

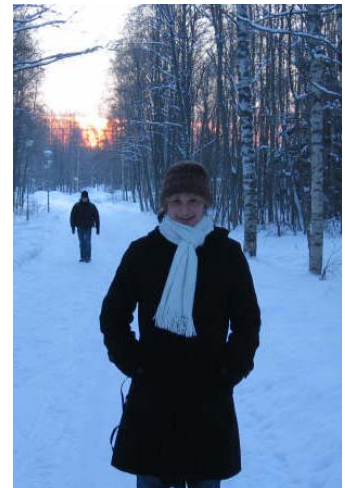
## Amanda Layther – Finland

I can't believe that it is already time for me to write my first boulder report! It still feels as if I got off the plane maybe a week ago, and, in the same way, this feels like I have been here for life. So much has happened since I left home.

I spent the first week at a language camp with all the other exchange students from the southern hemisphere, 24 Aussies, 5 South Africans and one New Zealander. During the week, we were taught the basics of Finnish, which have helped a lot in the time following. We were also given many worksheets that have been invaluable when trying to talk about certain subjects. But it wasn't all work. We were allowed quite a bit free time to get to know each other, and also to educate ourselves about living in a country where there is snow outside. I combined the two activities through snowball fights... A lot of snowball fights. It was great, because but by the end of the week, I had made some really close friends, who form the base of my support system here in Finland. Now, I know that, whatever I am going through, there are another 30 people who are probably dealing with the same issues, and I can call or email them if need be. Also in this time, we were educated about Finnish culture, and I had my first sauna!! It was amazing, especially because all the girls supported each other to experience it fully the traditional Finnish way – naked, with frequent dashes outside to go swimming in a hole in the ice, or roll in the snow! It was a fantastic experience, and I was so glad of the entire week, which allowed me a stepping-stone before I was thrown into the deep end and went to live with my host family.

My first host family were the Hakkarainens. My parents, Matti and Liisa had 3 children, but all are living out of home, apart from the occasional weekends that my host brother, Hannu spent at home. They were fantastic, very welcoming, and made me feel very at ease, but they did not speak much English, and I had not learnt much Finnish yet, so there were a few problems communicating, and it was a little lonely, not having any siblings. So, after about a month, I moved to another family. I will probably move back to the Hakkarainens in July, when their youngest daughter returns from Australia. In my second host family, I have 3 siblings – two sisters, aged 15 and 13, and a brother who is 9. My host mum and my oldest sister speak English very well, so it is easier to get by, though now I have to make sure I don't get complacent and stop learning Finnish.

My school here has 300 - 400 students, no uniforms and is all in one building. I am studying English, Finnish, Philosophy, History, Sport and the hardest Maths I could do, which is still work I have already done. In Finnish and Philosophy, the language is still completely over my head, especially in these classes, so I have decided to use that time to teach myself Finnish, from a book. However, I am finding the other classes brilliant, and I am picking up more language everyday. I have made many friends there, and I am beginning to meet them outside of school, so I feel as if I have definitely been accepted by my peers there. Some of my friends especially are making an effort to speak Finnish to me, even when it is obvious I don't understand, and repeating it slowly several times so that I am learning more Finnish. They are also coming up with many ideas of how I can learn to speak Finnish more easily. I have also started attending private Finnish lessons at a school for adults in town. I have lessons there once a week, and I hope that these really help me.



Me on the walk to school from the Hakkarainens



To other exciting events in my life. I have been snowboarding quite a few times already, using my first host sister's board (She is in Australia). It was brilliant. The skiing site is about 50km from me here, so hopefully I will be able to go quite a few more times before the snow melts. I have also gone to a bigger place that is around 2 hrs away from my house, with my family and also an Australian exchange student who I met in the first week. It was brilliant to catch up with him, and boarding was great.

I went to a hot air balloon competition in Viittasaari for a weekend with a friend, Juhis, and I helped his cousin and uncle prepare and pack up their balloons. Then, in the afternoon of the first day, I went up in his uncle's balloon!! It was an amazing experience, and it was great to see Finland from the air. It looked so fantastic, all white and green, and it was hard to believe that all that was holding us up was a lot of hot air. We landed on a lake, and as we did, the basket tipped over so we ended up all mixed up, and I finished fairly squashed, as I was on the bottom. However, for me that was the best bit of the whole process.

Another highlight was seeing how the students celebrate finishing school here. Their last day of school occurred quite a while ago now, but then they have to come back to do their final exams. On their final day, they first dressed in traditional outfits and did a traditional dance for the rest of the school and their parents in the sport hall. Then, once all the formalities were over, they disappeared, and transformed. They came back wearing the most ridiculous outfits they could think of, and wandered around the school for a while making as much noise as they could. Then they climbed into the back of trucks, which they decorated with signs, and threw lollies and shouted at the rest of the school. The trucks drove through the town and to the lower schools in a last parade of the senior students. It was pretty amazing, and it looked like a lot of fun. The atmosphere was great as well. The next day, the 2nd year students (my class) had the Vanhut dance, to celebrate that they were the oldest in the school now. It involved 12 formal dances that the students have already practiced and learnt, so unfortunately I couldn't take part. However, in the last dance the students were asked to dance with people from the audience, and so I got to dance with two of my friends.

All in all, I am having a fantastic time. The entire trip has been like a dream for me so far, and as I don't know when I am going to wake up, I am taking every chance I can to experience more of Finland. Everyone here has been so friendly and welcoming, and I am just loving every second of it!! Voi hyvin, minun ystävä! Nakimiin!!

From Finland, with love,  
Amanda Layther

### **Jozef McPherson – Finland**

Elä maassa maan tavalla taikka maasta pois pakene (Live in the country as they live). This was one of the very first proverbs told to me to make the most of my exchange year and since that day, I have been living like a Finn, in Finland. And to this date, this has been one of the most enjoyable experiences in my life.

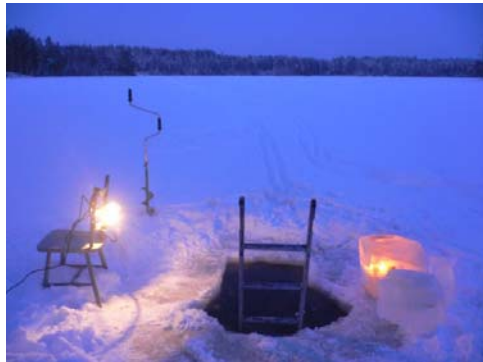
So I arrived in Finland on the 22nd of January, after some 36 hours of flying. The first week I spent in a small town called Karkuu, where I experienced a real Finnish winter, where the temperature got down to -26. In this week, I attended a comprehensive Finnish language school with the other 26 students from Australia. At the conclusion of this week my first host family came and picked me up, and we drove back to my new hometown for the next year, Nurmijärvi. Nurmijärvi is located about 30 minutes drive North of Helsinki with a population of approximately 45,000 people.

The first week in Nurmijärvi was one to relax, get over the jet lag and find my way around as the school was in Test week. Following this week I started school at the Nurmijärvi Lukio, which was so exciting as I got to start school all over again! However, the difference here was I got the opportunity to study subjects I have never studied before. So for this first period I study Art, Biology, Computer Science, English, History, Mathematics, Physiology and Sport...all in Finnish of course. So after a few weeks of school I began to get a routine in my life and started



studying the Finnish language and absorbing the Finnish culture into my life.

Since been in Finland I have done so many new activities and had the joy you experience when you try something for the first time. A common Finnish tradition we all know about is the Finnish Sauna! And I must say, the sauna is a relaxing place and very enjoyable...especially



when it is -20 degrees outside. However, I was not too sure about ice swimming! But now I have done it countless times at my host parent's summer cottage, it is something I really look forward to when we go there. After all you can only stay in the sauna for so long at 80 degrees before you must cool down and this is the way to do it. Once your boiling...run out steaming onto the lake and jump in the ice hole! And once you come out it is not really that cold, as you are still recovering from the shock of the ice cold water. So you must think I am crazy and it is bad for the body. But the President

of the Rotary Club, who is a brain surgeon, said it is not bad for your body. It is actually good for the blood circulation and Finnish tradition is, if you do it 3 times before winter you will not get the flu...so it is definitely worth it!

70% of Finland is covered in Forest, and hence there is so much untouched beautiful scenery to see. And I think the best way to see it is on skis, so we also do cross-country skiing a lot. The cottage area offers a lot of forests, lakes and rivers to go exploring and last Saturday Arto (my host Dad) and I, went for a 10 km ski. This was awesome and there are so many natural events that occurred in the in the nature that I just cannot describe or capture with the camera. It is just amazing. The next Sunday we did something very unique. I had an idea to go for a canoe in a near by river, but first we had to get the canoe there. So we had to pull the canoe across the snow covered lake on our skis...as if we were on an expedition the North Pole! This was so funny as in Finland the people are so conservative and don't do thing out of the ordinary and since we were pulling the canoe across the lake some people came to see if we were alright or if there was some kind of problem...but there was not...we were just having fun!

There are just so many experiences I would love to tell you all about but I have no more room and I must be going as we are having a party tonight to celebrate my nimipäivää (name day). So the 19th of March will be Jooseppi (my name in Finnish) day forever in my life! And I will make sure I will celebrate it in the years to come to stay a custom to Finnish tradition.