



Ainsley

from Woodstock
to
Finland

“Wow, how time flies.”



It's already February and I've now been in Finland for six months. When people tell you that exchange goes by super fast, I never really understood but now that I am more than halfway I realize what they mean. I feel as if it's been forever, that this has always been my life but when I truly think about it I can't believe I can now say it's halfway done. When I think about coming home, I think about having to say goodbye again. You never truly realize how close you get to people and how in the end I won't say goodbye but I'll say "see you

soon" because it may be the end of my one-year Rotary exchange but it's not the end of my Rotary experiences. I will never forget this year and these people and that's why I want to say thank you to everyone in both Canada and Finland for supporting me, encouraging me and helping or have helped me in any way to get this far and will continue to for the rest of my journey.



Last time I was just about to go on my first Rotary trip. This trip was a four-day-long trip to Mournio, Lapland. Lapland is the very top area of not only Finland but also Sweden and Norway. Sadly the week I was there it didn't have it's normal -30 degrees but was only about -3. The first day of this trip started at night with the approximately thirteen-hour bus trip stopping a couple of times to pick up more exchange students the farther North we got. When we arrived it was 11:00 am Finland time and we had time to put our bags in our room and quickly grab something to eat before heading to our first activity which was getting our skiing equipment and some tobogganing while we waited. We stayed in this hotel which was very cabin-like. I had three roommates, two from France and one from America.

The next day it was a reindeer sled ride, learning about the native Lappi weather and other facts and going to the Finland Sweden border. The border is just a bridge that anyone can happily drive over, no stopping, no security, nothing. After lunch my group headed for a snowshoeing walk in the forest then we got to go and visit the husky dogs and go dog sledding. In the evening we went to a local school and put on performances for some of the students and they put some on for us!

The following day we headed to the slopes. Every exchange student got the choice to downhill ski, cross country ski or snowboard and I chose to downhill ski because I had actually never done it before. That day for me was the most fun of the trip; I learned how much I love downhill skiing! I went on every slope as many times as I could in the five hours I had which included a break to grab a warm meal and some glögi (warm fruit juice). The next day we headed home but first spent the morning at the real Santa's village. Before making the long trip back to Lahti.

Itsenäisyyspäivä is Finland's independence day. It takes place on December 6. In Finland the celebration is very different; my school put on a dance a couple of days before in which the girls wear very fancy dresses and the boys wear tuxedos. There was live music, snacks and lots of fun! On the actual day, you eat a very fancy dinner and on tv, you watch the real party which takes place in Helsinki. It's watched live and it's the president of Finland, Sauli Niinistö and his wife shaking hands with all the very important people in Finland which include political people, athletes, teachers and many others plus representatives from countries all over the world including Canada. The dresses these women had were amazing, truly stunning.



It was now December and Christmas was in the air and I was looking forward to learning all about the Finnish Christmas! This is exactly what I did, I spent the next couple weeks doing lots of Finnish Christmas celebrations. It started with my host family hosting a Pikkujoulu (small Christmas). We had delicious food and played a game in which you picked a random gift on the table which was some sort of food either good or strange. I even got a jar of pickles. This was just the beginning of my Finnish Christmas experience. I had a Christmas party with my Rotary district, my Rotary club, my friends, soccer team and even had the opportunity to make some traditional Finnish food. In Finland, the main day is the 24th which includes having family over and eating a lot of food, like a lot of food. Also, Santa doesn't come when you are sleeping he actually comes in the evenings and gives you all your gifts in person. Santa came around 17:00 and even played the accordion and sang some songs.

Wanhat dancing is a very special celebration in Finland, one that I got to take part in! February 6 is Penkkarit day. This is the last day for the third-year students (Abi's) which will be leaving the school to go and study before their final exams in a couple of months. Because of this they also have something called the Vanhojen dancing which is a celebration of the second year students becoming the new seniors of the school. To celebrate this they dance ballroom dancing. At my school, we had nine ballroom dances and one dance which some of the students created. It's a very fun two days that involve dressing up like we are in a fairytale and you're going to the ball. I got to take part even though I'm not a second-year student. My school danced on February 13th for the parents and siblings then twice on the 14th for the other students in the elementary school and the first-year high school students and any other guests!

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