



**Mackenzie**  
**from**  
**Cambridge Sunrise**  
**to**  
**Finland**

*“Terveisiä Suomesta”*

It’s been over three months since I went on arguably the most important plane ride of my life—one where I left Canada to spend ten months in Finland, a country I knew very little about, but an experience I knew even then I could never regret.

After arriving from the nerve-wracking yet exhilarating plane ride, I spent a week in a Rotary orientation camp for all exchange students from around the world, who were going to both Estonia and Finland. There were sixty-six students in this camp, and every day there I had a better day than last, something which felt impossible considering how perfect it all was. There are four other Canadians, and it was nice to connect with them and reminisce about some of the things we wouldn’t experience in Finland.

There, I got my first taste of Finnish culture and lifestyle, including the language, customs, food, and the sauna of course. After that week flew by, I met my wonderful host parents for the first time when they picked me up from the camp and drove me to their house. They live in a small area called Rusko; a neighbourhood very close to the city of Turku, where I would be attending school in a couple days. I met my host siblings; an older girl and a younger brother and sister, and soon managed to settle into Finnish home-culture and life with them. My older host sister left a day after I met her, for her own Rotary Youth Exchange in America, but not before going with me on my first day of school and showing me around. I began to see a few of the major differences right away between Canada and Finland. From the landscape, to basic things like meal customs and conversation topics.

As I mentioned, I attend school in a city called Turku, which is the third biggest city in Finland, and known for being the oldest and the former capital. I take a forty-minute bus drive to and from five days a week, something that I had to get used to. Public transportation is quite common here, and a very pleasant experience. Buses in Finland are known for being very silent, and having the unspoken rule of no one sitting next to each other— even if there are no standalone seats left. Finns will then prefer to stand.

Finnish school is quite different from the Canadian curriculum. There are five different periods which last about two months each, with an exam week at the end of every one. The classes I've had include: Finnish, English, art, music, religion, and psychology. I will switch to my next period in three weeks where I'll get to take dance lessons for Vanhat Tanssit; a formal and traditional ballroom-styled dance I will participate in this February.

In every school in Finland, there is a free lunch provided. This was a great way for me to experience Finnish cuisine. Finnish meals usually involve a lot of potatoes, fish, and vegetables. I am lucky the cafeteria always has a vegetarian option for me. Though there is never a lot of unique flavours or spices, the food is still enjoyable, and can be described as something similar to comfort food.

Though it was uncommon knowledge of the potential arrival of exchange students at the school, students there were still very friendly and genuinely interested in learning about Canadian life and culture. My teachers as well. People were nervous yet determined to practice their English, and have been incredibly helpful in teaching me Finnish.

Moving on to the Finnish language, it has indeed proved why it's considered the fifth hardest language in the world. However, I've taken it in stride, and really enjoy the logic and structure of the language, and learn more every day. My Rotary Club, likewise to all the clubs in Finland, had previously signed me up for Finnish lessons which I now attend twice a week after school. People here are very aware that Finnish to foreigners can be difficult at the start, and have been extremely understanding, and willing to help teach me. A huge part of Finnish culture is the Sauna. Almost every family in Finland has one, if not two saunas in their home, and they attend at least once a week. Usually every Sunday, I will go with my host mother and sister to the one they have in their house. I now really look forward to it, and can see why Finns have made it an essential part of their lifestyle.

In two weeks, with most of the other exchange students in the Multi-District of Finland and Estonia, I will travel by bus to Lapland for a few nights and experience the incredible Finnish winter up north, and have a chance to see the frozen Finnish nature and go skiing or snowboarding. I am looking forward to this very much. I will get to experience Christmas with my current host family, and then switch to my next one in early January.

Though I have enjoyed many activities with other exchange students in the Turku District, I have also made many friends here in Finland. I am lucky to be able to travel to Turku so often, as it is a wonderful place to hang out with friends, having many museums, shops, and beautiful historical roads to walk down. A favourite activity with friends is walking by the river, where they often have many markets and temporary shops open that are always interesting to see. My Rotary club here has also taken me to many meetings, and individual Rotarians have taken me to activities such as a haunted walk and a hockey game.



I am pleased to say that in these first few months I have never felt more independent, and have never felt like I've grown more as a person than I have in Finland. Though it saddens me how fast time is passing, I'm still eager for every upcoming event or activity I have planned, and to just continue to live life here.

Thank you to the Raisio-Jokilaakso Rotary Club for hosting me, as well as my wonderful host families and many friends I have made in Finland. And many thanks to Rotary Cambridge Sunrise and District 7080 in Canada, and my friends and family who support me there.

Terveisin,

Mac Clarke

Rotary Youth Exchange Orientation Camp  
Karkku, Finland 3.- 9.8.2025 

