

NEWSLETTER FROM GWYNETH MAC MURTRIE
2009 VIRGINIA IFYE TO FINLAND (3 MONTHS) AND GERMANY (3 MONTHS)

August 15, 2009 Finnish Update

Hello,

This month I have been very busy. My last host family was able to take me to many places around Finland, so I have been able to see how the country differs from place to place.

The family was even able to take me to RUSSIA!! We looked at many different ways that I could enter and exit Russia without a Russian or Finnish VISA. In the end, we took a boat through the Sinmar Channel. It was very interesting to be able to go through all of the locks and see how they worked. I have studied how locks work, but being able to go through them brought it into better perspective.

We landed in Vyborg, Russia. This area once belonged to Finland, while under Russian rule. After World War I, Finland experienced the Continuation War. During the war, they fought for their independence from Russia. During this war, Finland lost much of the area in the southeast known as Koralia, where Vyborg is located.

While I was on the ferry, I met a man whose mother was born in Vyborg but was forced to evacuate by the Russians. He said this is the reason some Finns do not like the Russians, but the two countries should be hospitable to each other since they are neighbours. He mentioned that even though where his mother was from is now Russia, the people who came from that area always consider themselves Finns.

St. Petersburg was AMAZING! The city celebrated its 300th anniversary a few years ago, so the city has seen a revitalization period in the last few years. I was surprised by how many churches were in the city. During the Communist Era, religion was outlawed. During this time the churches were used instead as markets, barns, or storehouses.

I had the opportunity to go inside an Orthodox cathedral. I could not believe how beautiful it was. I have seen many images of these churches, but those images do not do the real thing justice. The whole experience was fantastic. I am so glad to have been able to have it.

I also attended a guided tour of the Hermitage. It was huge! What is now an art museum was once the Winter Place of the Russian Tsar. We were there 3 hours and only saw a little bit of the museum. The entire time I was there, I could not believe that someone had lived there. It was very crowded and busy, and I am extremely grateful to have seen works that I studied in class. I was amazed by how big or small some were.

I even saw a MOOSE! For those that know me well, I love moose and one of my dreams has always been to see one. While we were driving back from the boat, it just ambled out into the road. I now understand why people are so scared of meeting one on the road. Unlike deer that stand by the side and then run into the car, the moose just come right out of the woods, no stopping!

I have just completed my stay with my Lapp family (similar to Eskimos). I had to take the night train from Tampera to Kolari to reach them. It was a very interesting experience. I was able to

have a sleeping car to myself and wander around the train. It was surprisingly quiet. I thought that I would have been able to hear the people on either side of me, but all I could hear was the *clik clak* of the train.

My family was very nice. There were parents Juha and Eija and their two girls Emilia (16) and Anna (10). The family is also a foster family to two sisters Julia (9) and Jasmine (8). All of the family gets along well and acts like the two other girls are truly part of the family. Eija was able to take me several places because she was on her summer holiday. Some of the most interesting were Ylläs Mountain, The Arctic Circle, and a Reindeer farm. Ylläs is a ski resort that is part of the Fells Mountain Range. A Fell is actually a geological formation, where the mountain is actually eroding away. There is a very distinct timberline and on the top of the mountain there are only boulders. I had to ask several times if the formation was natural or if the area had been logged. It is a natural formation.

Learning about the reindeer was very interesting. At first I did not want to go to the farm, but I knew Mom would be disappointed in me, so I went. I was pleasantly surprised. I am very glad I went. The family owns about 115 reindeer, but only 15 live on the farm. The others are released in the middle of the spring and roam around until they return in mid-fall. The owners said that they always all come back. Their return depends on how well they are cared for during the winter. As I was driving around I noticed that there were no dead reindeer on the roadside. This is because there is an association that residents can contact if they hit one. The representative comes out and is able to identify the owner and can then contact the owner about the accident. The owner then comes and picks up the animal.

I have only spent a day so far with my new family the Tokola's, but they seem very nice. The parents do not speak any English, but we are starting to figure out how to communicate. The youngest sisters both speak English, so they are able to translate for us. The family has 6 children from ages 30-19, and there are 5 girls in the family. We are planning a few activities, such as going to the shore, which is about 40 KM (about 24 Miles) away.

Sorry I do not have any photos posted yet. I have not been able to get them off the camera.

The next update will be around the 15th of September, but it might be a few days later since I might not be able to get to a computer. By that time I will have completed my stay in Finland, been on break, and might possibly be in Germany! For my free time I will be heading to Ireland, England, and Greece!

Until Then!

Gwyneth