



**Sarah**  
from  
**Mississauga West**  
to  
**Finland**

*Memento vivere.*

Remember to live. It is difficult to think that an exchange student would need to be reminded to live, as our lives are often filled with new experiences and activities. Nonetheless, it is easy to get caught up in everything and overlook the genuine enjoyment in each moment.

It's been three months since my previous report, and I've undergone significant changes since the start of my exchange and initial report. In addition, I've experienced, accomplished, and felt so much that it seems like a small lifetime condensed into just three months.

If you have read any other Beaver Tales from previous exchange students who went to Finland, you may be aware of the Lapland trip. While other trips, such as the Euro Tour are arguably bigger and more eventful, the Lapland trip is the most unique. It allows us exchange students to dive deeper into the history and culture of Finland. Things that you probably would never learn as a tourist or if you never went to Lapland. Things such as why the Northern Lights are called "Revontulet", meaning fire fox. Or the history of cross-country skiing shoes, or the songs of their native Sámi people, or the laws regarding reindeer.

December 6th brings a special day in Finnish history: itsenäisyyspäivä, or in English, Independence Day. In Finland, this day is celebrated by solemn rituals, candlelight processions, and watching Linnanjuhlat. Linnanjuhlat, also known as “the Castle Ball,” is an annual event held in Helsinki with approximately 2000 guests. It is broadcast on television and is watched by the entire country. Some joke that it is the “handshaking” day, as most of the broadcast is of the president shaking hands with each guest.

As a second-year student in Finnish high school, I had the opportunity to participate in Wanhat. It is often compared to prom, or referred to as “Finnish prom” despite not having many similarities. While prom is an event to celebrate the eldest of the school leaving, Wanhat celebrates the second year becoming the eldest of the school. It takes place after *penkkarit*, the day that the third years leave the school to study for their matriculation examinations. For Wanhat, the second years practice “old dances,” such as the waltz and tango, for months to

perform for the school and our families. Traditionally, people used to dress in old-fashioned clothing, often inspired by different eras, to perform. Now, it has become more modernized and akin to American prom outfits. While the preparation for this day can be tiring and stressful, it is one of the most memorable days for Finnish students.

In my previous report, I touched upon the sauna culture in Finland. Over these past three months, my knowledge and experience with this subject have only expanded. To start, Finnish people enjoy having a Christmas sauna on Christmas Eve. Every family member goes to the sauna, including me. This is a tradition stemming from centuries ago, to cleanse the body and mind before the celebrations begin. In the countryside, families may start to heat the sauna in the morning to ensure that everyone has a chance to go. Another vital part of the sauna culture is *avanto*. *Avanto* is the practice of cutting a hole in the ice and going for a dip before going back to the sauna. (You should always go to the sauna right after to prevent sickness.) While it seems intimidating, Finns enjoy using it as a way to refresh themselves.

I am forever grateful for everyone who has been supporting me and been with me throughout this journey. To all the Rotarians, the families, and my friends: *kiitos paljon* (thank you very much). I’m excited to see what the next three months will bring me.

Sincerely,

*Sarah*