

November 2011

Sarah

From Burlington to Finland



*How will I live without Sauna when I go back to Canada?*

Alright, so this is my first Beaver Tale. I have no idea how to start it, organize it and exactly what to say, so I'm just going to rant on about things that have been severed into my memory so far.

Let me start off by saying this, time goes by way too quickly! I arrived in Helsinki on Sunday, August 7<sup>th</sup> at 2:20pm Helsinki time. It was so crazy because I left Toronto around 9:30pm on Saturday night. I saw the sun set in Toronto and then rise in a matter of hours when descending into Iceland.

When I arrived in Finland, I was greeted by Rotarians and fellow exchange students. From the airport we had a 3 hour long bus ride to our Language camp, Karkku, where we would be staying for our first week in Finland. At the language camp there was about 132 exchange students from 24 different countries. I roomed with 3 other girls from Canada and one from Ancaster! I tried Finnish sauna for the first time at the language camp and at first I didn't really like it. What's so great about sitting in a hot room with other people? But then we were told that we could go jump in the lake and then back to sauna and that's when I started to like it. Now that I have been at my first host family for 3 months now, I

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absolutely love sauna. After a long day in the cold it's the best thing to do right before you go to bed. I don't know how I will be able to live without sauna when I go back to Canada. Also at the language camp we also took a day trip to a city called Tampere. I was so excited for this as it was my first time visiting a European city. In Tampere I bought my Finnish dictionary and went to Hesburger, which is the equivalent to Tim Hortons/McDonalds in Canada. If you have the choice to go to McDonalds or Hesburger in Finland, you choose Hesburger. At the language camp we had Finnish class for about 5 hours everyday, at the time I hated it, sitting in a room learning Finnish seemed so boring but now that I look back on it I actually learned so much, and helpful phrases too. I met so many people from all over the world. Every day was full of laughter, adventure and new things. At the closing ceremonies fellow Canadian exchanges and I did a "rap" about Canada. We all dressed up in random Canadian paraphernalia.

*"We are MC Canadian Stereotypes,*

*And we about to get started so let me get off the ice,*

*We don't want any trouble and we're always polite,*

*So let me hop on my snowmobile and we will tell you what we like,*

*But first let me turn off curling and turn down Avril Lavigne*

*Je dis cette phrase en francais parce que nous sommes canadienne.*

*Ow, I fell off my polar bear and I hurt my knee, let's go to the hospital,*

*Don't worry, in Canada it's free!"*

At the beginning of the camp we were told that we couldn't lose the keys

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to our rooms or else we would have to pay 250 euros. The whole week I managed to more or less know where my key was at all times, with a few scares here and there. However, on the very last night I was standing on the dock at the lake when I got pushed into the lake with all of my clothes on, jeans, sweater, everything and my key was in my pocket, so my key is now at the bottom of Karkku Lake. However, a lot of people saw what had happened and said it was an accident therefore they didn't make me pay for the key. Lucky for me!

The day I met my host family was so exciting. A bit nervous but they are such kind, loving and funny people. After living with them for over 3 months now I really feel like this is my true home. My host mom is like a real mother to me and treats me like her own daughter, which I really appreciate sometimes to believe it or not. I have one host sister, Enna, who is only a year younger than me so we get along really well. I have met all of my host families and they all know each other and are all family friends, which I am really excited for. My current host parents had them all over for a dinner sort of thing a month or so ago and everybody is so kind and funny. I am really looking forward to going to all of their houses. I will be moving to my second Family in early December. They have a younger girl who is 8, so I am hoping I will be able to improve my Finnish a lot.

Words cannot explain how exchange feels. I almost feel like all the preparation that I was given for homesickness and nerve-racking situations goes out the window. Of course you have suggestions that you keep at the back of your mind but I feel like if somebody were to make an emotional line graph of how you feel on exchange it would be all over the place. There are just no words

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to describe how you are feeling all the time, emotions switch in a matter of seconds.

One of the best things about my exchange in Finland is the school. I don't care if that makes me sound like a nerd. Finnish school is wonderful. At school they have computers, just everywhere and anybody can just go and use them. It's so weird, because the kids don't wreck them or anything. It's a sad moment when you are wondering why the students are ruining the schools property. Also, a lot of people don't have lockers and just leave their stuff hanging up on hooks in the hallways or they put they're moped helmets on a shelf, and nobody takes them. What is up with this? The kids here respect their teachers, come to class on time and if they don't they apologize and the teachers don't really mind. Also, there are no bells in my school, you just have to watch the clock and be to class on time, and most people do go to class. In the middle of a lesson you can just get up and be like "I'm going to the washroom" and nobody even turns their heads. The teachers hardly ever check homework either, but the kids do it anyways. When the teacher tells us to work in partners, the students actually do the work. Overall, the students are just way better behaved. I'm still getting used to it. In Finland at school your lunch is free, and at first you think it's so good and all the Finnish kids think it's gross but I personally like it a lot.

The Finnish food is so good. It's not that different from Canadian cuisines but everything here is so much healthier, my host mom makes everything from scratch by herself and it's always delicious. I have gotten to eat mostly all of the traditional Finnish dishes such as Deer, Reindeer, Moose, Finnish Pancakes,

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Salmiakki, etc. The Finnish Pancakes are the best. They are cooked in the oven and not in a pan and are a lot thinner, but if you spread a little strawberry jam on those babies, you're in heaven. However, Finns are known for their black licorice type candy, and it's called Salmiakki, all Finns love it, but the first time I tried it I spat it out. I just can't handle it. Maybe by the end of the year...

There are so many hilarious things about Finnish culture. Finns are quiet. When you are on a bus you will do anything to try not to sit next to somebody, and people won't move their bags off the seat if it's the only seat without anybody sitting there. The other Finn looking for a seat would rather stand. Also, I find in Canada that if you are having a conversation with somebody and there's an awkward silence then the conversation is bound to suck, but here it's almost expected, it gives Finns a second to think and really only say what's important. The only small talk here is about the weather. And even though it is sometimes hard to make conversation once you make a connection with a Finn it's definitely there to stay. Also, when you see somebody on the street, you do not look at him or her and smile, if they look at you and smile they are either drunk or American. Also, when you are crossing the street where there are no stop signs people are expected to stop and rarely drive through and you also aren't expected to do the "wave" or smile at them and thank them.

Finland has the best gum in the world. It has no sugar in it and it's still delicious. Xylitol is the name brand, which is on pretty much all gum and toothpaste and stuff. Also, it's very rare to see just packs of gum in Finland, they come in bags of 200g and they last forever. At first I was hesitant, like "Why

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would I want to carry around a somewhat large bag of gum in my purse all the time?" but then I slowly saw the positive aspects of the large bags of gum. Firstly when you take your bag of gum out you can offer it to all of your Finnish friends and gives you an excuse to say something. And in Canada you always have to make some excuse like "ah man, I only have one piece left." but there you can be like "YEAH, YOU CAN HAVE AS MUCH AS YOU LIKE!" Finnish people think ahead. And some of you reading this might say "But then you just run out because you give it to everybody." This however is false because it feels like it's a never-ending bag. I have had the same bag for almost 2 weeks and it still has a lot and I am literally chewing it all the time.

Finnish Chocolate. It's so good. I don't know what they put in it, but it's so delicious. The best kind of chocolate is the Mr.Fazer kind. You buy huge bars of it for like 2 euros and you tell yourself "oh, this will last for a few days." But it doesn't because it's so good. It's sort of like the gum scenario; you have a big chocolate bar so you can share it. They are absolutely everywhere.

Another thing I love about Finland is the Fani Pala. It's sort of like this chocolate, waffle, vanilla type of deal. But I can go through an entire bag in a about half an hour. They are so addicting. There are so many things I love about Finland that I could go on forever.

I have had the opportunity to meet up with Sampo Pere who was in Canada on exchange in District 7080 two years ago. We met up in Helsinki and he took me to a real Finnish Hockey game! Finland has it's own league so we went and saw Jokerit play the Pelicans. Jokerit is the local Helsinki team so we

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were cheering for them. Jokerit beat the Pelicans 5-2, so it was a really good game! Finnish hockey is really different than the NHL. They have even more advertisements, and cheerleaders and fire when they go onto the ice, and I think it's even more for entertainment than in Canada!

However, the best memory of my stay here in Finland so far has actually not been in Finland at all. I have had the opportunity to travel to Barcelona, Spain for 6 days with my Host mother, Sari and my host sister, Enna. It was possibly the best 6 days ever. The sun was shining and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I got to swim in the Mediterranean Sea and taste Chocolate and Churros, and all the typical Spanish food. I also got to see the Sagrada Familia and Casa Mila, and many other amazing sites.

I just want to use this opportunity to thank everybody that gave me this incredible opportunity. To all the Rotarians who put in time and effort to prepare me for this journey of a lifetime, a simple 'thank you' is not enough. Words cannot describe how thankful I am that you chose ME to take part in this amazing program, so THANK YOU, THANK YOU, and THANK YOU a thousand times over. I know at first I was a bit hesitant about traveling to Finland for an entire year, but now I can't even imagine myself being anywhere else, somehow you always seem to get everything right.

*Sarah*