



Samantha

from Waterloo

to

Finland

"An Experience That School Can't Provide."

As someone who has never spent more than 2 months in another country and never spent more than 1 week away from family, the notion of getting on a plane, flying to another country, and living there for a whole year was terrifying. But that's what intrigued me. Before hearing about Rotary Youth Exchange, I had always had a plan to go straight from high school to university, and continue on my academic path of learning. However, I decided to take the opportunity to learn more about life, more about the world around me, and more about myself, which is something that school can't always provide.

When I heard that I was coming to Finland for a year, I was immediately ecstatic, but I didn't know what to expect. Other than the promise of countless lakes, dark winters and saunas everywhere, this country was a mystery to me. Now, having been here for over three months, I cannot believe how lucky I was to be placed in such a breathtaking country. Finland is an amazing place and I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life telling everyone I know about the magic of this northern country.

My journey began on August 5th as I left my family, friends and hometown to begin the adventure of a lifetime. Leaving the Toronto Pearson Airport, I remember feeling nervous, excited, and incredibly eager to see my new home. After a 5 hour flight to Reykjavik, Iceland, and another 3 hour flight to Helsinki, I caught my first glimpse of Finland through the tiny plane window, and all I could see was forest. As I stepped into the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport I immediately noticed how quiet it was. There were people everywhere, but the normal hustle and bustle I expected when entering the airport was missing, and everything around me seemed calm. This calm moment however, was followed by a rush of excitement and chaos as I claimed my baggage and got the chance to meet all of the other exchange students that would be spending the year in Finland. In Finland, all RYE students arrive to the country on the same day and get to spend a week together at a language camp in Karkku, Finland. Having all spent hours on a plane, we were jet-lagged, loopy and overly-hyper; the perfect conditions for making new friends.

After beginning to get acquainted in the airport, we boarded a few buses to take us 3 hours away to our camp, located at a vocational school in central Finland. Here, we would spend the next week devoting hours to Finnish-language and culture lessons, eating tons of Finnish food (makkara, salmon, potatoes, pulla), swimming in the lake, visiting nearby cities, trying the infamous sauna (the Finnish way...naked), and above all else, getting to know our new friends from around the world. It was a week filled with laughter and learning, and it was where I began to fall in love with Finland and all its quirks. We learned about Finnish bus culture, sauna etiquette, and the world famous school system, which made us even more excited to experience the culture we were about to be immersed in.

At the end of this week, we were ready to go out into the "real world" and continue our exchange year in our individual towns. My host mother Tarja picked me up from camp and we began the 2.5 hour car ride back to Espoo: my new home for the year. Espoo is the second largest city in Finland, and neighbours the capital city of Helsinki. Everything in this city is beautiful. From the architecture, to the forests, to the seaside, I fell in love with it quicker than I could've imagined. I settled into my home and met the rest of my first host family, including my dad, two sisters and host bunny Nöpö. We live in a beautiful house in an area called Soukka, and our backyard opens up onto the sea.

A few days after arriving in Espoo, I attended my first day of school at Tapiolan Lukio. This school (currently ranked the best school in the city) has exceeded any expectations I had of the Finnish school system. All of the doubts I had about interacting with so-called "hesitant" Finns were put to ease on my first day, as dozens of my classmates came to talk to me about Canada and my life before exchange. Perhaps it is because I go to school in a bigger city, but the people at Tapiolan Lukio are not your stereotypical Finns. They welcomed me with smiles and open arms and I look forward to going to school every week because I get to spend time with them. At school I have been taking music lessons, art, photography, ceramics, phys-ed, experimental biology, lab chemistry and will continue to take more. We are also provided with free school lunches everyday, which I personally think are delicious. Later on in the school year, I will have the opportunity to dance Wanhat, which is kind of like Finnish prom. Finnish schools have lots of fun traditions and I look forward to experiencing them all throughout the year.

In the three months that I have been here, thanks to my host family, host club, and new friends I have been on countless adventures. With my school located only a 10 minute bus ride from the centre of Helsinki, I am lucky enough to spend time there every week. I attend Finnish lessons twice a week, and while language learning is a slow process, I can tell that progress has been made. I have been on both bus and boat tours, attended a fashion show, been to Nuuksio National Park, took a day trip to Estonia, visited the island/castle-fortress Suomenlinna, went rowing on the Baltic Sea, ate reindeer, been to museums, carnivals, basketball and hockey games, halloween parties, and got the chance to celebrate my 18th birthday with my host family and friends from the country that I can now call home.

The adventures will continue at the end of this month with a week long trip to the northern area of Finland called Lapland with other exchange students. You will have to wait for my next Beaver Tale in order to hear about that trip and the other exciting moments to come, but for now I would like to say thank you. Thank you to District 7080 and the Rotary Club of Waterloo, thank you to my hosts: District 1420 and the Espoo-Meri Rotaryklubbi, and to my family back in Canada and my family here in Finland. None of this would be possible without your hard work and dedication, and I hope you know that you have made me the happiest girl in the world. This experience already has and will continue to challenge me with the unknown, and push me to try new things, and that is something that I am eternally grateful for.

To express my gratitude in Finnish: Kiitos paljon! Kolme ihana kuukaudet Suomessa.

Moikka!

Sam