

Finland: Libby Holmes

We arrived to our guests Sunday evening, me and my friend Anna were both staying with the same host and were welcomed very well by her and her family. All night we stayed up late getting to know our host and her family; It was lovely as you can tell how much effort they were all making, they all had a very friendly, kind approach. Despite the fact that her parents spoke little English and her younger siblings barely a sentence, it was nice how they tried their best to communicate and actually advised us to help them learn more. I in fact learnt a bit of their language over board games. It has certainly made me aware of our culture and how lucky we are to speak a very widely spoken language in our culture.

On Monday, we went to their school to meet the rest of the students taking part in the project. We all stood up and completed our presentations. We then were put into international groups to encourage communication and meeting with people from other countries. This really helped with 'breaking the ice', especially as it was the first day. We ate Finnish food at lunch in the canteen with the rest of the school, it's strange as we have the option to eat outside but because of the extreme cold weather and snow at the time, it made that impossible. In the afternoon we went into one of our host's lessons. We were in their English class- as a language. Their teacher was intrigued by us and wanted to learn as much as she could from us. It's strange hearing your own language being taught as to yourself it is so natural but hearing it broken down into grammar it is quite complex, and you can see how easy it is for people in the class to not understand, although their English was impeccable. In the evening, we explored the city with the Croatians and Germans as we went shopping, tried more food, and went sightseeing.

Tuesday, one of my favourite days, we went exploring into the wilderness! The whole group trekked through a Finnish forest in very deep snow and cold temperatures of around -10c. We made a fire and toasted wieners and marshmallows. It was so interesting as the landscape is very different to ours in the UK. I learnt how important nature is and how big a role it plays in their society. Many of their industries are made around it, lifestyles and hobbies. In the evening we experienced true Finnish culture as we went ice lake dipping and in saunas. This was such a crazy thing for us to do but for them it is completely normal, the sauna is a big part of their culture. They see it as a tranquil, safe, relaxing place to be and I can see how that impacts them. It has always been a big part of their heritage.

On Wednesday we travelled a few hours to Turku, a city/town on the coast of Finland. It was a lot different here to Tampere as it had lots of big ships its whole main industry built around from being on the coast. Throughout the day we visited museums, a big old cathedral, the city centre as we took many photos of our international friends. I remember looking over the bridge down onto the river and seeing a big block of ice broken up in the middle of the frozen river. One Finnish student was telling me how it is unusual for the river to be thawing at this time of year and even the temperatures were very mild for the season, she said that it's a shame how the earth is changing, because it changes everything they've ever known, the ice, and how familiar that is to them. I can only imagine the effect climate change will have on them as a culture or even as individuals as their whole sense of community is built around the ice and cold.

Thursday was the day that the seniors of the high school left. They did an assembly to the second graders, which we watched and thoroughly enjoyed, then they did they parade all around the city, dressed in costumes throwing candy onto the streets were hundreds of people were stood watching on. I would love for our school to have something like that to do as we leave, it makes the whole experience of school and leaving fun and memorable. I still find it surreal how everyone so normal out in the snow and ice, to us it is madness. We also saw the ice sculptures in the afternoon which were very interesting. They were physically very cool and pleasing but the stories and legends behind each one was interesting to learn about how all the folk law of their whole heritage. In the evening, just me and my host went ice skating onto one of her local rinks. It was so inspiring to see how good she was, she said you just grow up learning to ice skate like we do riding a bike or even walking. Figure skating and ice hockey is a big part of sport culture in Finland. I learnt a few tricks from her which was to have someone show me who has experience. Even the sports are very different to ours and it shows how their nature and landscape (ice and snow) affects their culture like ice skating as a sport which is something we don't have.

Friday, our final full day, we went tobogganing in the morning. The slope onto a frozen lake in which people just walked all over without hesitation! It was fun to have a good laugh with all the different countries and get to hang out with them all before we left, we also had some friendly competitive races like a mini Olympics between the countries which is also healthy. Then, in the afternoon we witnessed the second-grade ball. They throw it each year after the seniors have left to celebrate being the oldest of the school, they get dressed up in full tuxedo and ball gown dresses that look beautiful. The whole year perform these perfected dances to traditional music, these dances are the same each year apparently. Then they perform the more fun ones that they have choreographed themselves, which are hilarious but show how united they are. This is something I would love to bring into our school as it is such a nice thing to have, such a nice event to remember. In the evening, one of the hosts took us to see a live national ice hockey game! This is one of my favourite experiences in Finland as it was so exciting and great to see a different sport of theirs and how it works, and how widely appreciated it is. And even though I knew neither team, its nice to see the sense of community between the supporters, that's something big I've noticed in Finland, everyone has a strong community sense for each other, like they are all looking out for each other in society. Later that night, as our last night, we had a big family meal all together with many baked Finnish goods, her mum was amazing at baking. The Finnish food is incredible, some of the things I've tried I would love to try and make back home.

To sum it all up, I have learnt so much from this amazing trip; from some in and out insights and big traditions, it has all been so interesting to be apart of for the week. I can see how nature impacts their everyday lives, past the first glance there is a lot to see from the impacts. And also how climate change could sadly affect this, it is a huge shame and disappointment.