for a very long time. Something I get to check off my Finland bucket list. Lots of the dogs' names were normal, but some of them were pretty funny: Twitter, Bark, #.



That evening, we went to an outside campfire in negative 20 degrees where we had dinner, and cookies. Due to the large number of exchange students only half of us could be there at a time, so the first half went while the other half stayed at the hotel, and then after 30 minutes, we went back to the hotel and the others filled our spots. Even though we couldn't be there all together, it was an evening of bonding and an unforgettable campfire filled with laughter and joy.

In Finland, Christmas is a big deal. It's not a big lead up before Christmas though. Kids get off school a week early, and parents usually a couple of days early. Around that time the family sets up a Christmas tree as you would normal see in Canada; an evergreen tree with lights and glass balls, or garlands wrapped around, and a star on top.

February 2019



One main difference though is that they celebrate Christmas on the 24th. The whole day is spent preparing for the evening. Christmas is mostly spent with your closest family; Mom, Dad, sister, brother, maybe Grandma and Grandpa. Most importantly of course And if there are small children in the house then Joulupukki (Santa Claus) visits each house to hand out the presents. When he arrives at the door, you welcome him in, sing him a song, and then he'll give everyone their presents before leaving to the next house.

The best thing about my exchange year is the people I get to meet. Of course, that makes it all the harder to say goodbye. I already had to say goodbye to one of my best friends who I got to meet here in Finland. She was from Australia and had to leave in early January with all the other Aussies. I only got to know her for 3 months, but those 3 months meant a lot. She lived in a town near mine and I didn't get to see her often, but when I got to see her, it was always a great time. All of her friends got together to say goodbye to her at the airport when she left, and it was one of the hardest goodbyes I have ever had to say. Our group of friends will never be the same.



February 2019

But with goodbyes, come new hellos as well. Last month I got to meet our new Aussie. My host club here in Finland received a new exchange student from Australia. It's lots of fun getting to know him and show him around my city as much as I can.

This week has been the last week for the 'third graders.' They are the graduating class of this years lukio (the Finnish equivalent to high school and there are many celebrations going on in the school, a goodbye party to the graduating students and a sort of coming of age party for the students who are now the oldest in the school. Both are things that I am excited to experience. Next week my host family is bringing me back to Lapland for our winter vacation. I am excited to see how different Lapland will look with the typical amount of snow. And of course, there are the big Rotary planned tours that I also look forward to. In early March there is a planned trip to Russia, and later in the year, after school is finished, there is a trip through 6 different countries in western Europe. These are wonderful opportunities and I am so grateful to have been given this chance to experience all that is happening to me this year. Thank you again to everyone who is involved in this program and I really hope that it can continue for a long time.

Kiitos,

Elyse