

With a little help from my friends

Celeste is a student from South Africa who is spending her exchange year in Finland. Below are some posts from her blog.

3 August: Arriving

This is a post to all my friends back home. I've made it! Celeste Lomas from Aurora in South Africa, has arrived for her exchange year in Finland. I've never blogged before, but I promised my mum that I'll write every day about my experiences in the far north.

I've dreamt of studying in Europe for so long, I can hardly believe that I'm here. It was not easy though. I spent months planning, filling out application forms, looking for scholarships and attending interviews. Then I discovered that Finland's visa requirements had been updated, so I had to get my fingerprints scanned too. My number one tip to anybody thinking about doing an exchange year abroad: start planning early.

School starts next week, and I'm worried about what to wear. Moving from the sunny south to the frozen north requires a whole different wardrobe. Maybe a whole different attitude too. I'll find out, when school starts. It can't be very different from schools in South Africa, can it?

11 August: First day at school

After my first day at school, the answer to yesterday's question is "Yes!" It is very different. First off, hardly anybody spoke to me! They were quite friendly. They smiled and said "hey", but most of the time they hung out in groups, chatting in Finnish. By the time the first class started, I was so nervous that I forgot everything they told us during the orientation week. For example, when the teacher spoke to me, I stood up, like we do at home, and I addressed her as "ma'am". Then I noticed that nobody else did this and I nearly died of embarrassment. They use their teachers' first names! Things went downhill after that. I forgot every Finnish word I knew. And when the teacher tried to involve me, I stared at her in silence. I got lost between classes, and I was too shy to ask for directions, so I was late for my lessons. This is supposed to be my dream-come-true year. What's wrong with me? What's wrong with them? Why don't they respect their teachers? And why don't they talk to me?

12 August: Day 2 in Nightmaresville

I hardly slept last night. Today I am determined to do better. I read my orientation week notes last night, and I thought about my first day at a Finnish school. Here are my conclusions: the bling has got to go! I thought that my bling and my cute pink boots were the right things to wear. Then I noticed that Finnish students don't wear fancy clothes to school, so maybe I was a bit overdressed. And maybe Finnish students weren't ignoring me. Maybe they were giving me space to find my own way? I also read some other exchange students' blogs. They all had a great time in Finland from the word go. So either they are all lying, or I am doing something wrong.

2 September: Things are getting better

My host father suggested that I make an appointment with the student counsellor. The student counsellor asked a peer tutor to help me. She's nice. She explains things in a funny way. "Just because we're not hugging you every morning, doesn't mean that we don't like you," she tells me. She invited me to her house for a small party next weekend, so things are definitely getting better.