

EXCHANGE TO FINLAND

Katrien Nel, deputy head girl of Merensky High School, took part in Rotary International's short term exchange programme and visited Finland for six weeks from the 24th of November 2012.

Katrien and her exchange partner, Tuuli Valkama, became good friends when Tuuli stayed with the Nel family in July/August 2012.

About Finland, Katrien says: "I loved it all. From staying with a large noisy Finnish speaking family to the icy temperatures and of course, a white Christmas!

Finland is a beautiful country with modern cities, enormous lakes and natural pine forests. There are only five million people in Finland and the standard of living is of the highest in the world.

The Valkama family treated me like one of the family and I became six year old Emmi's pet project. She followed me everywhere and spoke Finnish non-stop. Some of it simply had to rub off and I can now understand and speak a little Finnish. Finnish is a unique language not related to Germanic or Latin languages and it is only spoken in Finland.

Most teenagers and adults in Finland understand a little English.

I was lucky - it started to snow on my third day in Finland and it was still snowing when I left. The average daytime temperature during my visit was

-15 ° C. The buildings in Finland are all heated so the only time I ever really felt cold in my thick borrowed coat and boots was on the two mile walk to and from the school bus.



The Valkama family stay in

Rajamaki, a small town about 30 kilometres from the capital of Finland, Helsinki. Tuuli and I went to school in the neighbouring town of Nurmijarvi. Schools in Finland are all excellent and free of charge.

Even the tasty school lunches, unlimited use of the internet and colour printing was free!

School starts at different times of the day, between 8:00 and 17:00, depending on your subjects. My subjects were English; Maths; Psychology; Dancing and Religion. Needless to say I only really participated in my English and Dancing class! Languages offered in school are Swedish; English; French; German and Spanish.

I presented PowerPoint presentations on my life in South Africa at school and at the Rotary club in Nurmijarvi, and both were very well received. Learners commented on how colourful everything in South Africa is! Unexpectedly, because I included a picture of my brother with a hunting rifle, I was asked numerous questions about hunting and all of a sudden I was a boffin on hunting!

Because of the long school day, extra mural activities take place in the evenings and are not school related. Tuuli takes singing lessons and attends choir practice; her brothers Ville and Jussi play ice hockey and little Emmi takes ballet and gymnastics. The Valkama parents drive the children to neighbouring towns for these activities and bed time is usually close to midnight.

Apart from short outings and trips to neighbouring towns, the Valkamas took me on three magical trips. The first was to the medieval town of Turku, the original capital of Finland, where I visited the fortress like castle of Turku and walked through the streets of the ancient town, only recently discovered by archaeologists.

We took an overnight trip on the Viking liner....., crossing the Baltic Sea from Helsinki to Stockholm. I was amazed by the many small islands on the way, all of them with summer cottages or gorgeous mansions covered in snow.

I loved shopping at the Christmas markets of the design capital of the world, Helsinki, and seeing the beautifully preserved historical buildings of the old part of Stockholm. Not to mention the awesome high heeled boots I bought there!

The highlight of the special trips was to Kilpisjarvi, in the Northernmost part of Lapland. The breathtaking views of frozen lakes and snow laden forests on the 1200 kilometre trip made the journey feel short, and I saw real Reindeer on the way! We stayed in a wooden cottage straight out of a fairytale, with the welcome difference of central heating and a sauna.

It was dark until noon, when the family and I bravely trekked up the icy paths of Saana mountain, in -28° C! What an adventure, especially when it became pitch dark again at 15:00, and we still had to get down! Back at the cottage at last, we were welcomed with steaming bowls of Reindeer soup!

Seeing Huskies excited to be tethered to a sleigh, and a thin green line in the 'morning' sky - surely a glimmer of the Northern Lights - made this trip even more unforgettable.

The icy, snowy weather was such an experience! Apart from the heavenly feeling of warming up in the sauna after the cold walk from the school bus, Tuuli and I had a lot of fun in the snow. Following a very Finnish tradition, we rolled around in it after a sauna, blood-red and helpless with laughter after only a minute or two! We braved swimming in an ice hole cut from a frozen lake - the temperature in the lake, -2° C, almost felt warm compared to the outside temperature of -15°C!

Finally, we went snowboarding in a forest with friends and skated on a frozen lake just outside of Rajamaki.

What I will miss most of all is the order and cleanliness of the entire Finland, the energy the cold weather gave me, the fun we had in the snow and most of all my host family in Finland, especially my host sister Tuuli.

What I missed about South Africa during my exchange was the warmth of the people, the friendly hugs and easy conversation in my home language, Afrikaans. Oh, and biltong!

In conclusion I would like to thank Letaba Rotary for approving me for the programme and District 9400 for the meticulous arrangements. Traci Holdcroft, D9400 YEX Chairman took particular care to prepare outbound students for exchange and Bob Sienaert, D9400 YEX Placement Officer, gave friendly support and encouragement every step of the way."