

Ava Bettger continues Rotary Exchange in Bolivia

At this time, I am more than seven months through my Rotary exchange, having departed from Toronto airport at 8:00 a.m. on August 14. After connecting through Panama, I arrived at Viru Viru International Airport in Santa Cruz, Bolivia at 10:30 p.m. that night, greeted by my first host family, who welcomed me with a sign and hugs to my new home for the next ten months.

I recently moved in with my third host family. They have been so kind and welcoming to me and I am so happy to be living with them. I have one host brother, Andres, who is 13, and my host parents are named Susie and Enzo. Their daughter Carolina is currently an Exchange Student in Illinois. Also in the house is their dog Tasha and cat Tom. They are a very active family and I know I will have a very fun and busy time with them. I was lucky to attend my first soccer game with them too. I have also started practicing basketball and volleyball.

During my time in Bolivia, I am staying in Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Santa Cruz has a population of around 1.5 million; a big change from St. Marys. I do miss the tight-knit feeling that St. Marys offers. Santa Cruz is located in the eastern part of the country and in some areas of the city, parts of the Andes are visible. The climate is usually hot and humid and the snow I am accustomed to in December and January has been switched to lots of rain. At the end of January and the beginning of February, all of the Exchange Students in the country went on a two-week trip around Bolivia.

I started school at Colegio Marista two days after I arrived. There are about 1,000 students in total but the day is split into two different groups. Secondary students (ages 11-18) go to school from 7:30 a.m. to 12:05 p.m. and primary students (ages 4-10) go from 2:10 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. I am in the graduating grade, sexto or the "Promo" as it's called here. Each Promo has a name, I am a part of Sheihet. I have six 40-minute classes a day, with a 20-minute break in between.

My Spanish has improved immensely since I arrived. The hardest part so far has been all of the verb conjugations. Masculine and feminine nouns can also be challenging. It has become easier since I arrived; listening and talking to native speakers has helped. During September and October, the other Exchange Students in my city and I attended Spanish lessons three times a week. It was fun to learn more Spanish with people in the same situation as me. That's also where I met some of my best friends in Bolivia.

Bolivian food can best be described as carbs, carbs, and more carbs. Some of my favourite traditional foods are salteñas, majadito, cuñapé, and cheese empanadas. Salteñas are baked pouch-shaped pastries filled with meat, sauce, and potatoes. Majadito is a rice dish with jerky, and rice. Cuñapé is a round bread made with yuca flour and cheese typically eaten during tea/



dinner time. Cheese empanadas are fried dough with cheese inside, you can find them almost anywhere in the street. Some of the weirdest foods I've tried have been llama and cow udder (both were accidental).

A couple of interesting events have taken place during my time in Bolivia. The first was the Presidential Election in October. Evo Morales had been reelected, but the vote was deemed a fraud. This led to a nationwide strike that lasted for 21 days. During this time, there was no school or jobs (apart from grocery stores, markets, banks, etc.) and limited driving. In my city, people set up blockades in the streets and went to larger protests at night led by the civic leader Luis Fernando Camacho. After the resignation and flee of Morales, things became more normal in my city. In other pro-Morales parts of the country, protests were still ongoing. These protests

resulted in 31 deaths and hundreds wounded. The Coronavirus Pandemic has also shaken up my Exchange year quite a bit. I was unable to say goodbye to 20 of my friends before they returned to their countries. Almost half of my friends from Canada have also gone home from their respective host countries. In Bolivia, we are quarantined until April 15, but I suspect that date will be extended.

In Santa Cruz, I am hosted by Rotary Club Amboró. The club consists of around 25 people who have all been very welcoming and kind. I attended two Rotary meetings per month along with the other Exchange Students. Apart from me, my club hosts five other girls. They are Sydney from Bermuda, Kamila from Slovakia, Lea-Margot from France, Aliyah from the United States, and Annina from Switzerland. After the national strike in October and November, the student from the US returned. Two more students from France and Switzerland have also returned home because of COVID-19. Some of the projects we have helped with are: helping to build a library in a rural community and volunteering at a care centre for malnourished children.

I have had such a great time the past eight months being an Exchange Student and if you are considering signing up I recommend doing so. I have learnt a lot about Bolivia, Spanish, Rotary, and myself. Rotary has been such a great organization and I have been able to see first-hand the great work that they do. I am very thankful for the St. Marys Rotary Club for sponsoring me throughout this amazing opportunity.

(If you are interested in learning more about Rotary Youth Exchange or possibly hosting a Rotary Youth Exchange student please email Mark Oliver at mark_oliver@mac.com)




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