School is over and so summer has officially arrived for the kids. Ellie loves it. She has around twenty little girlfriends in the area. With her Finnish now at full fluency, she is no longer an outsider and so can partake in frenzied play for many hours out of the day. Alex, on the other hand, finds it difficult to interact with the boys his age in the area – his classmates from school don’t live close by – and since there is only so much solo skateboarding a fellow can do in a day, he is finding the transition to summer a bit more challenging. Of all of us, I think that Alex looks forward to the return to Missoula most.

When we came to Finland, I had hoped that Alex’s passion for skateboarding would wane. But it hasn’t. He skates, in short stints, several times daily, and watches skate video clips on YouTube as much as we’ll let him. Nowadays, I am just glad that he is passionate about something physical that is done out-of-doors. Also, skating is a very technical sport and requires determination, which I like. So you could say that over the year I’ve changed from a reluctant to a proud skater Dad.

Alex has also been on a soccer team throughout the year. It has been a positive experience for a number of reasons, not least of which is that very few of his teammates speak English, and so he has had to figure out how to navigate practices and games with this handicap. Fortunately, his coaches can communicate with him. And one of the highlights of his summer is an international youth soccer tournament taking place in July called the Helsinki Cup.

Alex has had a good school year as well. We got the same report from his teacher here, more or less, as we have gotten from his other teachers in the past: Alex is a good friend, is consistently excited, and, sometimes frustratingly, doesn’t worry too much about details. Throughout the year, he seemed consistently positive and happy. The biggest change for him was a great increase in freedom: he navigated the trip to and from school on the city bus daily, and has, along with friends, visited various skate parks, swim centers, and joke shops around the city.
This has also been a year of physical change for Alex; although he is still a boy, he is now firmly on his way to adolescence. As a parent, this change is bittersweet; it is great to see the individual emerge, but sad to see the child grow up.
How will a year in Finland effect Alex? Well, the 9 months among classmates from many countries and religious backgrounds was a great experience. (One of his Muslim classmates got up at 4:30 before school each day to say his prayers, which made an impression on Alex.) A worldly outlook has surely resulted from his time here. Also, the increased freedom handled responsibly has given him confidence. Beyond that I’m unsure, but I am happy to have given him this opportunity.