

Dear friends,

I left on the 28th of May and, of course, the SwissAir plane I was travelling in left three hours late, due to NATO corridors problems starting from Aviano. Oh well, a short pause in Zurich and let's go, towards Tampere. I had no clue about Finland, neither the city nor its history, but on the Finnair plane I meet a Swedish woman (what a pity, she was 60) who lives in Finland; we had a very long conversation (three hours long) where I came to know everything about the Swedish king and the queen; Ahtissaari, the Finnish president; the president of the government; the history and culture of that country.

Finally, we land in Helsinki and the woman says goodbye almost moved; I hope I will have the same result and charm with younger ladies and I smile. I catch the bus and I head towards Tampere, at about 200 kms on the north. It's 11pm and the sun is still in the sky!

My friend Maria, my housemate in the good ol' times of Vigo, fetches me and we go to the place where she lives, Kaukajärvi, really far from the centre of the town. There is a very cute little lake there (järvi, in Finnish) and it looks like being in the mountains. Just a little chitchat to remember the old times spent together between Maria and me and it's already 6am. And at 4 it's day already...

On the next day we go to the Tampere University (Tampereen Yliopisto, so you learn a little bit of Finnish too). It's really nice, modern, efficient, with computers everywhere, printers, scanners, Internet connection at 102 KB/sec. I meet some other Erasmus students there - an infinity of Italians, Greeks, Spanish, Americans, Australian, South Koreans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Germans and so on - and I am invited to go by bus to see the Finnish countries and their typical natural products with no chemical additives. More than inspired by a WWF-like spirit, I'd like to meet some Finnish girls and of course I accept. The countries are much like ours, but the girls are so different! They are so incredibly wonderful, so blonde, tall, with blue eyes; I had the headache, as I was looking on the left and right, near and far, all the time. Unfortunately, Finnish girl are really fond of their and above all the other one's privacy. They have the custom of putting their shoes off when they get home, and a wonderful girl I was looking some flirt with almost touches my foot. Geez! She takes her foot away as she had had a 2000-Volt shock and there's nothing doing. Anyway I meet another girl, really more open (quite impossible to find one like her in Finland!), and she gives me her cellular number (they all have a cellular phone, of course a NOKIA!) and her e-mail (another thing they all have). My trip-mates, a German and an Italian one, are really nice and the day goes by really fast.

As the Finns blindly trust everything and everyone (they do not steal, if you forget your purse you find it where you lost it with all the money still inside, the bikes are left unlocked in the University parking and so on) I am given a new identity and thus I become a Check born in 1975. With this student card - which has a photo on it not resembling me at all - I can get the 50% discount on trains, museums, buses and the University canteen. It's easy - just show the backside of the card from a far position

and that's all! Nobody will ever ask you documents or stuff like that as they do not want to disturb you.

The next day is the 31st and there is the most important night for the Finns. It's VAPPU, the Spring Party (well, it was snowing, anyway....). All the people, instead of passing by alone, as they used to do before Spring, come out, smile to the people, stop looking on the floor and look at your eyes, talk a little bit more. Vappu shakes up the souls, warms up the hearts and above all the belly, 'cos in this night they drink, drink, drink. The entrance ticket is a piece of cloth you have to sew on special overalls all the university students have according to the colour of the faculty they're studying in: yellow, red, pink, blue, black...

All Tampere was in the streets, everybody partying, and there was a famous Finnish group in a live concert. For the first time people sing, and dance, while in the winter, also in the concerts, the maximum they do is clapping their hands.

On the next morning there is the "Tekkarikasti", which is the baptism of the First-Year-Students of Engineering. They have to put themselves - naked- in a big container that is put by a crane into the cold water of the river, so that the water may enter... Brrr...

In the meantime I meet a lot of new people: some Italian girls of Verona, Padova, Palermo; some foreign girl (from Kiel and Hamburg) and some other Erasmus. And what about the Finns? Unassailable, unapproachable, untouchable, inexpugnable. I am suggested to get them drunk to have success, but of course I'd collapse on the ground much before them (they drink 7 biers as an "aperitif"...), so I just let it be.

I also leave for my cultural-historical tours, around the Country. Turku, the old capital of Finland; Jyväskylä, where the big sculptor Alvar Aalto was born, and then Hämeenlinna, with an interesting castle made of bricks, the unique example in the Northern Europe, and homeland of Sibelius, author of the Finnish hymn. Of course, if you compare these cities with ours, all these places have nothing to say. They are modern cities, born, like Tampere, in 1906, industrial even if very tiny (the whole Finland has 5 million inhabitants, the capital 600.000), with very similar protestant and orthodox churches from town to town. What is nice to see is the context, the cleaning of the streets, the silence of the cities, and the fact that between town and town - at least 30 kms - there are only closely-planted trees and it's like coming back to civilisation, when you see more than four houses at a time...

As for the language, I'd say the gestures are the best thing to do, because only in very lucky cases one can find English-speaking people. The young students know English, but if you go to a shop and you don't speak Finnish it's over, dude.

The prices are quite expensive, as a postcard costs 1 pound, a stamp 80 penning, an international call 90 penning per minute, a bottle of water (in glass, because plastic is almost unknown) 3 pounds.

Of course I had a sauna, which the Finns do love doing - all the houses have one: hey, wonderful! You enter, paying by your will (the receptionist is behind the sauna, and the two entrances are off visibility) and after a very FROZEN shower there is a room

you have to go in. The steam is at 80 Celsius degrees. This temperature is maintained constant by some volunteer who throws some water over a stove warming some stones put on it. These stones release this steam.

After about 5 minutes of sufferings, one goes out, in my case in costume, at +7 C, and goes to have a bath (in my case, at +5 C - there is a blackboard where you can read updated temperature). It seems something very difficult to do, but as a matter of fact the difference of temperature seems lesser. Well, I couldn't feel my feet anymore, but I also swum in the clean water of that lake!! Then one comes back to the sauna and so on. This mixture of cold-warm should invigorate the muscles and make you more resistant to the colds and the illnesses.

I also went to Stockholm, in the near Sweden, with a ship (a 10 floor ship!). It was an 11 hours trip, by night, and I stayed there from 6.45am to 8.45pm.

In this city things change a lot: people are alive, they shout, honk, write on the walls. Stockholm is less expensive, at least in the means of transportation, and above all in the postcards (5 penning each!), and it is a wonderful city. I do not take many photos of the same city, generally, but this time I made 40. They say it's the Venice of the North, but there is no comparison, a part from the bridges... Well, they just content themselves and dream.

There are some really wonderful houses, monuments and sightseeing, and if I can I'll send you some photos. This city MUST be seen. Ah, Swedish girls are really awful, I don't know who invented that legend..

I went all alone to Stockholm, even if I had contacted the Finnish girl who had given me her number. If she hadn't been abroad for work, she would have come with me, as she said in a letter she sent me later on. What a pity! Anyway, that city was worth walking also alone.

When I came back, all the Kaukajärvi girls (i.e., all the Erasmus girls, as they all lived there) had a party, and there was a special party for me too, organised by three girls - an Italian one above all. I thought there was something to develop with her, but as she's an Italian, she just played with me. The same ol' story... You know, as I was staying there, we really came along, but then time passed (even if we kept on writing each other once I came back to Belluno) and now she's going out with another Italian one she met in Tampere.

It was already the 10th of May and I had to catch the plane to come back to Belluno. Of course, in Zurich I had other problems, and instead of leaving at 4.30pm I left at 9.45pm (the plane was broken and the NATO forces had to drop bombs); luckily the airport direction gave us a 30 pound ticket to have a free dinner! I ate so much at the restaurant I couldn't breathe, and I also met 5 other passengers, so time flew.

Well, this has been my trip. With a recap, wonderful, but so different that it must be lived in first person to be understood. Stockholm can be understood without visiting it, Finland not.