Report date: July 7, 2004

My name is Matthew Davis and I’ve just returned from a one-semester exchange to the University of Jyväskylä, Finland (JyU). It was a superbly interesting and positive experience, and as the first student to have gone, it’s my pleasure to heartily recommend the exchange program at JyU.

I made the decision to go on exchange after a show-and-tell session with a good friend of mine all about his recent exchange to the Fiji. So inspired was I by his tales that I almost immediately got on the ‘net and took a thorough look at every foreign university offering a communications program that SFU has an exchange agreement with. My interests include the outdoors, snowboarding, and music, and my time at JyU was able to satisfy each.

I was seeking a university (and a country) that wouldn’t be outrageously expensive to get to, that offered communications courses in English, and that was in a country I’d never been to before. JyU fit that bill to a tee. Their website did a good job of making me feel that the program for exchange students was well developed, and as I had been to Sweden and Denmark previously (and had taken a liking to Scandinavia) but never Finland, JyU seemed like a good bet.

Some specific points of advice:

Travel and Visas

After an almost obscene amount of toying with internet travel agencies to get the cheapest fare, I stumbled across an American travel site called www.itravelosophy.com. Their web fare searching feature doesn’t work very well (buy by phone), but they offer the lowest fares imaginable! In addition, they were able to create a tricky ‘double-open-jaw’ ticket for me, which included takes-off and landings at 4 different airports on the same ticket. For a return trip on SAS airlines, I paid $660 USD, almost $400 CDN lower than either Travel Cuts or STA travel were able to quote me. The only catch: you have to depart from Seattle.

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Finances

Finland is an expensive country by Canadian standards. In Finland, expect to pay the same sticker price for most things as you would in Canada, only in Euros. Still, it is much cheaper than Sweden, Denmark, or Norway. Groceries, especially fruits and vegetables are very expensive, but as the government subsidizes student meals, you can eat like a king at the excellent cafeterias on campus for very little money. The rent is also quite low by Scandinavian standards – it’s about €175 per month.

Arrival and Orientation

JyU does a simply stellar job of welcoming and informing their incoming exchange students. As we arrived over a period of a few days, a Finnish student tutor was dispatched to meet each of us at the train station individually, lead us to our apartments, and generally show us around. Each tutor was responsible for five students. These students will also appear in your classes, as they have the same major as you. My tutor group became my closest group of friends.

As soon as I got to Jyvaskyla, there was a five-day orientation course (for credit!) which was informative, but more importantly a great opportunity to mix and mingle. Everything, from coursework, to food, to paying rent, to student trips, was explained in great detail during those first five days. They also included seminars on Finnish culture, as well as a ‘Finnish culture day’ and a trip to a sauna in the woods.

Accommodation

Like many exchange students, I lived in Kortepohja, the student village. It’s a cluster of student apartments along with a public library and two grocery stores. Each flat houses two students, and to the best of my knowledge nobody has to share a room. The bedrooms are big, but the kitchens are small. Everything is in walking or biking distance: a post office, grocery stores, a small ski hill, the town centre, and the campus.

Most international students were housed with other foreigners, but I had the luck to be put with a Finnish guy – we got to be good friends. However, lots of students who had Finnish roommates complained that they were very quiet and kept to themselves most of the time. If this is the case with your roommate, don’t take it personally – it’s just the Finnish way. Finns are shy by nature; if you want to do social things with your Finnish roommate, be bold and take the initiative – they probably won’t. Still, I highly recommend having a Finnish roommate. Request it if you can. There’s no better way to get an ‘in’ to meeting Finns and learning what they’re like.

Academic Details
JyU offers classes in English for a number of majors. If they don’t offer very many (or none) for your major and you don’t speak Finnish, you may have difficulty finding classes you can take. Some of the most comprehensive streams in English they offer for exchange students are: Communications, Sports Management, and Biology.

The university system in Finland is very different from our own. For a local student, the lowest undergrad degree is a five-year masters program. Almost everybody goes to some kind of post-secondary school in Finland, and nobody pays tuition. (In fact, their government also gives each student several hundred Euros each month for living expenses!) Instead of As and Bs, you get a number from 0 to 3. It’s almost impossible to fail a class, because there are unlimited re-tests on all Finnish exams. Students in Finland see university more as just a part of a person’s normal education than a special privilege to be fought for and competed in.

Most classes given in English are attended by international students only. They’re small, and friendly. Students aren’t considered subordinate to the professors, and in most classes participation is encouraged, although it’s usually just the foreigners who speak up – the Finns are too shy. I found my classes to be just about the right difficulty level, given that the vast majority of students were speaking English as a second language. The professors did an excellent job of keeping the material open, in such a way that a person who had studied the material before, or who spoke native English, was not limited from going more in-depth. Classes at JyU are not necessarily linear – some will run every day for a week, some are weekly, and some are at sporadic times.

I would strongly recommend that every JyU international student takes a Finnish-language class for beginners. Chances are, you’ll never use most of what you learn, (not even in Finland, as so many speak English) but for me, language is part of culture, and it’s worth getting some insight into how the Finnish language works.

**Country Information**

When they hear Finland mentioned, most people think of an extremely cold country with not much sunlight. This is somewhat true, but even in February, Jyvaskyla is no colder than Montreal or Ottawa, even though it’s much farther north. Most people just gear up for the cold with a good winter jacket, toque and gloves, and long-john bottoms under their jeans.

I discovered that there are two types of visitors to Finland – those who’ve been there long enough to develop a love of the country, and those who haven’t. For those who haven’t, Finland isn’t a particularly interesting place. Sure, it’s different from other Nordic countries, but there simply isn’t a lot for tourists to do, particularly in the winter months. The country’s fortes do not include historic sites, art, fine cuisine, or architecture. So, for a short-term tourist from North America on a limited time budget, there are more gratifying places to go than Finland. However...
It’s impossible to live in Finland for more than a couple months and not to develop a deep fondness for it. Those who do see Finland through different eyes. They notice and appreciate the one-of-a-kind countryside littered with beech forests and thousands of lakes, the uniquely Finnish traditions like sauna and ice fishing, and the cultural traditions and unusual parts of everyday life. Once Finland has become a sort of home to you, you’ll love the quirks and details that really make it different from Canada.

Social Scene

One of Jyvaskyla’s great features is that it’s a small city with a dense centre. That, as well as the fact that students live mostly all in the same place, makes for a real atmosphere of community. By the end of my term there, I couldn’t walk outside for more than a few minutes without running into someone I knew. Because of this, it’s relatively easy to get ‘plugged in’ socially at JyU.

As I mentioned earlier, my ‘tutor group’ was my first (and, in the end, best) group of friends. In addition to this though, the JyU staff also organize ‘buddy groups’ of 4 internationals and 4 Finns to get together socially. There’s no set program for the buddy groups – each group does what it likes. There are also big parties in one of the student bars every second Thursday night called “Stammtisch”.

At first, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed by all the new experiences coming at you. Not only do you have to adapt to living in Finland, but you also have to get used to associating with friends from other countries only. This means that you probably won’t be speaking as complicated English as you’re used to, and you may not have anyone around you who understands what it’s like to come from North America. Don’t despair, however. In my opinion, these “culture shocks” usually show up after a couple weeks, but die down after a couple more, as you settle into a kind of groove, and get to be closer to your friends.

Experiences and Learning

Absolutely everything is cultural. Everything you think, do, say, and feel is a product of the culture you come from. That’s the biggest thing I learned while in Finland, even though it took me several months to come to that conclusion. Two people from exactly the same walk of life (i.e. students) but from different cultures will operate on totally different wavelengths – their expectations and the way they think will differ quite drastically. I learned that at the point when you can get used to the differences between your culture and theirs, you’ll become much stronger friends. There’s no better way to see into a country than to meet a person from it.

In my mind, it’s important to make as many links to the host culture as possible when one is on exchange. One of the very best ways to do this is through a “friendship
family”. (Apply for this early – there are not enough families to go around) This is a program where a Finnish couple will sign up to befriend an international student for a semester or more. The families and the students eat, take trips, and just spend time getting to know one another. You’ll see inside a Finnish person’s house, eat their cooking, find out how they live, and maybe even meet some of their relatives as well. By the end of the semester, I felt that I had an in-depth understanding of Finnish culture, thanks in large part to my friendship family. The trips to Tampere and to the countryside I took with them are some of my fondest memories of my time in Finland.

All told, I would encourage anybody who’s looking for a satisfying, educational, and very original way to spend five months to study at the University of Jyvaskyla, Finland. When it’s over, you’ll find yourself having strange longings to go back to this beautiful, beguiling, and obscure country.