



## Sarah

From Burlington to Finland

### *Getting lost in Lapland was exciting, but wasn't part of the official plan*

This is my second Beaver Tale and so much has happened since I wrote my first one! December was a crazy month! I went to Lapland as a Rotary Trip. Lapland is a region in the north of Finland, all of it lies within the Arctic Circle more or less. This is where Finns do most of the good skiing, cottages in the summer and general holidays. Lapland was a beauty trip. It took us about 12 hours to drive all the way up there on a bus. I was on about 4 hours of sleep in 32 hours or so. I absolutely died. But like all Rotary Trips you get super tired! In Lapland we got to go on 'poro rides' which is a like a dog sled ride but with Reindeer. We also got to snowshoe just like in Wanakita but not for 6 hours this time. We also got to do a bit of downhill skiing. It was a nice trip because it was in the beginning of December and the snow didn't come until really late this year (after Christmas) so it was only around -5 and not like -20 like usual.

After my tour to Lapland in the beginning of December I switched host families. In my current family now I have one host brother who is a year older than me and a younger host sister who is only ten years old. It really helps having a younger sibling who speaks no English as it really gives me a chance to practice my Finnish and improve it much faster. Sometimes I have to tell my friends and host brother to speak only Finnish to me since everybody here more or less speaks English quite well.

Christmas at school was pretty nice. The last day before Holidays we go to eat special Christmas porridge. I hate the normal porridge we get at school but this stuff was good. There was Christmas Trees all around the school and there was even a Christmas Musical that ended up being absolutely hilarious.

Christmas was quite different for me. Finland has a lot of different traditions. For example, Santa comes on Christmas Eve, soon after dinner time. The Finns really either hire someone or ask their neighbor to come dressed up as Santa and they give the 'Santa' the gifts and he comes and delivers them. The children usually have to perform some sort of song, play an instrument or sing. They also don't have the traditional Turkey and potatoes with gravy. They eat more fish and salads and such. I woke up on Christmas morning and shot up in bed thinking I had to check the Christmas tree, but then remembered that I was in Finland and that there wouldn't actually be any presents under the tree because I had already opened them. Also, in Finland the stockings tradition doesn't really exist here either. Lucky for me my mom in Canada sent me a stocking full of all my little favourite things like a Terry's Chocolate orange and my favourite face cream from Clinique. The fact that my

friends and family sent me lots of Christmas cards really helped me feel like I was where I was supposed to be this Christmas.

A lot of people told me that I will be the most home sick around Christmas time and I did find that was the case. As much as I did enjoy the new traditions and getting to experience another families culture I did find myself comparing or thinking about what we did in Canada and it was really hard not to blurt out every five mints "BUT WE DO THAT THIS WAY."

New Years was a bit difficult for me. I'm going to be really honest here and explain what Finnish teenagers are like. They drink a lot. The drinking age here is 18 but a lot of the teens don't care. A lot of parties are known for teenagers getting quite drunk. So for New Years I wasn't allowed to go out to any parties and had to stay home with my host family and my old host family came over too. At first I was really upset about this because, being a typical teenager, I wanted to go out and be with my friends. I was really upset about this to the point where I Skyped home and complained to my parents. This was a huge learning experience for me because New Years ended up being one of my best nights here. We ate good food, had a lot of good laughs, and watched our own Fireworks. It really helped that my first host sister, Enna and my host brother now, Aleksi are both really good friends to me so it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. This taught me that I really can't always have what I want and that you do have to follow the rules of the host family even if you don't agree with them. Sometime you have to do things you don't want to do and then it's up to you to either dwell on the fact that you didn't get what you wanted or make the best of it and you will usually find that things are not as bad as you think they are. I know they were just looking out for my best interests and I do appreciate that. I think from that I have learned not too take every occasion so seriously.

On February 16<sup>th</sup> was the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students last day of school. It's their last day because then they get the rest of the year off to study for exams where they are tested on everything that they have learned in the first 2 years of Lukio. At my school this is called 'Abi Day.' (the 3<sup>rd</sup> years are called Abit). On this day they get to dress up as whatever they want. During the day they have a thing called the 'Abi Show.' Where they present awards to various things such as 'Prettiest First Year Girl.' And other random awards. These awards are done strictly only by the Abi's. The show included some provocative dancing and some funny skits. At random times during the show the Abi's get to throw hard candies at the first and second years from the balcony into the auditorium at the school and we get to scramble and pick them up. After the Abi show we all headed outside. This is when the Abi's get to slide down the hill away from the school on the snow with homemade sleds. This is probably the strangest tradition I have ever heard of or seen. After they slide down the hill they get onto big trucks where they ride around the city and throw more candy at random pedestrians. Everybody knows about this tradition and the kids from the younger schools even come outside just to pick up the candy. A lot of parents also came to watch them slide down the hill away from the school.

The next day, February 17<sup>th</sup> was a really big day for me. It's called Vanhojen Päivä (the 'oldies' day). This day is for the 2<sup>nd</sup> years so they can now celebrate being the oldest student in the school. On this day all the girls get to dress up in lovely big ball gowns and the boys dress up in fancy suits. During the dance we dance ball room type dances like the Waltz and Tango. At the beginning of the school year people scramble around asking other people if they want to be their dance partner since the dance practices start in late October in order to prepare for this one day. I was lucky enough that my friend's boyfriend wanted to dance with her so she asked if I could dance with her first partner who happened to be my host brother and already a really good friend. So I was saved the anxiety of asking some

random Finnish Boy. In Finland the girls have to ask the guys to the dance because there are so many more girls than boys in Lukio. The dancing went really well and everybody looked like princesses!

The dance after I had an early morning and started 12 hour drive north to Finnish Lapland where I would spend a week for Hiihtoloma (ski holiday). This holiday we spent cross country skiing and one day downhill skiing. Also during the day we would snowshoe, go to sauna and eat good food!

An interesting part of my holiday to Lapland was the fact that my host brother and I got lost in the Finnish Lapland forest for 7 hours. I went cross country skiing with my host dad and brother just down the road from our cottage so I could take some photos as I had forgotten my camera a few days before hand. We skied just for about half an hour when my host brother and I decided to climb a 'mountain' or more like a big hill (there are no mountains in Lapland) and my host dad would take photos of us going up and coming down and wait for us. But he got cold so he said he would go back to the car and told us to come in about 10 minutes following the very clear path that the National Park had made for skiers. However it was difficult to downhill ski on the path with cross country skis on and the next thing we knew we had no idea where we were. We started to ski to where we thought the path might be. We did this for about 7 hours until we finally reached a road at about 7 at night. Just as it was getting pitch black outside. We waved down the next car that came, and asked to use their cell phone, and it happened that my host parents were just down the road with the police, ambulance, fire fighters, with skiers and snow mobiles looking for us. However, they couldn't get through the dense forest even though they had heard our cries for help. We both were fine with a little bit of frostbite. Since then three Lapland newspaper have done a story about us because any news is big news in Lapland.

I have to say that so far that has been the scariest thing that has ever happened to me. I really didn't know if we were going to make it. I learned a big lesson, which was to always follow the path, no matter how hard it is to ski. And to MAYBE not forget both of our cell phones in the car at the parking lot.

Since then I have been back to school and started a new semester where I am taking classes like Latin, German, Health, Art, English and Biology. It's nice because we get to choose our courses here.

I am still enjoying my time very much here. I love Finland and I can't believe how fast the time has gone by. It seems like yesterday that I just arrived. In a way I think I have also changed and matured a lot. I handle things a lot differently now and look at challenging situations without so much stress and anxiety. I think exchange really helps you to learn who you truly are as a person and what is important to you because when you're on exchange you really have no choice but to be your absolute self. You have no pressure from friends or family to be one way or another. It's simply just you trying to survive in a foreign country! It really shows you how much you can choose, whether to be strong or weak, interested or lazy.

To the new outbounds who are reading this (if you even got this far in my Beaver Tale) I would like to give you some helpful advice.

1. Even if you didn't get the country you want, don't worry. You'll love it sooner or later and it WILL become home for you, whether you want it to or not. (Hopefully you want it to; it makes things a whole lot easier during your year.)
2. Learn your language now. I cannot stress enough. Some people might say "it's not worth practicing your language now, you'll learn it when you get there." But even if you don't practice so much so you can have a full on conversation, become familiar. Get to know the letters, the way words

work, how to pronounce things. That way when you get to the country it will be easier for you to pick up new and more useful words than say “yellow, bird, cow” etc., etc.,.

3. Be excited. Be open. Oh yeah, the B's. Know those really well.
4. Time goes fast. I don't know why I'm telling you this because everybody told me the same thing and look at me sitting here saying how fast time is going by. Ha.
5. Research how Rotary works there. Find out the costs of trips, and how much everyday normal life things cost in your country. Get in touch with the inbound that is in your country now and if there isn't an inbound there now ask Rotarians for the name or an e-mail or somebody who has been there in past. All rebounds and inbounds are friendly and always willing to give you tips and advice, that's why they were exchange students!

To be honest, I am really scared of coming home. Finland feels like home to me now and I can't imagine living life without the friends I have made here. I switch to my last host family on March 6<sup>th</sup>. So far I feel like I now have 4 mothers, 3 dads, 2 brothers and 4 sisters, with 1 more dad, and 2 more brothers to gain!

I have 3 months left in Finland and my last month is spent on a 'Euro Tour.' I don't have a date to come home yet and I'm not excited to be making it.

This really has been a journey of a lifetime. It has defined me as a person and helped me sort through the things that are truly important to me.

Thank you so much Rotary for giving me this opportunity!

*Sarah*