

Finland 2019 Study Abroad – Kayley Ng

Over spring break of 2019, I was fortunate enough to be able to go on a study abroad trip to Finland. As an education major this trip was extremely exciting because Finland has one of the best education systems in the world and where better to learn about it than in the Finnish schools. Over 10 days, my group and I got to explore the country, visit and teach in schools, and try new things. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life and I am so grateful to have been able to go.

Lodging:

My study abroad group and I stayed in Töölö Towers, a group of buildings owned by the University of Helsinki for researchers and their families to stay at while in Finland. The rooms consisted of a kitchen, living room, bedroom with two twin-sized beds right next to each other, and a bathroom with a towel warmer. Living quarters may have been tight, but it certainly helped to bond people quickly. Every morning the towers had free breakfast, usually consisting of eggs, oatmeal, fruit, and a sandwich making area. Residents are responsible for serving and cleaning up after themselves. House cleaning came in once a week to take out the trash and provide new bedding and towels. It combined the service of a hotel with independent living, which was perfect for our short stay.

Transportation:

In Finland, owning a car is expensive and driver's licenses are available to people 18 and older. People instead rely on the extensive public transportation system. Unlike in America, where most passes only can be used for a certain type of transportation or take money off every time it is used, passes are available that last for a certain amount of days, with an

unlimited amount trips for every public transportation vehicle, including trams, subways, and buses. It was quite easy to navigate the public transportation and by the end of the week all of the participants were able to get around using the tram or subway to go out to dinner or find a fun activity. There is also a lot more trust with the transportation. There are stations to scan the passes, but most times there is not a conductor walking around to check if they are valid. Very occasionally the police will come on to see if everyone has a valid pass and those without must pay a small fee. Otherwise, all the trust is in the people to have bought a valid pass.

Dining

There was a plethora of restaurants to pick from within walking distance or a short a tram ride away. Some of the places had food you could find in America, like burgers or pizza, while others had different options, like reindeer or moose. All the schools that visited have free lunch for the students and teachers, including us. All of the schools had at least one vegan or vegetarian option so that everyone could eat. The food was fresh, and seconds were available. None of the lunches had anything too crazy in them. Most of them also did not have a dessert included with the meal, or even available for the students to buy. The grocery stores, however, did have dessert available. Many had ice cream and candy, but the candy options were a bit different than those in America. There was a ton of chocolate brands and types to choose from, but the sweet and sour candy often consisted only of gummy candy, including salty black licorice. I personally enjoyed being able to step out of my comfort zone and try new things, like reindeer.

Activities:

While in Finland, we got to spend two days exploring the country, including a walking tour led by our facility advisor. We also got to take a boat ride down to Tallinn, Estonia or the “Old City”. Many Finnish people make the trip quite often as Estonia is much cheaper than Finland and people do not have to go through customs. In Tallinn, we were allowed to roam freely. The old town consisted of some restaurant, little gift shops, and a beautiful old fortress. In Finland, we got down to business. Two days consisted of lectures at the University of Helsinki in a few different buildings. Unlike Illinois State, there is no quad and some the buildings even require trams to get to. The lectures were mostly on the way the school systems are run and some of the programs available within the schools or public areas. Then we got to teach in local schools, from first grade through senior year of high school. Students were usually split into pairs and go to both observe and teach a few lessons, all in English. The high school students often understood us better than the elementary students, but conversations were had at all grade levels. The students were able to help us better understand why Finland education is so amazing, including the equity and more breaks for the students. At night we were allowed to go out and do whatever. My favorite night was going to the Allas Sea Pool, where one would go into the Baltic sea then run back into the sauna.

My trip was a once in a lifetime experience. I was able to learn a lot as a future educator and as a person.



Tallinn, Estonia



Reindeer



University of Helsinki



Inside of the elementary schools



Allas Sea Pool