Jozef McPherson – Finland

Like all the other exchange students, life has been busy, busy, busy as normal for me too. The last three months have flown by. Life in Finland is awesome! Life goes by, and I struggle to keep up. There are many trips I have done in the past months I would love to share with you all.

Firstly I experienced my first white Easter! I had a week cross-country skiing holiday in Lapland, Finland. I really enjoy cross-country skiing, it is so relaxing and you really get a good change to experience nature. The Lapland nature is very different to that of Southern Finland where I live. Also while in Lapland, I experienced the North Lights. Words cannot describe this rare event. The weather conditions have to be perfect. And one night they were, and I viewed the most awesome show of dancing lights across the sky for almost 2 hours. It was –10 outside and I sat for 2 hours and could not believe what was happening in front of my eyes. I just cannot describe it, video or pictures cannot capture it, you just have to see it!

I have never before in my life had such an interest in History and Language. Travelling around is truly amazing, you learn so much about people, culture, countries, yourself and you learn to really value what we have, we all Australia and I have never been happier to say I am Australian. These thoughts were first sparked by a Rotary organized trip to St. Petersburg, Russia at the end of April. Prior to this trip I just thought Russia was a dirty, poor country. And still now, I can't understand how a country like Russia can have a city like St. Petersburg. It is a miracle. St. Petersburg is beautiful in every direction you look, plenty of action and covered in golden statues and building that will blow you mind away, like the Winter Place Art Museum. It is huge, in fact the biggest in the world. If you look at every piece of artwork for 2 minutes, with no stops or breaks it will take you 8 years to look at everything! In our 3-hour tour, we covered a distance of 1.5 miles and only saw a snapshot of the artwork and this was power walking the whole time. I can't wait to go back and find more about the history of St. Petersburg. Prior to war and communism it was a very rich city, a 'window to Europe' where very powerful people lived. And I am still amazed at how such a beautiful city like St. Petersburg is built on a swamp.

Following returning home from Russia my first host family took me on a cruise to Sweden. This was so cool and exciting as it was my first cruise on a boat! The ship was decked out in everything you could ever need! Sauna, Turkish bath, shops, restaurants, cafes, bars, nightclubs, casinos, movies, constant live entertainment…everything. In Sweden we looked around 'old town.' It was interesting that in this area of town people still lived in the houses, unlike in Helsinki. Sweden was much the same as Finland, and this most likely comes back to the fact that Sweden ruled Finland for many years.

Following coming home from Sweden I moved host family and now live in another bigger town closer to Helsinki. The rest of May was back to normal life…school! However, this is fun seeing friends and hanging out with people. I had enough time to rest before I headed out on my Euro tour!

I started Euro tour in the 4th of June. There were 110 people on 3 buses and it was some of the best three weeks of my life. We travel though 9 countries including Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Monaco, Italy, Austria and Germany. We had guided tours of all major cities and 2 full free days off in Paris and Italy. We went to all the famous sights everywhere. Some places really amazed me, the size of the Eiffel tower, the type of toilets in France and the war museums in Berlin. My favourite country was Italy. The people were very friendly, the weather was great (even though it only rained one day all tour), they had a real beach with sand unlike in Nice, the shopping was great (and cheap) and the food was fantastic! I loved everything and can't wait to go back to Italy. There are so many places I can't wait to see. The Euro tour also marked the end for our 'oldies' to go home. This was sad because living with people on the same bus for 3 weeks; you get really close and have so many good memories. Euro tour is something I will never forget.

Arriving back in Finland on the 22nd, we reached the longest day of the year in Finland. On

this day the sun does not set, and it is so weird so be able to sleep anytime of the day. We like most Finns were at the summer cottage were you stay up all night sitting around fires. In the summer time, all the towns and city are very lively with many happy Finns! The weather is mostly sunny with temperature around 25 degrees. I spent the last week on my host parent's 4-hectare island in the ARCHIPELAGO of the coast of southern Finland. This is an incredible place. They brought the Island before the surrounding area was made a national park, so there are many nature sites and walking tracks to explore, not to mention hundred of islands. It is said that man has not set foot on all the islands in the archipelago. So it is a truly unique place.

Now, I still have 6 more weeks before school returns and will be travelling around Finland seeing this amazing summer country! It does not matter the season, it is all happening in Finland! And I love it so much here.

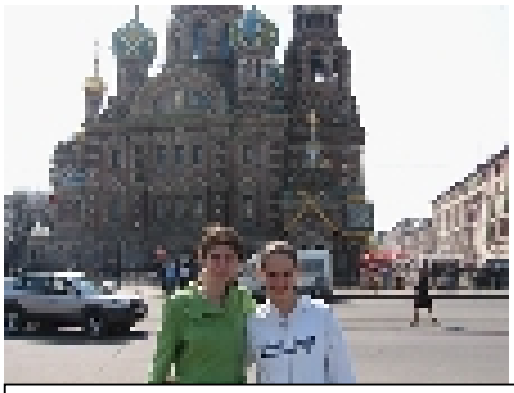
So to next time, live the life you love, and love the life you live!

Cheers,
Joseppii McPherson

Amanda Layther – Finland

I really cannot believe how much time has passed, and just how much I have done in that time. It is crazy to think that two of my big trips have passed, almost half my time here is gone, and I am about to lose over half of all my exchange mates when they return home. But I will start at the beginning… or at least more of the beginning than this.

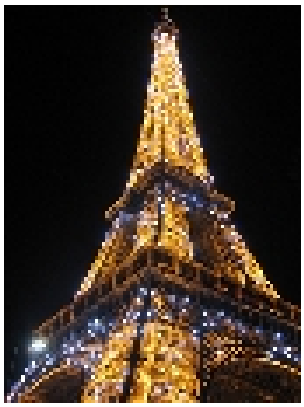
One weekend in April, I attended a District conference in Mikkeli, where I got to meet the other exchange students in my district, the ones who had been here for 6 months when we arrived. This group is known as the oldies, and we are their newbies. Meeting the ones in my district was fantastic, and a couple of them 'adopted' me as their newbie because we got to know each other fairly well. I just loved hanging out with exchange students, and I realised that weekend that, after a couple of hours, I was being far more open with them then I had been with people from school after a couple of months. We played stupid children's' games, climbed trees, and talked for hours and hours about anything and everything. It was just fun to spend time with others who didn't care about what we were doing, so I could be me.



Me and my oldie Diane in St Petersburg

The very next weekend was our St Petersburg trip. The trip went for 4 days, and was simply amazing. There were 3 buses and 100 exchange students travelling together, and the whole trip was one of very little sleep and sooo much fun. I grew really close to my roommate, a girl from Florida, and we talked every night until at least 3am. We spent one day in the Hermitage, which was amazing, especially for me. I was walking around with my mouth open, seeing van Goghs, da Vincis, Cezannes and so many more that I had studied and was now seeing in the person. The beauty of the Winter Palace (where the Hermitage is housed) and other Palaces that we visited was so amazing, they took my breath away, but they also threw into stark relief what is our world today. Because, after walking through such splendour and riches, we would step out onto the street and run into amazing poverty. We were only able to actually spend 2 days in St Petersburg itself, because the travelling time was so much. And a lot of that travelling time was actually spent not travelling, rather waiting at the border to be allowed through. We waited 3 hours going and almost 4 hours coming back, but that was, for me, a really enjoyable part of the trip because it was just all the exchange students, sitting talking, laughing, running, piggy-backs and fun.

I spent much of the time after this trip trying to meet up with other exchange students on the weekends, because I know, especially with the oldies, that I have limited time with them. I saw a few of them on various weekends, but also spent some time with my Finnish friends and my host sister, who is 16 and is amazing. I went to her school for one day to meet her friends and see what her classes are like, which was fantastic, and I also got to attend some of my younger host sister's classes, including a craft class. In this time, at school, my favourite class by far was my sport class, which was combined male and female and as a result was far more competitive than my previous, all girl class. It also gave me a chance to talk to some of the guys at my school where I had been too shy previously.



Then, the summer holidays began and therefore, so did… EUROTOUR!! The highlight of the year for most, it was such a fantastic experience, and I would give almost anything to go back and do it all again. There is no way I can tell all about it here, as it was just incredible. 100 students, 3 buses (of which, bus 2 was definitely the BEST!!!), 9 countries, 18 days. We saw Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands, France, Belgium, Italy, Monaco, Austria and Germany. Some of these countries we only visited for a couple of hours, such as Belgium, where we did a tour in Brussels on our way through, whereas with others like France, we spent several days in Paris and then moved to the south of France on the Mediterranean Sea. Basically, everything I have said about the exchange students when we are together, times it by 10000000 and that is what it was. Dancing and singing in the bus, doing the pony dance (a crazy exchange student dance here in Finland) under the Eiffel Tower so that everyone stared, talking to and beginning to love people I had never met before, having sand fights in northern Italy at the beach, dressing up guys as girls, having tickle wars, even visiting a hospital in The Netherlands because I was sick… it was all part of a fantastic time and one of my best memories. However, the end of the trip was so sad, because all the oldies are leaving soon, and for most, that was the last time I will see them.

Something this exchange really teaches you is to value the time that you have with the people you care about. Some of the fantastic friends that I have made here, who are now flying away from me, possibly forever, are the most amazing people I could ever hope to meet, and I am finding it really difficult to believe that I may never see them again. And the scary thing is, for most of them, I only probably spent 4 or 5 days with them. But exchange is like that. My plans for the future have changed dramatically over this trip, because now they, without a doubt, include a trip to North America, Brazil, Chile, and back to Europe, as soon as I have the money for the airfares. The friends you make on this journey on the other side of the world are so amazing, and it is so hard to say goodbye, but that is something that you must do with them. They are the people who make your year great, who make this something that you will remember forever, and that is not something that you let go of lightly.

Keep Safe and keep smiling!!
From Finland, with love
Amanda Layther