

Dear Howick Rotary Club ; Tracey ; John,

The past month has gone by so fast I hadn't even realised we hit the 1st of March already. I'm having the absolute time of my life, so thank you so much again to you all for making this exchange possible.

At the beginning of February I had my first outing with my District to Saumur. Us newbies got to meet all our oldies which was very cool, everyone is so kind, and I scored some nice new pins for my blazer. After a great lunch, we all went to visit the castle of Saumur and walk around the village. I find it so amazing how we are from all over the world but are doing an exchange in the same country. Although I am in France, I now have friends from Taiwan, Japan, Argentina, Mexico, Finland, U.S.A, Australia, and India, just to name a few.



[Me, Paloma (Argentina), and Kaco (Japan), the other two exchange students living in Sablé like me]



[The view over the village by the castle]



[My district - D1510]

By now I've gotten into some sort of a routine for my everyday life here in France, which includes a 7am start during the school week, a nice healthy breakfast (I'm starting to get myself back in order and not just going to the bakery everyday), attending my school courses (I'm still enjoying them!), eating a most enjoyable meal at the canteen, and % days going to 'La Muscul' (like a gym workout room where students can use all the equipment for free and plus have like personal trainers cause the PE teacher is there to help everyone, and thank God for that cause otherwise I would totally not stay in shape very easily during my exchange) with a few friends for

about an hour before my classes start again. After my classes are finished for the day, I take the bus back home and hang around with the kids until dinner, then talk with everyone or play some games before going to bed.

Every month on the 3rd Thursday, I attend a Rotary Meeting with the two other exchange students from my area, and we share a 3 course meal with all the rotarians which is always interesting and makes for some great conversations. Tuesday evenings, I go to ukulele rehearsal with my host mum (our festival is coming up in a few months!), where we practice songs, both in French and English, for about 2 hours. It's sounding really amazing actually, and has let me get to know and interact with some more people from other age groups.

Wednesdays my classes finish at 12:40 so I meet with Kaco and Paloma at my second host mum's flower shop where we eat lunch and then go to our French tutoring. It's going really well and I'm actually more advanced than the other two already (of course they hadn't studied French at all before they came, so I definitely had a big advantage in knowing quite a bit before coming here - something which has made it so much easier and more memorable as I am able to have conversations with all sorts of people). Some Saturday mornings I attend an interact rotary meeting (rotary youth basically) and we discuss events that we're organising. Soon coming up we have 'La chasse des œufs' (Easter egg hunt). Over my free time, I go for a lot of walks with the kids or occasionally just me and nature, I go for bike rides through the village and along the countryside (absolutely gorgeous), I've cooked dinner or lunch quite a few times now (something I love doing, and my family loves what I cook, which is a bonus), I invent games to play with the kids... and even my Spanish is getting along. Which is surprising since I'm learning Spanish from French.





[The village square and church]



I had two weeks of holidays not long ago in the middle of February which was awesome and gave me heaps of opportunities to do some things, including:

A day trip with my family to St. Malo as my host mum's mum lives up there (Ahh I had missed the ocean!). We walked down along the wharf and then did a walk at the top where there were some WW2 bunkers. It's such a gorgeous area! After lunch we went down to the beach again but a different area where we did a walk on this big wall (used during the war as fortifications - had the canons and all) encircling the village. Later on the evening me, my host mum and my two oldest host sisters went to a festival sort of thing to do some rides, eat churros and then go to a restaurant for dinner, I had a Gallettes and a Nutella crêpe with some apple cider (famous in that area), and it was so good! A few pictures of the day:









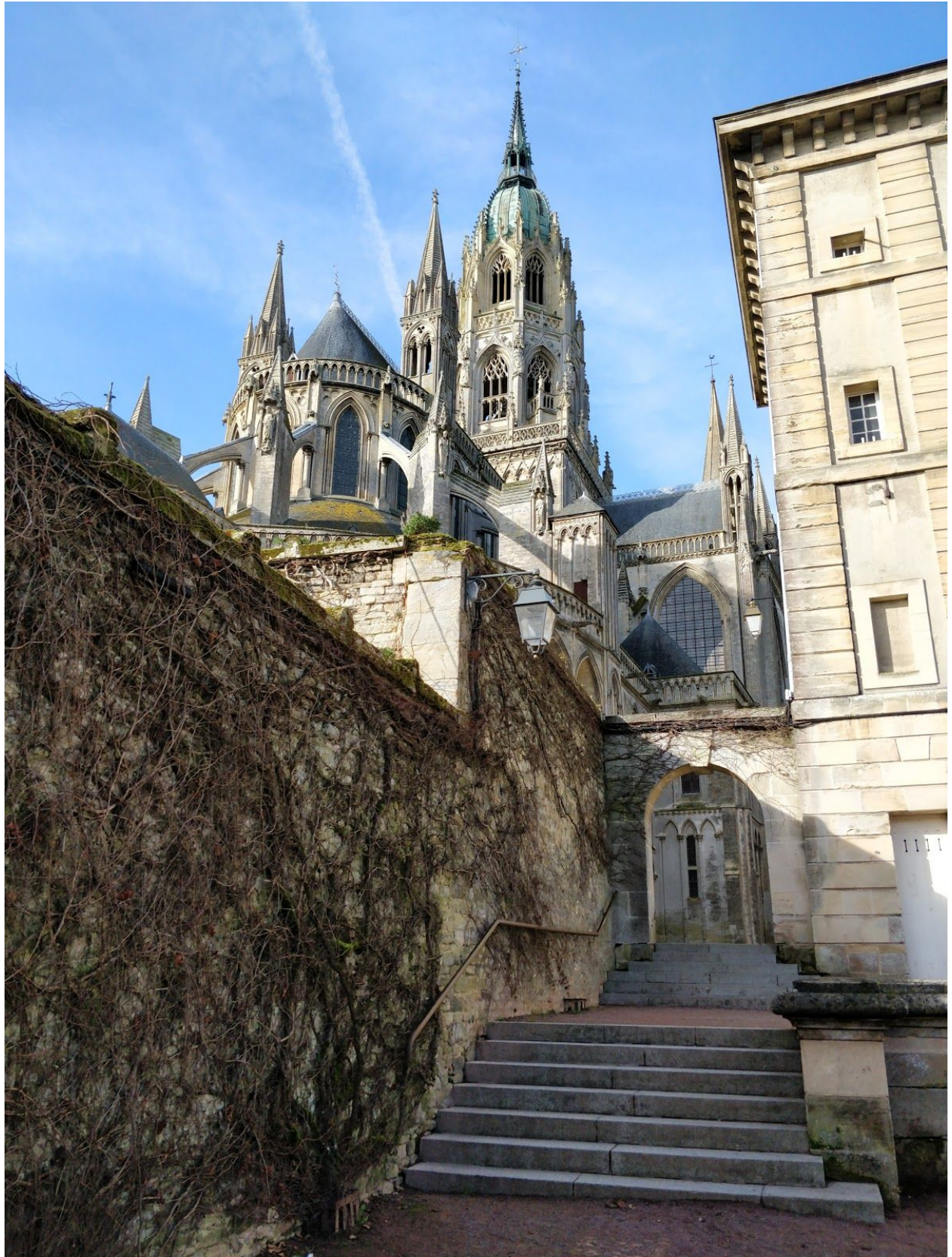
Me and Kaco joined Paloma and her host family (also my 3rd host family) for 4 days. They're such a nice family as well! I'm so lucky to have 3 absolutely amazing host families! The first day we went to Le Mans for shopping (not exactly my scene but it was fun nonetheless, I didn't buy anything save for food, so my bank account hasn't suffered much at all), the second day we went to Arromanches-les-Bains (the ocean again!), Saint mère église, la cathédrale de Bayeux, and the American cemeteries there from the war. It was an absolutely gorgeous area as well:















The next day we did a big bike tour and then went to visit a gorgeous little village called Saint-suzanne.

My third host mum loves walking like I do which is awesome, and we've already gone on a 9km walk the other day together, as well as walking the dog a few times (they have a giant dalmation!). On the night of the third day, we went to the house of their oldest son and his wife, and had Raclette (typical French meal), it was absolutely delicious and such a fun night. From then on, things have kept on sailing smoothly, this week was my first week back at school again - I changed my option subject to art now which I really enjoy. The other day I had lunch with my counselor - he's very kind and a great counselor so far which is awesome, and we're having dinner with him next week and all the students going out on exchange this year will be there too with their families which will be cool. A fourth student will be coming to my area in a few months too which is exciting! And in a few weeks we'll probably find out from where they are and who they are! I'm set to present my presentation of New Zealand for my Rotary Club on the 23rd of May, coming up pretty quickly! The other day me and my host family attended a rotary event - a competition for students of my school doing some sort of construction class, to design and build a light (not sure of the whole criteria), but we got to see all the contestants and their products which was very interesting, there were some really amazing concepts and great presentations. This weekend I'm staying with my third host family again, as tomorrow we're going to watch a football match and Sunday we're off to Saumur.

So far my exchange really has been only highs except for me missing the bus after school twice which I can't exactly call a low, it was just slightly stressful (the transport isn't very reliable as some days it's not the same driver and the bus is missing it's sign so I have no way of knowing which one to take). I don't miss my family yet, only my boyfriend which is fair enough as I spent a lot of time with him (sounds slightly pathetic, but he means everything to me), but no worries it isn't affecting my exchange negatively at all, just gives me at least one thing to look forward to when having to leave this amazing country.

I've already planned to give a presentation in my English class at some point (not sure when yet) and also at my third host mum's work, and I'm sure a lot of other opportunities will come by as well later on. I've met some great people through Rotary who always love hearing everything I have to say about me and my country, which again is so much easier thanks to having taken French for 2 years at school. I am able to express myself relatively well and understand around 80% of what people say, which is so nice!

What I've noticed most about the culture so far, is for one, bisous is totally legit, like in a normal day, I'll probably greet about 10-20 people with bisous, and at a rotary meeting like 20-30 alone. I've gotten so used to it, when I get home it'll be pretty difficult to get out of the habit I reckon. The French definitely take pride in their wine, their bread and their cheese, so yes the stereotypes are true to an extent. There's not a day we're not stocked up with bread and cheese at home and I'll occasionally have a small glass of wine alongside my host parents. There's a bakery in every village, with the most amazing baguettes, croissants and pain au chocolats. The people are very friendly - especially in villages, and it's so nice experiencing everything as a



local, it is honestly such an amazing experience, so thank you so much again. I am gaining so much already, in so many ways. I've made amazing friends, met incredible people, seen so many interesting things, tried so many delicious French foods, gained insight and wisdom, gone outside of my comfort zone... just every part of this exchange has been incredible and although there are times that are slightly trying or I make a small mistake, it makes me stronger, and I learn from it. I've already learnt so much - especially in the language and the culture with it's ways. I even gained 11/15 in a French test my class did! And 16,5/20 in a Maths test - believe it or not, Maths is different in France, like so much for it being a universal language...

All in all, I couldn't have asked for a more amazing beginning to my exchange - I am loving absolutely every minute of it!

Cheers,

Madita