My Erasmus in Helsinki, Finland

Kinga Révész

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I remember reading reviews about Nordic countries a year ago and dreaming about having the biggest adventure. Hence, I am aware that my review should give some useful and exact information whether the country / city worth it to spend a semester there. So, I will try to focus on that rather than on nostalgic storytelling. I would like to point out why it is worth it to do an Erasmus in general.

Helsinki, Finland and the Finnish culture

Why Finland? I have been in love with the Nordics in the past few years because of their design, lifestyle and the beautiful nature of their counties. My parents had lived in Gothenburg before I was born. They told me that living in the north can teach people to live their life more happily and productively. I wanted to know and experience how northern people live and what they do to make their lives more joyful, peaceful and happy. My older brother studied in Jönköping with the Erasmus Program two years ago and he also encouraged me to head north. (And now, according to what my brother told me and what I experienced I can tell that the Erasmus experience is very similar in the North. We visited the same countries; the people are similar and so on). I eventually chose Finland because I had very little knowledge about it in contrast with Sweden, Denmark or Norway. It was also attractive for me that it is not Scandinavia, and that Finns know who Hungarians are because of the same origin of the Finnish and Hungarian language. Another thing was the world-famous Finnish education system that I wanted to try out. Furthermore, Helsinki is small and friendly, yet it is a capital city and a good spot when it comes to travelling.

It was easy for me to feel like I am home in Helsinki. The nature is close to the city, the streets are wide and clean, safe and the whole environment is calm and peaceful. People do not rush, there is no traffic, and everything is so comfortable. I can feel the Swedish vibe mixed with a little Russian, but everything is modern at the same time. The weather was surprisingly good in the first weeks and it did not get that cold as we thought it would get. The prices, for me, as a Hungarian, are insane but I prepared myself beforehand. Still better than the Scandinavian countries (a little). My favourite places were the area at the central station, the parks and cafeterias in the design district, the main square and the harbour.

I think I cannot give a whole view about what Finland is like and who the Finns are because that is something one can only experience. I always say that Finland is like a hobbit / elf wonderland (apart
from the fact that people are only elves in their heart, physically they are very tall). This is because of
the beautiful Finnish nature with slim and tall pine trees, mossy ground, mushrooms, reindeers and
squirrels. Unbelievably cute. In the cities next to the see seagulls are everywhere. To experience this the
best places near Helsinki are: Suomenlinna, Seurasaari, Nuuksio national park, Turku archipelago.
However, if someone is going to Finland for its nature the best places are in the middle of Finland or in
Lapland. One hard thing was the darkness, which began in October. We got less and less sunshine and
in from late November we did not get any sunshine at all. The sun came up at around 10 am and went
down at 3 pm. In-between we did not see the sun because it was 100% clouds everyday all the time.
We got so used to the darkness and artificial lights, that after a few weeks we did not know why we
were so stressed and depressed. But after a while we learned how to deal with it.

**Finnish people** are hard to approach, they are distant, which is common in the Nordics. They need a
huge personal space (so no one should stand closer to them than 5-10 meters), they do not really talk
on the streets and to each other. Although if you have a problem, they help you instantly. If you get to
know them you realize they are only distant because they are introverted / super shy, and they are
actually kind hearted. Finns are so different from the Scandinavian, because they are not at all posh,
they do not care that much about fashion and what other people think of them. Finns have the weirdest
traditions like the wife carrying competition or jumping into icy water after sauna. They spend their free
time with being in their small group of friends, walking in the nature picking mushrooms or berries, or
staying in their Mökki (little cottage in the forest near water) in their sauna. To get an even deeper
knowledge about Finns I recommend reading about Sisu, which is a phrase which means something like
never giving up; inconvenience makes you stronger; being satisfied with what you have and so much
more.

**Some tips for Erasmus in Finland:**

− Start looking for an apartment in time, apply for HOAS as early as you can. The lucky ones can
  get a room for 380-450 euros. But the average is paying 500-900 a month and still travelling 30-
  50 minutes to school every day.

− Shop at Lidl, it is so much cheaper than the Finnish supermarkets.

− Buy a gym card, it is even cheaper than in Hungary. Always ask in shops / other places if they
  have student discount, they usually do.

− The autumn / early winter in Finland is like a freezing winter in Hungary, prepare like that. No
  need for overpriced winter jacket but have a practical one!
— Travelling outside of Helsinki between cities in Finland is almost impossible with public transport, so renting a car is handy. But I have to say, Finnish cities are not really worth visiting, they are simple and industrial, but the nature is worth travelling for.

Hanken School of Economics

Why Hanken? It was attractive for me because Corvinus Business School has thousands and thousands of students. I felt that I needed a break from that and experience the advantages of a smaller university. I liked the fact that apart from its size, Hanken is well known in the Nordics (mainly for its research).

Hanken had a lot of advantages, in my first weeks I had fallen in love with the atmosphere of the university. I think the best thing about it was that it is made for the students. The environment is motivating and cosy. Lunch time was the best part of the day since I met with my little exchange crew. And the food was only 2.60 euros which is unbelievable, because you can only buy a small candy for that price in Finland. The interesting thing is that the core knowledges I gained this semester was how to write essays in English, how to summarise articles, how to read and write fast and time management. Teachers were fair, there were some interesting lectures and I only had two exams which were not hard.

Hanken also had some disadvantages. I only had 4 classes a week, but the number of deadlines and assignments were insane. Every week there were days when I was sitting in the library until 11 pm. Just to give an idea I added the number of pages I had to write this semester, and I wrote 70 pages. The assignments are mostly individual research and the teachers are not really interested in your opinion, but only expect you to write summaries about articles and to show that you understand what you had read about. The goal of this to teach how to think, but I did not succeed to fit in the box. The grading is also different than in Hungary, 60% means ‘good’ while in Hungary that is almost fail. So even if my grades usually were ‘very good’ I am going to get ‘average’ in Hungary for that. The amount of studying was hard (not the typical Erasmus experience), but the content what they thought was actually easy compared to Corvinus.

Hanken is a Swedish university and Swedish speaking Finns study there. Swedish speaking Finns are minority in Finland, about 10% of the population is Swedish. This was exciting for me, because this way I could experience also the Swedish culture and I also studied some Swedish. However, I think the teaching system is similar to Sweden and not the real Finnish system. This was something I had not thought about and it was disappointing. If I could go back in time maybe I would choose Aalto university, which is a higher ranked school. I had not chosen it because it is not in Helsinki, the main campus is in Espoo, but it is only 20 minutes away from the capital city.
Travelling in the North

Our exchange committee was brilliant at organising trips to the surrounding countries. Although, I believe this is true to the Nordics, because student unions are very organised (and mandatory to join for by the way). I recommend joining all of them even when they are pricy, because this is the only time when you get to know your friends and have a break from studying. Even if you think you do not have time, you should have for the trips. A short brief about the trips:

Tallinn was a daytrip; the ferry took only two hours and we were in the Estonian capital city. The city is lovely and definitely worth visiting. It is so much cheaper than Helsinki. The committee did not organise a trip to the Baltics, but I regret not going, because the flights from Budapest are expensive.

We went to Stockholm also by ferry. These ferries are enormous and an amazing experience (apart from sea sickness). The city was huge compared to Helsinki. The atmosphere was so stylish and cool. However, we only spent two days there and it would have been nice to have a few more days to see the actual city, not just the old town.

Saint Petersburg was something special, my first time out of Europe. This was also a ferry cruise. The city is one of the most touristy places I have ever been to, but I enjoyed getting to know the history and interesting information about the city. The buildings were breath-taking, and the activities were fun. However, Russian people were rather rude and fed up with the tourists. The prices are similar to Hungary.

Lapland is the north of Finland. The atmosphere of it is magical. The sun comes up at 11 am and goes down at 2 pm, which may sound frightening but actually an interesting experience: the sun is not really coming up but stays on the horizon making the sky red, yellow, purple and orange for 3 hours. We were unlucky when it comes to the weather, because we had just a little snow (which had not happened in the past 61 years, they said) and the sky was so cloudy that we did not see the famous northern lights. But I said to myself that I cannot complain, I did not see green, but I saw so many other colours on the sky and even if all the activities were cancelled because of the lack of snow I enjoyed chilling in our Mökki cottage with my friends and our sauna for sure and we had a true Finnish experience. And cuddling huskies and reindeers was something we could do a lot.

‘The Erasmus Experience’ and what I took away from my exchange

The Erasmus lifestyle: Erasmus people always have in mind that the exchange will be over in a few months, so you must get the best out of it. Studying, travelling, cooking, sitting in the library, laundry washing, exams, partying, meeting new people, trying out new things all in one day. And I had 113 days like that. It feels like you made a pause on your real life and now you started a new one far away from
home. Time went by so fast because almost every day was full of new thing, new people and new experiences. I must get used to being home again in my everyday life. I would like to note that this Erasmus lifestyle is not normal so paying attention to healthcare and stress management is important.

I have to say that Erasmus is a very specific experience like nothing else. It is not a trip to another country nor moving to another country. You find yourself in a multicultural group of fun people surrounded by a new culture which for me was Finnish. But I believe it does not really depend on where you are, which country you choose. I also believe that Erasmus is the same but so different for every outgoing student. It depends on you, what you want to take away from this blast of experiences. For this reason, I recommend having a plan what you want to get from your Erasmus. For me Erasmus was about people and self-development, learning how to deal with obstacles alone, managing my life and being more ‘adult’ and self-confident. And of course, a lot of travelling. I am so glad to say that I achieved these goals and Erasmus was my biggest adventure so far and now I have close international friends. My friends who I met there taught me so much. Mainly I learned what the cultural differences are and how to accept people even if there are some things about their culture that I do not understand.

To sum up it is impressive how your view about yourself can change throughout the exchange and the network one can have after the exchange. Eventually these are the main results. And it makes Erasmus worth it even if it is sometimes hard to learn in a different system in a different language surrounded by different cultures. Most people afraid of Erasmus because of the stress and risk of losing a semester, but actually even if that happens one can gain so much experience and personal development that it worth it anyway. One more thing, after the exchange it is common to feel the urge to travel again and to see the whole world. I think this is a good, because travelling is the only thing you give money for, but you become richer. However, it is important not to lose the perspective and appreciate your friends and family at home, working on building your life and the only way to do that is to take small steps forward in your ‘monotonous’ everyday life at home.