



Eric
from
Kitchener
to
Finland

“A Quite Agreeable Landing”

I chose over a year ago that I no longer wanted to be stranded in my hometown of Cambridge Ontario. I chose to leave mediocrity and discover a new way of life and experience what the world had to offer. This choice has paid off. During my three months abroad I have laughed, loved and discovered more than anyone of my friends could have in such a short span of time. Exchange is being thrown out of the nest while tied to stones. It is the equivalent of starting a new video game on insane. The learning curve is extreme and the payoff is well worth it. You will never have another experience such as this one in your entire teenage life. Make sure, you appreciate everyone who got you here, your parents, your Rotarians both local and international and your friends for supporting you every step of the way, so let's begin shall we.

I arrived here in Finland on August the 7th 2016, a year and date that I will never forget. From the plane to the airport the ripe feeling of adventure had enveloped my being and I instantly wanted to experience everything possible. However I knew there was a task at hand and that task being leaving the airport. A bus had been arranged prior to our arrival to transport us to the intro camp at Karkku. However before we would embark, we were greeted by our oldies, flag in hand and wielding excitement. My oldie, Montanna had contacting me several times before my arrival in Finland and needless to say I couldn't wait to meet her for real. Montanna would play an integral part in the first few days of my exchange, but back in the airport she greeted me with open arms and overwhelming enthusiasm. Her and the rest of the oldies instantly claimed their newbies and began briefing them in everything about Finland.

After several hours of waiting around and meeting new people we were informed that our buses had arrived and to gather at the rendezvous point. We all piled into the bus anxiously awaiting the camp we'd been told so much about. Unfortunately our excitement was stunted by the realisation that we had a three hour bus ride ahead of us.

After several hours of inconsistent sleep we arrived at Karkku, a small vocational school often rented to patrons looking to host events. We were planned on being situated there until Saturday, so that they could teach us the ways of the Finns and explain in terrifying detail the rules and their severity. The week I spent at Karkku was something else. Nearly every student out of the one hundred and thirty-one sent in August expressed immense amounts of energy that formed an amazing week that can only be experienced to be appreciated. By the end of the week we had all experienced the infamous Sauna, visited Tempere, and eaten the various dishes that Finland had to offer. As a result we had gotten really close as a group and Saturday became one of sad goodbyes and farewells to those we were likely not going to see till Lapland.

It was arranged that I'd be driven home by friends of my host family and alongside their exchange student Martha. Luckily for me the rumours of Finns being quiet didn't really ring true, and my driver and I made some lovely conversation on our way to Muurame. When we finally arrived I awoke to be greeted by an enormous forest home. My host family the Muilus were investors of sorts, and had made their fortune off of several successful business ventures in the past hence the massive house. Once inside Jukka and Sari Muilu, my host dad and mom, greeted me, gave me a few presents and explained to me the house rules. These consisted of keeping my room clean and doing my own laundry, two rules I had no problem upholding. The day before school I got to take a boat ride to Jyväskylä with my host parents where I met a lovely French girl who ran her own crepe stand. We had a nice conversation and my host family then bought us crepes. I got to meet my host brother Marcus and Jussi, and watched some motorcross biking.

Suddenly it was my first day at school, Montanna had been texting me all day the day before to make sure I was there when she was. She greeted me with open arms and a smile just as she had at the airport. I was then escorted to the principal's office where I was introduced to the principal and the staff of the small school of two hundred. He took me on a tour of the facilities and showed off his pride and joy the Virtual reality machine he had set up for student use in the computer lab. This indeed became my favorite part of the school quite quickly. Once the tour ended my school life began and we chose some courses for me to take and discussed a variety of after school activities as well. When lunch came around Montanna introduced me to her friends and I instantly befriended them all.

This was extremely lucky, if I hadn't found myself in a small school and with a connection like Montanna it would have been a much longer process to make friends in Finland. Fortunately god smiled on me that day and I was graced with what could have possibly been the best case scenario. After that my life began, I continued to create bonds with my incredible host family and went on some crazy adventures alongside my new Finnish friends.

Thanks to Rotary I visited a theme park and made some powerful connections abroad. My host family, since we first met, has brought me to Thailand and Lapland both of which blew my mind. I cannot emphasise enough the extreme generosity of this first host family and the bond that I hopefully I can maintain with them for years to come. Recently I switched families and staying in touch with the first has become harder, but luckily my new host family is equally awesome and my old one lives right across the street. These past few months I've grown immensely as a person and matured just as much.

In conclusion I hope my brief description of my experience here in Finland inspires future exchange students to show there never ending gratitude towards those who put us here. This is truly a once in a life time experience where every day counts and the environment you're in and the people you meet become your most valuable assets.

Eric