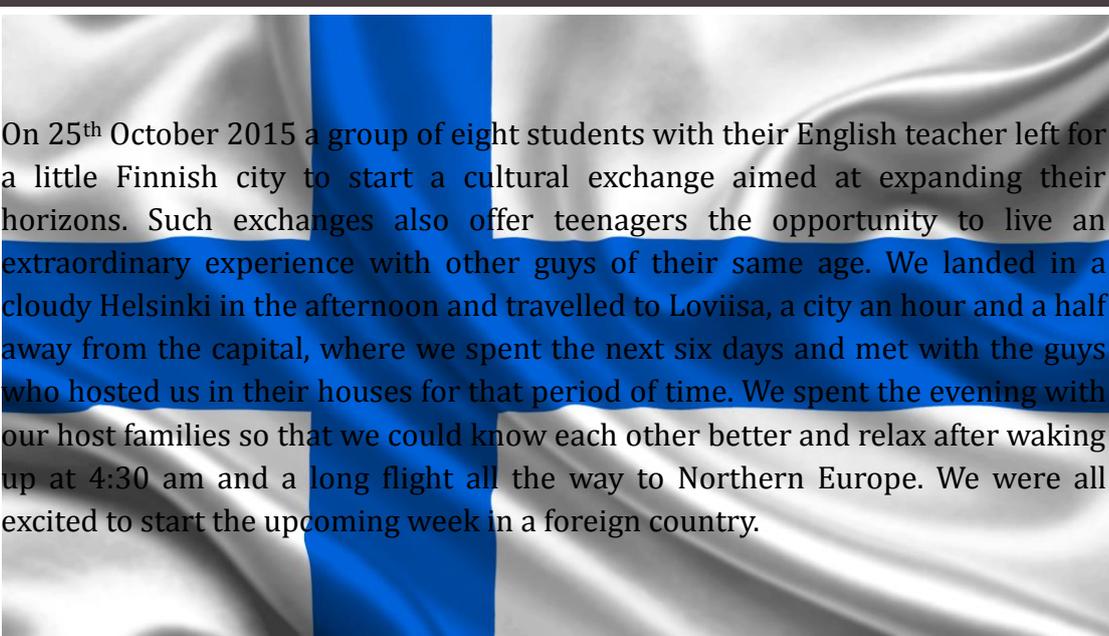


Exchange Italy-Finland

An experience beyond every expectation

1 MARZO 2016



On 25th October 2015 a group of eight students with their English teacher left for a little Finnish city to start a cultural exchange aimed at expanding their horizons. Such exchanges also offer teenagers the opportunity to live an extraordinary experience with other guys of their same age. We landed in a cloudy Helsinki in the afternoon and travelled to Loviisa, a city an hour and a half away from the capital, where we spent the next six days and met with the guys who hosted us in their houses for that period of time. We spent the evening with our host families so that we could know each other better and relax after waking up at 4:30 am and a long flight all the way to Northern Europe. We were all excited to start the upcoming week in a foreign country.

The next morning, as we arrived at the Loviisa Gymnasium, we immediately noticed that it was a completely different facility in comparison with our school. First of all, it extends on a wider area which includes basketball courts, lawns and more than one building; the school itself is not so big, since it just has to accommodate 300 students, but it has lots of spaces for guys to relax and study, like a pool room, a library and tables in the lobbies. There's free wi-fi for students and they can freely use their mobile phones during the lessons as long as they don't impede the teaching; moreover they're given a lap top which they use to study in the classrooms, where there are plugs to connect them. We had the possibility to attend regular lessons for three days and we discovered that they're organized more or less like our university, as they can leave the classroom whenever they want without asking the teacher if he's busy, and they can get out of the school during the breaks, which are every 45 minutes.

School starts at 8:30am and finishes at 4pm, but students don't have classes for the entire period since they can choose some of the subjects as not all of them are compulsory, and sometimes they have "self studies", meaning that they can do the tasks on their own without attending the lesson. Moreover the organization of the subjects is different, because they study the same 3 or 4 ones for about two months and then they have tests, after which they change subjects.

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The classrooms are as big as ours but the number of people inside them is a lot different, because there are about 15 students in each one and the silence during lessons is unbelievable, an aspect which we should all try to take a cue from.

At lunchtime they go to the canteen in a building next to the gymnasium, and they can help themselves at a self-service point. Near this building stands a huge construction in which there's the gym, a space that can be divided into 4 smaller pitches by big curtains lowered from the ceiling so that more than one class can have gym lesson at the same time.

But let's now move on to all the activities we did in those days! On Monday we gathered at the school and the Principal made a welcoming speech giving us some guides, maps and information about the place; then we followed an Italian guy who lives in Loviisa on a sightseeing tour around the city and into the woods, which took the whole morning. Afterwards we had to go straight back to the school to have our first Finnish lunch, because in the afternoon we went to the beach and we had the opportunity to try kayaking in the bay with two instructors for a couple of hours, and it was a great experience also because we could take a moment to enjoy the view of the woods and to admire the whole landscape which borders the sea that is really different from the ones we are used to. We had to wear special suits not to get wet, because after this activity we had to go back to school again to work in groups and make our own dinner in a cooking class. It was great fun and in some ways different, because we ate at 4:30 pm and the sun had already set, a strange fact for Mediterranean inhabitants who are used to different schedules.



On Tuesday we had the chance to attend the lessons we liked the most and all the subjects were explained in both Swedish and English to allow us to take mentally part in them. I know I said "Swedish" and not "Finnish", but the Loviisa Gymnasium is a Swedish-speaking school since they have two official languages

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in Finland. After lunch we went to the woods to play Frisbee golf, which also included hiking, and then we lit a fire to cook some sausages while chatting. In the evening we went to a nice cottage on the beach to nibble something all together and to have our first Finnish sauna, which involved also diving into the sea because there was no snow and we had to find something else to dive in.



Wednesday was about visiting the area, in particular the town of Porvoo, a small and nice city which once was a fishing village with colorful houses, where we had a sightseeing walk and a special lunch consisting in a main course of reindeer meat. In the afternoon we visited traditional shops and a couple of chocolate laboratories where we had the chance to discover tar chocolate and salted liquorice, called “salmiakki”, before going to a spa to recover from the cold.



On Thursday we spent the morning at school, wandering from class to class and spending some time playing pool; after lunch in the canteen we had to present our Italian school to all the students who were more or less our age and talk

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about our city and a little about Italy in general. It was a crucial moment to see how many differences there can be between two countries which are just two hours of flight away from each others, and I think it was also interesting because it gave us the possibility to examine some aspects of our system that look normal but can always be improved. Then we moved to the gym for the dancing class. Yes, they do have a dancing class for the students of the penultimate year of high school in order to get ready for the ball, and we got the chance to see and try traditional dancing.

On Friday morning we left for the capital city, Helsinki! We started the tour in front of the Finlandia Hall, which was designed by Alvar Aalto and built in marble of Carrara on the outside, and then we visited a pretty nice church in the rock under the ground in the city centre and the Kiasma Museum (Finnish national gallery), where we had the opportunity to admire the brilliant exhibition of Jani Leinonen called "School of Disobedience", in which the author imagines brand mascots as teachers, switching over from being marionettes of marketing to activists teaching critical media literacy and civil disobedience. Then we had free time to do some shopping and have a look around the downtown. At night, since it was the last one, we guys met in the old school of Loviisa and had a great goodbye party.

We took our flight back to Italy on Saturday afternoon, carrying countless memories with us and regretting it all passed so quickly. But this is not the end of our trip, because our new Finnish friends are coming here in April to spend another week with us, and we couldn't be happier to host them and live other unforgettable moments with them.

