



Ending a long, challenging day with sauna in Brännskar and a swim in the sea. Life cannot get any better than this. I think I’m falling in love with the Finnish outdoors. Photo by author.

First sail of the year

Newbie crew on schooner Helena

----- LI-FANG YEO, SYS-LIFE

I think an adventure is just a nice packaging for a horribly tough journey. As if my life wasn’t difficult enough in Finland, I signed myself up for a 3-day 2-night sailing trip in the Finnish Archipelago at end of spring ‘25. Unlike a charter, the paying customer is also the crew member. We learn the art of sailing while on the job, including hoisting the many sails, tying knots, tidying loose ends, cooking for the whole crew etc.

I remember at the end of the trip, sitting on the deck listening to the captain debrief after we had docked, “Tervetuloa.....Turku...”. That’s all I understood. “*Welcome to Turku.*” As everyone shared what they thought about the whole experience, and their challenges, I sat there quite close to tears, and desperate to get off the ship already. I did not want to share my thoughts. I mumbled some generic feeling, that it was nice, I learnt a lot and thanked the crew for being patient with me.

I was genuinely grateful to the crew and the nice people I met on the trip. But if I had said what was really on my mind, it would have sounded something like this.

“I did not hear the meeting time, or

the lunch and dinner time, because it was in Finnish. The small bits of English instructions I received were not enough for me to get by. I had no idea what was going on most of the time. And your idea of downtime and chitchatting in Finnish meant I was left very alone to my thoughts. So, no I did not have a very good time. In fact, I felt so lonely I started to sympathize with deaf and mute people. I would like to go home now, please.”

Will I go back next sailing season? Absolutely yes! This time, I will come more prepared. I will have had one year to learn Finnish. Bless the people I met on Helena. Yes, I was excluded from most conversations. But as I sat quietly and just observed, I asked when something intrigued me so much that I was willing to open my mouth to ask. And they were always so willing to teach me.

Three days at sea, I went to sauna. I sat in a circle of semi-drunk Finns, and in a confusion of Finnish and English, they tried to teach me knots. I worked together with two *older* Finns who were bickering all the time because “Teacher said it should be this way!” Have you tried to mitigate arguments between two old people?

Naked Finnish sauna

“My colleagues lied to me”

That was the only thought running through my head when we were in sauna on Seili island. It was late spring, so the cold had not quite loosened its icy grip on Finland.

My colleagues assured me that no one goes naked into mixed gender sauna. I realized belatedly that the shower area was very open and people walking about as you showered. For now, let’s enter the sauna. There I was sitting with my other sailing mates, and then the first mate entered in his fully glory. My brain stopped working at that point. I didn’t know what to do. So, I did nothing, and just sat and chatted with other people.

When it was time to shower, the girl next to me, just took off everything. But there was another guy also showering a few spots away, and also the other people, men and women still walking in and out of the sauna. What on earth is going on???

I whispered to the girl, “Do we just shower like this?” Her epic reply was “Yes.” Silently cursing my colleagues who did not give me a heads up, I showered, and put on my clothes in the dressing room. Returning from two evenings of sauna in the archipelago, my new found love for wood sauna, jumping into the sea after, I couldn’t care less if others were dressed or not.



The crew at sea, listening to instructions, in Finnish. Not understanding a single word, I sat there listening but not hearing.



Photos are deceptive. As beautiful as it was, it was equally difficult. Images never show how cold it really is. This was 1°C in the morning around 830am. Photo by frozen author.

To and back from Hell

Camping in Helvetinjärvi National Park

----- A COLD CAMPER

There was a scouting jamboree organized in collaboration with a few universities hiking clubs. We all gathered in Tampere and camped in the national park for 4-days 3-nights. With a whooping 5 camping trips under my belt, I should have been the most prepared I have ever been for camping.

I was so wrong.

I left my winter jacket at home and after shivering in 0°C and fighting down raising panic in the night, I asked for help the next morning and a kind Aino and Jere each lent me a sweater and a down jacket. The 2nd night was -2°C but thanks to them, I was safe and warm in my sleeping bag. I learnt that being cold and dry was better than wet. Because it will be impossible to warm up with any wet clothes on. So

simple and intuitive but why did it take me so long to understand this?

By the 3rd night, I was finished. I couldn't sit mutely around the campfire. My blister was hurting. I was getting cold. It started to rain and the wind was making the trees rustle violently. Without my jacket, I wasn't exactly waterproof. According to my newly learnt concept of cold and dry, I would be very cold if I got wet before going to bed.

It was the last night of the jamboree. I wanted to talk to a few more people. But I was more afraid of the cold and rain, so I cooked my food really quickly by the fire, packed up and retreated to my lonely but dry tent in the forest far from the main camp. I spent the last night peacefully but alone in my tent. "Next time, we'll have warmer clothes, be waterproof and join them."

Being self-sufficient

The lonely and liberating Finnish way

One of the first things I learnt about the Finnish way is their independence and self-sufficiency. They don't easily offer help, not because they don't care, but because they respect your independence.

For someone who grew up in a relatively close-knit community, where people were almost always in each other's business, this self-sufficient way made me feel lonelier than ever in a new country where I had no one to rely on. It felt like, if I were to disappear, no one would care.

But I gave myself some time. Every step towards self-sufficiency felt like I was walking on knives. Soon I realized the freedom that came from being self-sufficient. In this strange land, I found a way to exist and be. The Finnish way that I have come to love is that they live and let live.



Proudly using my own stove cooker, drinking lake water with my filtering system, picking my own mushrooms, and carrying my own weight.

Off-trail hiking with some Finnish elves

"What about second breakfast?"



----- HOBBIT FANG

If I could be reborn, I would like to be born with the built of an elf from Lord of the Rings. This life, I am unfortunately very unelf-like and instead, very much hobbit-like. And not even the likes of Frodo who has his trusty Samwise Gamgee. I am more of

the likes of Pippin who requires constant feeding.

During our camping, everyone broke into small groups and went on their own hikes. I (accidentally) found myself following a group that went off the trails. I found out later that they were all very experienced, and very fit. Our day hikes were around 6 hours, even with sitting and just enjoying the forest, there was plenty of stomping through waist-high undergrowth, navigating through many, many swamps, up boulders, sliding down them, only to go back up another. I was mostly silent throughout the two day-hikes. Yes, they mostly spoke only in Finnish, but I was

out of breath trying to keep up with their pace. I had no breath left to make small talk. I couldn't feel my legs 3 hours into the hike. I was already stumbling more, my leg always catching on branches because I couldn't lift it any higher, falling on all four, stepping into a very, very deep hole that somehow everyone avoided except for me. And the most classic, taking one step and discovering I had stepped into the swampy area and horror filled me as cold water seeped through my double layered socks. I had wet shoes on both days. And blisters by the 2nd.

"Are you okay?"
"Yea. (Honestly, no)"