**A Finnish Odyssey**

I still remember the moment when I received the mail stating that I had been selected for an internship at Aalto University in Finland. It was a joyous moment, but was soon followed by apprehensions and uncertainty. It struck me at that point that I knew nothing about Finland. Sure it was a Scandinavian country far up north in Europe and home to Nokia and Rovio and home to the design capital of the world at one point. But what did I know beyond these facts. What did I know about the people, the culture, and the lifestyle? Nothing. This formed the basis of my misgivings about moving in and staying alone in a new country for two months. In retrospect, I am really glad I took up this opportunity and was more than pleasantly surprised. I was blown away.

I wouldn’t be wrong in saying that Finnish society in some terms was utopia. Here was a society based on very strong feelings of trust and a helpful attitude towards their cohabitants. I could just leave my laptop, mobile and all other belongings in the street, and would still find it there two days later, untouched. This was the level of trust, and the abysmally low level of crime here. Acclaimed as the second safest city in the world, it lived up to its reputation. The people here go all out when you ask them for any form help. I was walking on a street looking for a building somewhere in its vicinity. Upon asking a Finnish couple for help, they tried their best to ensure that I found it. Even though they did not know about it, they took out their mobile and searched on it and then patiently gave me precise instructions on how to get there. They could’ve chosen to walk away citing the lack of knowledge, but instead they chose to leave whatever they were doing and spent 5 minutes trying to help a foreigner find a building. During my stay here, I also attended a concert of one of Finland’s biggest homegrown musical talent. However, it wasn’t the music which is making me cite it here; it was the behavior of the crowd. There was no pushing at all. This may be a good thing, but it was creepy to the extent that everyone maintained a small distance from everyone else, and at any place in the humongous crowd, no one was jostling to get closer. Although this wasn’t one of the best experiences I had at a musical concert, it sure was a unique one. There are numerous other things in this society which won me over, but alas, is too much to write here.

However, the good qualities of the Finnish society were equally matched by their idiosyncrasies. We all have heard about the phrase ‘Silence is golden’, but the Finnish society takes it to whole another level. People here will never talk to you unless it’s absolutely necessary. The term ‘small talk’ seems absent from the Finnish culture. This does have its drawbacks and is one of my few gripes with the Finnish society. People here would always sit alone in a bus unless no other option was left. Even when they sat next to each other, silence prevailed. Being an Indian, small talk in the buses is normal for me, but here, it almost seems like a cardinal sin. As with other things, this was also a new experience for me, and did help me realize that value of silence. Another interesting aspect is the dogs. Dogs are more than a hobby for the Finnish people, and are treated with utmost care here. They are allowed to go to all places with their owners, be it buses or the malls. An interesting thing which my friend said was that there’s a local saying which goes like, ‘You may hit the children but not the dog’. Although I guess this was on the lighter side, but it makes you realize how much the Finnish love their pets. Also, the dogs themselves in some sense imbibed the Finnish culture in them. I never heard any dog barking at another, and they maintained perfect silence even in the most crowded places. This nature of dogs was also surprising and a stark contrast to what I have observed in India. In Finland there are 550 000 dogs and they have been with us around 9000 years. They were used and still are for hunting and guarding. Nowadays there are a lot of dogs in the cities, and they have become a part of the urban life. Here is a video clip telling about the Finnish national dog, Finnish Spitz:

http://www.spj.fi/en/breeds/finnish+spitz/breed+description/

I remember one of my memories when I was staying in Moscow was that of travelling to St Petersburg to experience the ‘white nights’. Those three-four days in June when the sun set there only for a few hours. In Finland, every night in the summers is a ‘white night’. Being placed so up north on the globe provides Finland with a near uninterrupted view of the sun in the summers, and a lack of it in the winters. You can’t tell the difference in time here by looking outside at two in the afternoon or eleven in the night. The sun would set past midnight, and would rise again in its full glory around four in the morning. Those few hours without the sun weren’t still perfectly dark, and I have many time heard birds chirping when I went to sleep at one in the morning. This played havoc on my body cycle during the initial days and was unsettling, to say the least.

As previously mentioned, Helsinki was at one point the design capital of the world, and after exploring the streets, I can say it deserved it. Here was a city where beautiful was the norm. Roaming around randomly, I encountered many beautiful buildings, and these didn’t even find a mention on the travel websites. These beautiful spots were buried under the plethora of even more beautiful designs. Finland is a treasure trove of beauty.

Another thing, without whose mention I cannot do justice to this text is the sauna. Sauna is Finland’s legacy to the world, and its gift to the English language. Sauna is more than a recreation here, it is a national obsession. When there is a sauna for every 2.5 people in this country, my point is well justified. My numerous trips to the Sauna were always ever so relaxing and was where I figured out the golden rule to talk to Finnish people about irrelevant things; Get them drunk or get them in a sauna.

I can only conclude by saying that this has been one of the best experiences of my life, made ever so better due to the amazing people who I met here. Finland is a gem of a country, hidden up north in silence and snow.

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I think it was a great idea of yours to come over here and experience such a different way of life. If you can make it here you can make it anywhere! All the best,

Aija