

Dear Howick Rotary Club; Tracey; John,

Another month down again and time is flying so fast that I can't seem to keep up with the date. A mere 2 months lie ahead of me now and my calendar is pretty packed up, though I am starting to dread the day where I'll have to leave my life behind. But for the moment, I'm living this life to the fullest and enjoying it while I can, and what an amazing life it is. I watched a film the other day with my host family, Mr. Nobody, which explores the choices we make in our lives; how one small choice can change a whole life. And this made me think of how this one choice to go on exchange, has changed all the years to come in my life, and that's a pretty crazy thought to think about. I am so grateful for all the people I have met this year, and I know with certainty that they will be a part of my life till the end. This month has been absolutely amazing, from the school routine, the friends and the family, to the holidays, the food, and the late nights talking with my host sister. Starting off with a nice little visit of the port by the castle with friends thanks to having only 2 hours of class that day, and continuing with all my 4 badminton matches won the day I got to start doing sports again



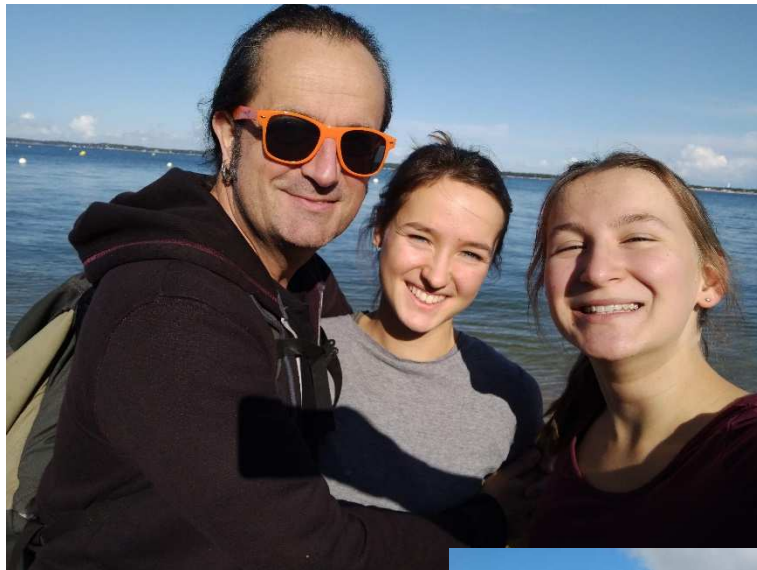
(finally! 😊), school has been an absolute blast. I have grown so close with my friends – I absolutely love the French system for this, as we spend so much time together in a day, we eat together at the canteen, we go to the gym together – and thanks to this, we get to know each other a lot better. Funny mention: I have a higher average mark than the average of my class, so I'd say the French is going pretty well. In fact, speaking French is completely natural for me now, and I'm going to miss speaking it after I leave – it might even be my favourite language of the 3 I speak. I definitely plan to be coming back to France next year or the year after though, and will be keeping in contact with my friends and family here.



Jenga towers taller than us, accordion playing, and an apple tart eaten in the warmth of the fireplace, me and Nora (the American in Sable with me) took a train to Angers to meet up with 2 other exchange students (from



America and Finland). We did a bit of shopping and sat down in a gorgeous little café for some sweet pastries. Soon enough, the holidays had arrived once again. I was one of the 4 exchange students from my district to be invited to a day of Rotary reunion. We were invited to present in front of about 100 Rotarians about our exchange year, and also to answer some questions that the Governor of Rotary posed. They were all very impressed with how well I have mastered the French language, and asked me a lot of complex



questions which I was able to answer very well. Throughout the day I was able to meet a lot of other students – Rotaract, Interact, Rotex etc. which was very cool, especially because it is so easy to make friends in these kind of situations, as we can all relate and talk about our experiences. [I'll try to find some photos, but haven't got any for the moment] The next day, my host family and I went on holiday in Arcachon – by the ocean with the whole extended family (I

had met them once before at the family house up North), but this time we spent over a week together which was so awesome! My sister's cousins are like my real cousins – more so than my actual ones, and I really got close with them over the stay. In Arcachon, we visited the Dunes of Pilat – what an amazing sight! We climbed up and ran down with difficulty, which was amusing, and at the top we were rewarded with green forest on one side, the length of the dune on another, and the ocean everywhere else. That evening, me and my sister sat on a paddleboard together







and floated on top of the ocean, a bit of rain falling upon us and a rainbow backing us up behind. I remember thinking how lucky I was and am, and how beautiful my life is, with all these amazing people in it. Sunsets, shopping, hot chocolate, some funky coloured



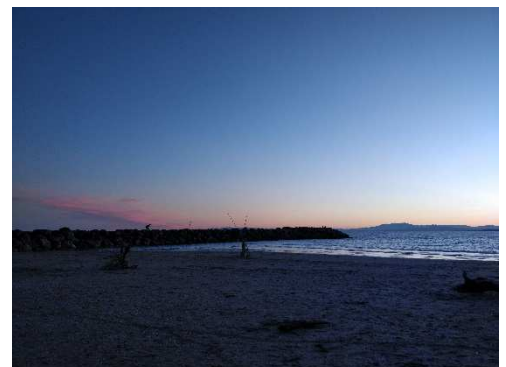
fishers huts, and an oyster coast later, we took a day out to Bordeaux. What a gorgeous city! The architecture is incredible, and the streets are full of different tones of red and brown. My sister, the cousins and I went about looking through shops in the longest shopping road in Europe, which was heaps of fun, and the lights at night looked pretty cool when we drove back to the holiday home. I taught everyone the haka (we were 18 in Arcachon), as we're planning on doing one all together for our cultural themed Christmas this year when we all meet up – what a fun night.



The next day we all drove down to Valras Plage, as one of the families live there (we were 3 families – my family, and the families of my host mum's 2 sisters), stopping over at Carcassonne on the way down. We saw the sun set over the castle and its towers which was absolutely

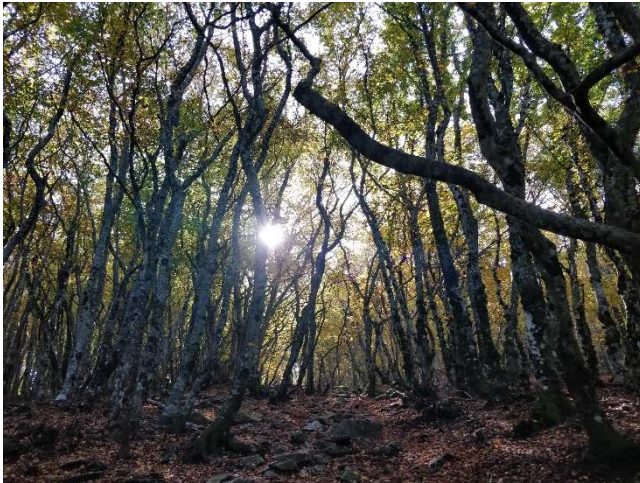


incredible to see. The next morning, my sister and I got up to see the sunrise down at the beach, starting the day off nice and fresh with a book in hand. Later in the morning we went to the local market – the olives are





amazing (since it's so close to Spain), and speaking of, we could see Spain from the beach! Reading, beach walks, and a greyhound later, we ended the day back on the beach with the sun setting over the mountains. The next day we went on a hike in the mountains, which was a big highlight for me as it's one of the things I loved to do in New Zealand. Up through the forest, across the ridge, and down the mountain, we were rewarded with a magnificent and magical view of the valley, with its rolling mountains and rocks.

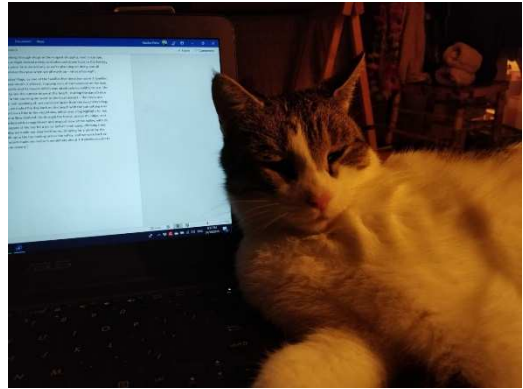


We stopped at the top for a picnic before continuing, climbing trees and crossing mini rivers. The next day we made our way back home, stopping for a picnic by the tallest bridge in Europe. A little walk up to the top looking across the valley, and we were back on the road (we drove about 800km, which made me realise it would take about 3-4 weeks straight to drive to New Zealand if there was no ocean). Back home, my sister had organised a few

days for us to spend with 3 other friends. We started off the little stay at Valentine's home, (we were 5) so we got into 2 teams and each team cooked a meal for dinner with a given theme. We had a 20-euro budget at the supermarket – for food, deco, and activities, and then 2 hours after to each organise everything.



We ate very well, and laughed a lot together which was super cool. The next day we all went to Angers for some ice skating and shopping and we ended the day at our house with a few more friends for a little evening of fun games and talks. Which brings us to the present, where our cat Luchi is lying next to me, half over my computer.



My whole exchange has been a big high point, and such an incredible experience in my life. I never could have imagined getting so much out of one single year – it truly is a life in a year, and I am certain that the experiences I have gone through this year will have a great impact on my life later on. I remember the info evening where we were told that we might not get our choice of the country we'd go to on exchange, and thinking, uh oh I'm not sure I'd like to go on exchange in a country other than France, and I was pretty stressed about the possibility of going to a different country. But today, I truly understand that it doesn't matter where we go on exchange, that there's so much more to it than learning the language and the culture of the country. I think the real beauty of it, is in the people, in the connections, and in the life experiences. As an exchange student, we have the opportunity to be a part of several different families, which at the end, we consider our real families. I find that absolutely incredible. I have 4 families in France, who mean so much to me, and I can't imagine my life without them anymore. It's the simple courage of 5 teenagers to go and live a year in another country, which brought me together with them. It's amazing how life works to bring people together in such an interesting way – and I admire Rotary for this, for how they have managed to link so many different people from different cultures together. Thanks to Rotary, there are so many connections like mine from country to country, which I find incredibly beautiful. Such an opportunity is rare, and I feel so grateful for it and for having given applying a go. The world is so full of opportunities and an exchange is the perfect way to discover that, along with all the different perspectives we get to find on life, on family, on school – on everything that makes up our life, because ultimately we get to discover several different lives while on exchange – different ways of eating, of going to school, of making friends, of speaking and of different families. What an experience.

Off to Paris!

Madita