



**Kyle**  
from  
**Mississauga West**  
to  
**Finland**

*“Live in the moment, while it’s still here.”*

9 months, 14 days, 5 hours since I arrived in Finland; and 9 months, 15 days and 15 hours since I left Canada. The 9 months here have passed faster than I could have imagined, it seemed just a few weeks ago I met the newbies, and now I have just a few weeks left in Finland. In total I have exactly 42 days left to spend in Finland, I never thought I would end up with such few days left. My greatest achievement however, how I have spent the time I have been here so far.



A lot has happened since the 6 month mark. One of the biggest things that happened after the newbies arrived was the Finnish prom, “Wanhat”. The “Wanhat”, unlike North American Prom, is much more rehearsed. It is not just one night, but months of preparation and practice go into making every dance perfectly choreographed for the big day; and after months of practicing the special dances it was finally time to perform. Before this I thought that we dressed up nicely for North American prom; the Fins put our prom attire to shame! All the boys wore slim fitted suits and tuxedos, especially the traditional “Frakki”. The “Frakki” is a tux with a long tail (similar to a penguin), a vest and a special tie. While I thought these were fancy, the ladies’ dresses are what

surprised me the most. Just about every girl had a colourful, long, flowing dress. They all had their hair done to perfection in a traditional style. It was an incredible sight to see everyone walk into the school gymnasium in unison. The months of preparation had finally paid off. All the dances went without a hitch, and looked absolutely beautiful.



Thanks to the headmaster of my school being so tech-savvy, my parents and friends were able to watch the Wanhat via live stream online. It was a cool feeling knowing that even while I'm across an ocean, my mom could still watch me dance my prom. Later in the evening, the official after party was held in a hotel area in Kuopio. There were nearly 600 people (probably more) at the event. The party was not just for my school, but for all the schools in the city, and even smaller surrounding city areas. I even got to see some other exchange students from my district at the party!

The next little bit of time had been filled with many activities and events; for change students there is never a dull moment! The Ski Jumping World Cup was held in Kuopio, and thanks to my amazing host family, we were able to attend and see it live!



Soon after that I had a weekend trip down to south of Finland, to a town called Hamina. With several other other exchange students we went of a guided cross country skiing event with one of the students' host mothers. We learned about Finnish nature and the history of cross country skiing in Scandinavia and the Nordic countries. On this trip I met one of the newbies in person for the first time, Max from Australia. He is the only newbie my district received this year, and one

of the best friends I have had on exchange. Little did we know when we first met on this weekend, that some way or another, we would end up seeing each other at least once every week. Not planned or anything, but by some coincidence we end up having events, trips, camps, or just being in the same cities at the same time. Its truly something odd and unexpected, but at this point we have learned to expect the unexpected!



While I have been on exchange, I have spent much of my time on weekends (most of my weekends actually) traveling around to different cities in Finland and visiting other exchangers wherever I go. Possibly my favourite thing about being a Rotary Youth exchange student, no matter where I go, I always have friends that I can visit and catch up with. Even with my school, I have had the chance to travel across Finland to Turku (West Finland) for a track and field event. I realize that traveling has become my biggest addiction here, I just can't seem to stay put for too long. I guess my Rotary club was right when they said I would probably develop a travel bug. I have seen just about every major city in Finland, small villages, and even Lapland multiple times!



Speaking of a travel bug, there was one trip that did help strengthen my love of traveling, the St. Petersburg tour. In late March, I had the opportunity to participate in the Rotary organized St. Petersburg, Russia trip. With about 80 other exchange students, we traveled by bus to the ex-Russian capital city, for a stay that lasted 3 nights and 4 days. The whole time we were there was packed with activities and sightseeing. On the first night we arrived it was quite late already, so we

were given free time to either explore the surrounding area, or relax in the massive hotel. Truly, this was the biggest hotel I have ever stayed in; the whole building itself must have been over a kilometre in length! The second day was quite an early morning, but for good reason. After a quick bus ride we arrived at our first attraction on the tour: The Winter Palace. Right from the start we arrived at the grand courtyard of the legendary palace/Museum, the area of the courtyard could only be rivaled by that of St. Peter's square in the Vatican! In similar fashion there was a large Egyptian obelisk in the centre, little did we know that would be nothing compared to what was inside The Hermitage Museum. After stopping and taking group pictures, we entered the Palace. Some of the first art pieces we saw as we entered were massive Egyptian sculptures, vases the size of 3 people combined, granite columns; and this was just the coat check. After a quick walk, we passed through the ancient Egyptian section and proceeded up into the main palace. Here we walked passed giant jade vases, countless oil paintings, even a painting by Leonardo da Vinci himself.





The rooms were all clearly inspired by Roman architecture, with the Corinthian-style inspired rooms being consistent throughout the museum. There were so many memorable art pieces to be seen, in fact our tour guide told us "If you spent one minute looking at every art piece in the museum, it would take you 6 years to see everything." This truly put into perspective how massive of an art collection the museum had.

Two things that definitely stood out however, there was a comical amount of gold everywhere, and the largest jade vase in the world was on display there. This vase alone was so massive that the room it is on display in had to be built around it because it is so massive! After a few hours we left the museum for a quick traditional lunch, then headed to Peter the Great's Museum of Anthropology. This museum was by comparison quite small, but the content was no less fascinating. Later in the evening we attended a Russian ballet in the centre of the city, with everyone dressed up. While being as interesting as ballets can be, many exchange students fell asleep due to the beautiful, peaceful music and dark silence. Nonetheless a beautiful artistic performance. The second day began with a bus tour with stops around the entire city. It was interesting to see the old architecture and the Soviet Union-style buildings in such a close proximity. Along the tour we stopped at many statues and parks, one of the nicest stops however had been St. Isaac's Cathedral. It is a sight I will soon not forget, as the entire main dome is covered in solid gold. It is the 4th largest cathedral in the world! We also entered another church to observe the Russian Orthodox style art pieces inside.



Later we went into a Russian souvenir shop, it was here we noticed one peculiar thing about Russian culture: Putin. The first thing we saw as we entered was a giant headshot of Putin above the entrance, pictures of Putin using products to help sell them better. Everything from shirts to Russian Nesting Dolls, Putin was almost guaranteed to be on it. The afternoon was filled with free time to explore St. Petersburg's main shopping district, where we were exposed to even more Putin themed souvenirs. I myself could not resist picking up a Putin passport cover! In hindsight, one of my best purchases on the trip.





Later that evening the Rotary students attended a traditional Russian Folk-Dancing show. This was much more lively and exciting than the ballet, this show was definitely one of the highlights of the trip for me. The next day we took the busses back to Finland and ended the tour; almost all of us were in tears when saying our final goodbyes at the Finnish border. For some, it was the last time they would see that many exchangers at once. This was undoubtedly one of the best trips I have ever been on so far.

After the Russia tour, school resumed as normal and we all attempted to come down from the excitement of the trip. For me though, the traveling didn't quite end there. A few days after returning to Finland, I moved to my last host family of the year. I moved back to the countryside in the village of Kurkimäki (again). Not 2 days after moving in, I traveled to Muonio in Lapland (also for a second time) with 2 of my host brothers. Here we spent a week doing as the Finnish do. We ate reindeer, cross country skied, went snow shoeing, cross country skied, snow boarding, cross country skied. Did I mention how much Finns love cross country skiing? No? Well neither did my host brother, Mikke, when he got me to agree to try it with him. Now, being in Finland as long as I have, I tried it once before and once in Canada as well. All that little training could never have prepared me for what came next. On the first day at the cottage, my 2 host brothers and I skied 23 kilometres in 3.5 hours. I realized I have never felt true exhaustion. Regardless of my horrible skiing skills and complaining, there was one thing that made the trip worth it: The Finnish landscape. After Skiing to the top of a "Tunteri (the only translation in English is literally "a hill in Lapland"), we could see the whole landscape and all of its beauty. Later that week we went to a "tunteri" called "Pallas" where I was able to go snowboarding. Out of all the hills I have ever been on so far, this was by far the best one. The hill had the perfect mix of fresh powder snow and well maintained runs, as well as steep drops and perfectly clear hill faces. I was in snowboarding heaven. After returning back below the Arctic Circle, I resumed school with my Finnish friends as usual with the occasional weekend travel trip here and there. The Rotary district 1430 Conference was held in Kuopio this year so I didn't need to travel at all for that event. Soon after the conference weekend came one of the biggest spring celebrations: "Vappu". A day dedicated to just celebrating students and their accomplishments. This has been one of my all time favourite Finnish holidays, because it is just meant for young people to go out and be social; something not so common in Finnish culture. I took pride in celebrating it the Finnish way with my Finnish friends.

Just recently, I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Estonia to visit my American friend Perry and surprise him for his birthday. With my Dutch friend Sanne and Alaskan friend Cora, we took a boat from Helsinki to Taliin (Estonia's capital), where we were met by the only newbie in Estonia, Rafe. After exploring a little bit, we caught a bus to Perry and Rafe's town of Tartu, the second largest city in Estonia. We spent one day exploring Tartu and seeing all of the attractions with Rafe; then Gave Perry the surprise of his life! We took him to a summer house not too far from Tartu where we spent the night and next day just spending time together and hanging out again. We had been some of the only people to come and visit him in Estonia until this point in the year. In the evening we had Perry's Estonian friends come over to help us celebrate his big day. I helped with making the dinner extra special; making smoked salmon covered in the nectar of the Gods, Maple Syrup. After the short visit, Sanne and I went back to Taliin where we met Cora and boarded our boat back to Helsinki. Estonia is one of the most beautiful countries I have had the pleasure of visiting so far, it was lucky for us that the weather had been 25 degrees all weekend (very rare weather this early in the year).



Now that everything is caught up, we are back to now. At this moment (15.05.2015), I have roughly 14 days left in my school year. The day after my school ends I will leave for my Euro tour. For 18 days, I and 75 other exchange students will travel through middle Europe. While I am extremely excited for this trip, I am also a little sad and surprised. At the beginning of my year and throughout most of my exchange this trip seemed so far away. Now its less than 20 days away. My exchange year feels like it has passed in the blink of an eye. It fills me with sadness knowing that my new life is coming to an end, and soon I will return to the same life I had. But after an experience like this, will it really be the same? I dread the approach of July 17th, for I know that will be my last day in my home. I'm just glad I will be able to spend the last of my time on exchange doing what I love; traveling with friends and experiencing something new. Thank you Rotary Club of Mississauga West, Rotary District 7080, Rotary District 1430 and Rotary Club of Kuopio Veljmies for giving me this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Live in the moment, while it's still here,

Kiitos Paljon,

*Kyle*

Kyle David Cashin

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