



Sarah

from
Mississauga West
to
Finland

“Carpe Diem”

To prevent change equates to living in a comfort that conceals potential. To embrace change entails disrupting that familiar comfort to explore and discover diverse possibilities that can shape an individual. I guess that for me, embracing change meant hopping on a plane to live in a country halfway across the world for a year.

My journey started nearly 100 days ago. Three months ago, I flew into the Helsinki-Vantaa airport and was taken by bus to a week-long orientation camp in Karkku with over 80 other exchange students. While forming friendships from around the world, we learned basic Finnish and learned about different aspects of Finnish culture. The week passed instantly, which set the precedent of how fast time goes by during my exchange so far. It’s hard to believe that I had arrived in Finland during the summer and now, there is already snow on the ground.

At the end of the camp, I had finally met my first host family and had a long drive to Keuruu, the town I would be living in for a year. I spent the drive talking with my family and admiring the Finnish landscape. Finland’s scenery appears to be quite similar to Canada's (though they do have more birch trees than we do), but it was obvious that Finland is quite different from Canada even one week into my exchange.

School in Finland starts in mid-August. So, by the time I arrived in town, school had already started. At the beginning of each year, my school has a presentation of all the incoming students, both exchange and international. Meaning, that everyone knows who you are before you even know them. This feeling is amplified when you are living in a small town like Keuruu. Everyone seems to know everyone, and everyone certainly knows the exchange student. You never quite realize it until someone you have never met in your life starts listing out your host parents and where you are currently living.

Finnish schools have five periods. A period is around a month and a half long, with courses that you choose. Each day of the week is different, so you may have your first class at 8 am on Tuesdays and then have your first class at noon on Fridays. This also leads to many students having long breaks in between classes, so many schools have a student lounge.

Finland also believes in free education, so everyone uses computers for class instead of paper. Since every student has to take final matriculation exams at the end of their three-year-long studies, they need course materials from the first year. Buying all the textbooks is incredibly expensive for families, especially if they have multiple children, which used to turn people away from going to school. So, when Finland introduced a free education law, every student would get a computer with all the course material they needed on it, to reduce costs. Which then leads me to do math on the computer (something I still question even after taking math for three months here.)

Now to discuss language. The Finnish language is known to be quite difficult, especially for English speakers to learn. And it is true. The Finnish language, while it uses many of the same letters, is incredibly different. Finnish people enjoy adding words and letters onto one word to form a singular word instead of breaking things down into phrases. This results in all of us foreigners needing to learn many different word endings. Finnish is also a phonetic language, meaning there is a direct relationship between the spelling and the sound. So, in Finnish, there are many "double letters," in which you need to pronounce both letters (normally by elongating the pronunciation or adding a pause to emphasize the second letter.) The issue is that if you don't pronounce the second letter, then you might be saying a different word completely. For example, "tapaan" means "I meet", while "tapan" means "I kill."

However, despite the difficulty of the language, I do feel myself progressing with it. There are some days that I feel proud of what I have learned, like when I understand the entire dinner conversation. There are still many days where I feel discouraged and demoralized about the language. However, I learn more each day and am excited to become more proficient as my xchange continues.

You might be aware that saunas are an important part of Finnish culture. Every family has a sauna in their home and goes at least once a week. On the surface level, it seems like going to the sauna is just a relaxing thing to do after a cold day, which is common in Finland. However, saunas have been an important aspect of Finnish culture for thousands of years. They started as pits in the ground during the Stone Age and then were eventually built above ground. During the winter,

they were a place to wash as there was no hot water to use normally. Even though it was used as a bathhouse or winter dwelling, it was also a place for birth, death, and taking care of the sick for Finnish people. Today, going to the sauna is still an important aspect of Finnish culture and daily life.

Living in Finland, especially in a small town, has given me opportunities to do things that I normally wouldn't even think of doing. From fishing every weekend during the summer to stepping outside and seeing the Northern Lights. Or, coming home from school and seeing a deer (also referred to as "dinner") on the table. I have recently changed families as well, which has already led to many different first times, such as shearing sheep with scissors. These are all different incidents that build to an experience that cannot be achieved from a simple vacation.

Growth is necessary, there is no question about it. Everyone will experience personal growth at some interval in their life. Except, to be allowed to grow as a young person in a foreign country, is a gift that should be embraced. There is nothing else in the world similar to being an exchange student. No other way to replicate the experiences you can go through. So, to those who are considering applying to become an exchange student, all I can say is to go for it. It will change your life in ways that you can never imagine.

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And to the Rotary Club of Mississauga West, the Rotary Club of Keuruu, District 7080,
to my family and my host families, I am forever thankful for your support.

Sincerely,
Sarah

