



An unforgettable working holiday

Lapland trip part 2

Snowy trees and fields are zooming past the train window and the dull, snowless landscapes of southern Finland are slowly changing into a white winter wonderland. It's exceptionally snowy in Lapland this year, and the exchange students who have been witnessing the most unusually warm winter are in for an experience they're not going to forget.

Me and the 9 other AFS volunteers also have our responsibility in ensuring that. After being on the same trip the year before, I was excited to do it all again. I was never in exchange myself, actually, but to me, exchange students have always been some of the most fun people to hang around with. There was no need to think twice about joining almost a hundred of them for a week in Lapland, and doing it again was a no-brainer.

Here's an unexpected fact: I, a 100% Finn, had never actually been to Lapland before that first trip! This time there was less of the new and unknown to me, so I was excited about having a better idea of how everything works and not being as confused as the students.

Each of the volunteers had a small group of roughly ten students on their responsibility. There were daily small group meetings where we informed the students about the plans for the upcoming day and listened to their feedback about the trip so far. My small group was absolutely amazing and those meetings, while brief, were some of the best moments on the trip. In fact, I'm still in contact with a few of those students.

We had a volunteers' meeting every day where we went over the upcoming plans and talked about... well, everything. There was always much on the table, as one might imagine is the case with a hundred people: Important things we need to inform the students about, individual issues with some students, timetables and such.

The entire trip was tightly packed with a dense program of outdoor activities, socializing and tourist attractions of the Pyhänturi area. The volunteers took part in the activities with the students and hosted some of their own in the evenings. Mine was music. I took my guitar along, the musical portion of the people decided to spend their evening with me and magic just kinda happened. For the first trip, I learned some traditional finnish campfire songs. Incidentally, no one could sing them, so they played and sang their own ones. It was amazing, and I was wiser the second time around to not learn anything beforehand.

If the program was tight for the students, it was even more so to the volunteers. We had to be the first and the last people everywhere, and outside the programs we were planning and going over things. Still, despite the huge, constant responsibility and the amount of work, these trips are a kind of holiday to me. Hanging out with the students is so much fun, and having so many different nationalities in one place is absolutely unique. The cultural differences are an endless source of humor and conversation, but despite that, I still can't help but take note of how similar people are no matter where they come from. There is always something to bond over, and it's a bittersweet feeling to know you might not see those amazing people ever again.

There are numerous goodbyes and hugs all the way from Rovaniemi to Tampere, as people are going their separate ways. It also warms my heart to see how much they have enjoyed this experience and to know I have done my part in that. One of them told me I had a big-brotherly vibe and things like that mean so much to me. Yes, my mental battery is completely drained afterwards and it takes several days to adjust back to reality. But being a part of one of the most unforgettable experiences in these people's lives makes it more than worth it.