



**Ella**  
**from Kitchener**  
**to**  
**Japan**

“This isn’t about a new destination, but a new way of seeing things”

It’s been 75 days since I landed in Japan, but it feels like I have lived here my whole life. After a long 13-hour flight to Tokyo and another hour to my local airport, Komatsu, I was



warmly welcomed by my Rotary Club and host family. When I landed it was almost 40 degrees outside and I was dying of heat. Imagining Japan as a formal place, I was worried about meeting their standards so I kept my Rotary jacket on and said a few words with the occasional hajimemashite (nice to meet you). That formal environment was quickly broken once one of the Rotary members mentioned

that I could take my jacket off if I was hot. I took it off in relief, and with everyone laughing about how hot it was, I realised that Japan wasn’t as intimidatingly formal as I thought; instead, people here are very warm and welcoming.

**Family**

My first family has been incredibly lively. I have a host mom, dad, two sisters, two brothers, and a grandmother. For me, this dynamic was new because I only have an older brother, who moved out years ago. Though different, I feel very at home and I couldn't have asked for a better family to start my year in Japan. The big family setting made it comfortable knowing I'm not the only one at the dinner table with my host parents. As expected, communication has been difficult, but thankfully my Japanese is improving, and one of my sisters, who had her very own Rotary Youth Exchange year in Canada knows English and is able to translate for me if needed. This family has been amazing, and I'll be sad to move in a couple of days especially because I have started to get close to the Grandma. After mentioning how I liked persimmons after trying them for the first time, every day without fail, I'm welcomed home from school to a persimmon she had grown waiting for me on the table.



### School

School was intimidating at first. I heard stories of people going to strict schools with students too focused on studying to notice you and teachers strict with enforcement of rules, but my experience with school has been completely different than the stories I heard. The week before school started I got a tour, met my teachers, and tried on my uniform. The biggest issue at the tour was my skirt length and watching the teachers debate on how short my skirt should be showed me that my school was a

lot more relaxed than I had thought. On my first day, I introduced myself on stage at their opening ceremony after the summer break. Thankfully, I was given a warning so I was able to prepare a short “Hi my name is... I’m from... I like...” speech. I soon discovered how friendly everyone here is and truth be told, I feel like a bit of a celebrity. Random students wave to me down the halls, and when I wave back, they get excited.

My first time in the classroom, a group of 4 girls immediately swarmed me with questions, saying “Kawaii!!!” to each of my answers. They would constantly stay around me and if I was ever alone, they would drag me into their group, literally. These 4 girls are now my closest friends and we upgraded from using Google Translate to “Japan-glish”. The school has kept me busy with many fun subjects like music, Japanese drumming (wadaiko), and calligraphy (shodo). We’ve also had our school festival and a sports day of sorts. The highlights of these days were my drumming performance, teaching the school the Cha-Cha slide with the English club and an 100m relay on our track and field sports day. Am I good at track and field? Definitely not, but it was one of the most fun experiences I’ve had at school.



## Friends

Making friends has been relatively easy with some exceptions. Some students in my class are shy, so it's been a bit challenging connecting with everyone. Thankfully, my friend group is



very outgoing so since the beginning, they've been dragging me around the school and asking me many questions about my life and Canada. As time went on, that made other students more comfortable with me so I'm slowly getting to know everyone. We have slowly started to hang out outside of school going to purikura (Japanese photo booth) and Sayzeria which is an "Italian" restaurant with all the meals being under \$10. It's not the most authentic food but you get what you pay for and it's surprisingly good.



Other than my friends at school, I have become good friends with the other exchange students in the area. There are 8 of us in my Rotary district, six living nearby and two living in a different prefecture. There are also more students here through other programs. We come from many countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia, Nigeria, Thailand, Costa Rica, Korea, and Argentina. We've gone to restaurants, festivals and Round 1, which is a six-story game centre with arcades, go-karting, sports areas, claw machines and much more. I'm very thankful for all my friends because I've never felt lonely with them around, especially during long school days.

## Rotary

During my first week, I had an orientation day with four other exchange students. A typhoon prevented everyone from attending, but I'm looking forward to meeting the whole district in December. I've had an amazing experience with my Rotary club as they've been so welcoming and patient while I learn Japanese. We have weekly meetings, and I give a small monthly update consisting of what I've been up to. Getting through my first speech was rough with me butchering most of the words, but I've thankfully improved since then due to the Japanese lessons they're providing. They've also provided me with some different experiences, like attending a marathon, visiting a university fair and enjoying a traditional Japanese 15-course dinner where I tried bear meat for the first time.

## Experiences

I'm incredibly grateful for all the experiences I've had so far. In my first week, I visited Kanazawa, commonly referred to as "Little Kyoto" with its beautiful geisha district and architecture dating back to the Edo period. The city is known for its gold-leaf products so I walked around gold-leaf shops, made myself a gold-leaf brooch, and ate ice cream topped off with gold-leaf.



After that, I went to Kenrokuen Garden, one of "the Great Three Gardens of Japan". It was absolutely beautiful with so much nature and an amazing view of Mount Hakusan. I also went to Kanazawa Castle multiple times, once to visit with my host family, once to cheer my rotary club members at a marathon, once for a coffee festival and once for a sake-tasting festival. I couldn't try the sake but I ate some delicious pasta and



pistachio ice cream. A couple weeks later I went to a local summer festival where I dressed up in a traditional Yukata with my host sisters, visited the local shrine and went to a ryokan where I tried the onsens for the first time. I was nervous to go to the onsen because I didn't know what to expect but it turned out amazing. After I got over my nerves, I was able to fully relax in the hot baths and it was a very interesting, but nice bonding experience with my family. If you aren't familiar with onsen rules, check them out and you'll

understand what I mean by interesting. I also slept on very comfortable tatami mats and tried a traditional ryokan breakfast. As someone who isn't the biggest fan of seafood, I was pretty

hesitant to try everything in front of me, but I found some that I enjoyed including a “live” abalone that we thankfully cooked before eating. I tried some pieces of the best steak I’ve ever eaten and an onsen egg, which has now become my new favourite way to eat eggs. I’ve also gone on a school trip to a seaside city named Nomi. I visited their museum where I saw weapons, armour and pottery from the Yayoi period around 300 years BC. The museum was built at the bottom of a hill which used to be a coffin where elite rulers and their items were buried. After visiting the museum we went to their local high school where we made pottery. I was one of the lucky 10 from the group that were able to use the pottery wheel where I made a bowl. I also made a cup, a plate and many more friends from different schools.



## **Life**

From what I’ve shared, my life sounds very busy, with constant outings and experiences. While that is partially true, I have to be realistic. Rotary Youth Exchange isn’t only about travelling, going out with friends and having plans every day. It’s about learning a new lifestyle, learning a new culture and changing everything you once knew. Most of my days in Japan are very relaxed. Most days, I go straight home after school, because students don’t go out often during the week. Is it different than Canada? Yes. I’m used to a different lifestyle back home but I’ve learned to embrace the slower pace. I’ve also changed my sleeping habits to reflect Japanese culture and become a morning person, waking up without trouble every day at 6:30, with me “sleeping in” until 8 am on the weekends.

In summary, Japan has changed me so much. In just two months, I’ve grown in ways I couldn’t have imagined. This is one of the best experiences of my life and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Before coming here, I was pretty uncertain of what to expect. While I was still in Canada, I was anxious about my upcoming exchange to Japan, but now, I am so grateful I have gotten the opportunity to come to Japan. I’ve made so many new friends, immersed myself in a different culture, and have had so many once in a lifetime experiences. I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity and everyone who has made it possible. I can’t wait to see what the future has in store for me.

次回会いましょう

See you next time,

エラ・ミロネスク

Ella Mironescu

**More Pictures:**



Interview at the Mayors office



Traditional ryokan dinner



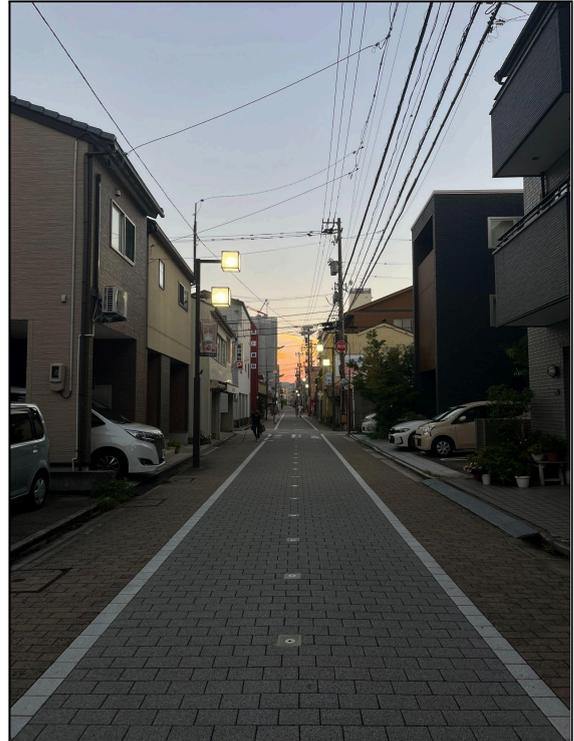
Teaching Australian students the Japanese drums with my drumming class



The abalone before being cooked



A float from the summer festival



Beautiful Japanese sunset



Kenrokuen Garden



My school garden