

June 1999

Cheryll, her parents and I just returned from Finland. Cheryll's grandparents and great-grandparents were Finnish immigrants to the Upper Peninsula, so this was an opportunity to not only see the Finnish countryside, but also to meet some cousins for the first time.

We had a rough start when we were bumped off our oversold Lufthansa flight from Detroit to Frankfurt, connecting to Helsinki. It worked out OK though as we were each provided with \$800 travel vouchers and business class seats on the next day's flight. We had only paid \$600 for our tickets and the vouchers should cover another trip to Europe next spring.

Cheryll's parents enjoyed meeting and visiting their relatives. They grew up speaking Finnish, and they clearly enjoyed dusting off their language skills chatting with the cousins.

Finland is the most American country I've visited in Europe. To be honest, Finland looks so much like Michigan's Upper Peninsula that there is no reason to travel 5000 miles just to see the sights. The countryside is flat to rolling with countless lakes and forests. We drove 2000 miles over eight days. Cheryll and I played golf at a course on the Finland/Sweden border. On the third hole you tee off in Finland and a well hit drive lands in Sweden. Both Finland and Sweden have joined the European Union and the border posts are abandoned. The Swedish one has been converted to a souvenir shop.

If you'd like to experience a trip to Finland without actually going there, I've prepared the following guide:

The first step is to stock up on plenty of coffee. The Finns lead the world in coffee consumption, averaging nine cups per person per day, and decaffeinated is not available anywhere. You'll also need baked goods, because the Finns enjoy their sweets. At one family gathering we were served no fewer than ten different desserts. We stopped at a McDonald's at 7:00 PM and we were the only customers eating hamburgers. Everyone else was eating donuts or sundaes and, of course, drinking coffee.

The second element of your Finnish experience is to keep quiet and observe. The Finns tend to be somewhat introverted. When they do talk, they rarely look you in the eye. They don't discuss anything controversial or complicated. Sex, religion and politics are definitely taboo. Berry picking, fishing, or your favorite foods are the preferred subjects. It's important to agree with the speaker with a "Yo" frequently. At one dinner conversation I counted 103 "Yo's" in a five-minute period; an average of more than one every three seconds.

The wardrobe for your Finnish experience is flexible as long as you wear nylon athletic pants. The Finns may not say much, but they sure do "swoosh" when they walk. In a field fifty miles from the nearest town, we saw thousands of scarecrows crowded together in a variety of outfits. There was a small sign that this work was entitled "Quiet People" with the artist's name. Hmmmm.....

You'll want to take a shower Finnish style. Finnish showers are generally uncurtained corners of the bathroom that don't have barriers to contain the water. Everything in the

entire bathroom gets splattered. The drain may be under the sink. Shower curtains are rare, but you're usually provided with a squeegee to clean up the floor when you finish. Finnish housekeepers are meticulous and the houses and hotels we visited were spotless.

To completely experience Finland, tall people (over 5' 6") will want to bump their heads on something. The Finns tend to be short and their doors are, too.

Your pseudo-Finnish experience in the U.P. should include a stop in Christmas, Michigan to see Santa. The real Santa maintains a summer office in Rovaniemi, north of the Arctic Circle. I had carefully rehearsed an authentic Arctic Circle crossing ceremony, but Cheryl accused me of making it up on the fly. Speaking of the Arctic Circle, it doesn't get dark in Finland during June, so you'll want to sleep with the lights on. You'll feel like a true Finn when you can sleep under bright lights after downing nine cups of coffee and four desserts. In northern Finland, reindeer graze freely. If your bleary, sleepless eyes squint just so, maybe you can imagine that the cows in the UP have antlers. There were patches of snow on the ground in the northern sections, so if you visit the UP in March, flip your calendar ahead and pretend that it's June.

A crucial cultural experience that you won't want to miss is the Finnish coffee ceremony. The preparation can take days. Everybody dresses in their finest clothes (this is the only exception to the nylon pants rule). The table is carefully set. Each place is set with a dessert plate topped by a saucer, a tiny cup (even the smallest Finn won't be able to get their finger through the loop), a very small spoon, and a carefully folded napkin which has been selected to provide absolutely no absorbent capability. The making of the coffee is a strange and mysterious process. As a non-Finn, all the secrets were not shared with me, but I can tell you that the coffee making process involves pouring the liquid back and forth between several pots over a considerable period of time. Several desserts are carefully arranged in the center of the table and the guests crowd around. The children are well behaved, and the table manners are impeccable. Remember, no controversial or complicated topics of conversation and don't forget to use plenty of "Yo's".

The Finns are some of the warmest, most generous people I've ever met. We were made to feel very welcome, and they couldn't do enough for us. Tipping is not expected anywhere. We were never asked for a credit card until we were ready to check out of each hotel. The Finns are peace loving, quiet, polite, meticulous followers. They work hard in a difficult environment, and the craftsmanship is uniformly excellent. The world could use more Finns.

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