



Alicia
from
Mississauga
to
Japan

“Exchange: because school was too simple, and you wanted to struggle ordering food instead.”

こんにちはカナダ！（Hello Canada!）

What does it really mean to be an exchange student?

I’ve been asking myself that question since the moment I stepped onto the plane, and the answer keeps changing the longer I’m here. Exchange is beautiful, exhilarating, and life-changing—but it’s also challenging, confusing, and sometimes just plain exhausting. It’s a whirlwind of experiences, and I want to share not just the highlights that make it onto social media, but the complete picture of what it truly means to be an exchange student—the highs, the lows, and everything in between. Because that’s what makes this experience so *real*.

Somehow, I’m already over halfway through my exchange. Time is slipping through my fingers faster than I can hold onto it, and with each passing day, I feel the weight of how temporary all of this is.

It’s hard to believe that just a year ago, I was living an entirely different life—one that now feels like a distant memory. I was doing the things every high school student does: attending semi-formal, starting my last semester, spending time with friends. But at this time last year, everything started to shift. One moment, I was building a quinzhee in Haliburton, Ontario, preparing to sleep in subzero temperatures alongside 14 other exchange students. The next, I was falling asleep at my desk while studying for my chemistry test.

Then, in the blink of an eye, I was waking up on the other end of the world to university acceptances in my inbox, watching the future I had worked so hard for unfold before me.

Learning Japanese has been easily one of the most rewarding challenges of my exchange. I can now walk through the city with a sense of independence—asking for directions, chatting with store staff, or ordering food without stumbling. The moments when I catch myself holding a normal conversation feel like victories, even though I know my grammar still needs work. It's like a puzzle—every word I learn brings me one piece closer to fluency. That said, textbooks have lost some of their appeal. While structured study is necessary, I've found that real-life conversations are the most effective lessons. These daily interactions have pushed me to continue learning, but to really succeed, especially with the N3 language exam approaching, (as much as I dread it) I'll need to refocus on those textbooks.

When it comes to kanji, it's been quite a journey. I've learned nearly 600 characters so far, putting me close to the elementary school grade 5 level. Reading kanji is starting to feel less intimidating as I focus on the most commonly used ones, and the characters are beginning to appear familiar in signs and menus around me. I used to rely on Google Translate for nearly everything, but now, I often go days without needing it. The real joy, however, comes when I understand a conversation or read a sign without having to translate to English in my head first. The beauty of the Japanese language is that you speak in ideas rather than words and pairing these concepts to kanjis is key to achieving fluency. It's those moments of clarity that remind me just how far I've come, even with the endless nuances I have yet to come across.

One of the challenges I didn't fully anticipate was navigating dialects. Just when I thought I was getting the hang of Japanese, I realized that the way people speak in one city can be completely different from the next. It's a humbling experience to think you understand a conversation—only to realize you're getting the completely wrong idea. But that's part of the adventure too. Learning how people actually speak, adapting to different ways of communication, and figuring things out on the fly.

My first winter without snow—what a strange experience that has been. I had always imagined a Japanese winter would be blanketed in a sheet of white, like the pictures you see in movies. Instead, the chill has crept into every part of my day, making it the coldest winter I've ever faced. It's not the temperature that makes it cold, it's actually the warmest winter I've experienced thus far in terms of degrees, which barely ever drops below zero.

The difference is that in Canada I could wear long pants and sweaters wherever and whenever I wanted. The school uniform skirt, short and thin, provides little protection against the cold, and with no central heating in the school buildings, I often find myself shivering through 8-hour school days. But despite the cold and the language struggles, school has gradually become a place where I feel more connected.

At first, school felt like an adventure—an exciting unknown where everything was new. The days were full of surprises, with my classmates marveling at my Japanese, constantly calling me “kawaii” and “sugoi” (cute and amazing) at every turn. But soon, the novelty wore off, and I found myself facing the reality of being a foreign student who couldn’t communicate beyond the basics. Classes were a blur, as I couldn’t understand what was being taught. I often found myself in the background, with teachers unsure of how to engage me, as there was little they could do without a common language. Over time, I began to find my place thanks to the daily rituals, like standing and bowing at the beginning and end of each class, saying “onegaishimasu” (please) before the lesson and “arigato gozaimasu” (thank you) after. At first, these small customs were unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but now, they’ve become part of the rhythm of school life.

Before the winter break, I found it increasingly difficult to drag myself out of bed in the early morning chill. The buses were always late, and the wait at the bus stop felt endless. By the time I got to school, I was already exhausted from the cold, and the day ahead seemed daunting. Sitting in class for hours, freezing and with little to do, became monotonous. Luckily, around Christmas, it was as though a magic switch flipped. My classmates and I began to get closer, exchanging laughs, ideas, and simple conversations that had once felt impossible. My Japanese still isn’t strong enough to keep up with more advanced subjects like science, history, and of course Japanese, but I’m no longer on the outside looking in. Instead, I’ve begun to participate more actively in classwork, feeling more like I’m part of the group than I ever did before.

Nevertheless, I still face challenges all the time. I’ve been placed in a second-year class which means they will be graduating high school in one year’s time. The school system is quite different to Canada— the year starts in April and there are 3 semesters each year. My second-year classmates, who are now in their final semester of second year, are heavily involved in club activities, making it hard to spend time with them outside of class. As third graders, students are so caught up in their studies that they no longer have the time to participate in club activities. This will make my outings with school friends far less frequent and leaves the last couple months of my exchange full of uncertainty, but regardless, I’m determined to keep myself busy.



Japanese second year high school students have school trips. My class went to Taiwan. It was an experience that exceeded all expectations—an exchange within an exchange, a chance to step outside of Japan and see another side of Asia through fresh eyes. From the moment we landed, Taiwan felt like a thrilling new adventure waiting to unfold. The energy in the air was different—lively, yet welcoming, with the scent of street food drifting through the bustling night markets and the neon signs flickering against the skyline.

Our journey took us from Taipei to Taichung and back, every stop along the way filled with awe-inspiring moments. In Taichung, we attended a seminar at Providence University, where we met international students eager to share their own experiences. Conversations flowed naturally, laughter was exchanged, and by the end of our time there, it felt as if we had built friendships in just a matter of hours. The warmth and hospitality of the people left a lasting impression, making it clear that Taiwan held a special kind of charm.

Taipei was a whirlwind of exploration, each street packed with hidden gems waiting to be discovered. The towering Taipei 101 loomed above us, a reminder of the city's modernity, while the centuries-old temples stood as a testament to its rich history. But the true magic of the trip happened on our last day—when we were set loose on Taipei with no itinerary, just a want for adventure and an entire city to explore.

Wandering through the streets with friends, we followed the enticing aromas of street vendors and indulged in the most incredible xiaolongbao (small steamed buns). We sipped on authentic bubble tea—far superior to anything I had ever had before—and weaved through the chaotic yet exhilarating crowds of the street markets.



Everywhere we went, we met locals eager to share their city with us. Strangers became fast friends, and I was the lucky passerby who got pulled into a street performance. I am amazed at how much we managed to see in such a short time, and the trip made me want to see even more of the world.

My time with my second host family has come to an end and I have so many positive things to say about them. They always did their best to make my exchange experience feel like home, and I will always cherish the memories we created together. From making 130 paper cranes together, to putting little surprises into my bento box, their simple yet meaningful gestures allowed us to connect on a deeper level. They embraced my curiosity about Japanese culture, always eager to share their knowledge and traditions with me. And their efforts to check things off of my bucket list made me feel truly cared for. They shared insights about everyday life, traditions, and customs that I would have never fully grasped on my own. One particularly meaningful gift they gave me was a *goshuincho*, a temple stamp book that I now take with me on every trip.



My second host family took me on an incredible trip to Kagoshima. We first stopped at a fascinating architectural museum in Kirishima, where I admired stunning designs and innovative structures. From there, we traveled to Ibusuki, where we stayed at a traditional Ryokan featuring sand baths—an experience unlike any other. Our room offered a breathtaking view of the ocean, and I woke up early to witness a mesmerizing sunrise. On the way back, we searched for the legendary Issie monster, saw massive eels, and visited a scenic spot with a beautiful view of Sakurajima, where we enjoyed coffee while taking in the stunning landscape. This trip was particularly special because Kagoshima was the last prefecture I needed to visit to complete my tour of all the prefectures in Kyushu.



Though I've now switched to my third host family, my time with my second family remains a special chapter of my exchange. They welcomed me and treated me as one of their own, and the bond we formed is one I'll carry with me for the rest of my life.

My third host family, who I've only been with for 2 weeks, has made me feel incredibly welcome. They are so kind and caring, and I already feel at home with them. I've formed a close bond with my host mom, who feels more like a sister, and their one-year-old daughter, soon to turn two, is the sweetest child I've ever met. They also have two adorable dogs, who I had been warned were not friendly and often bite, but to my surprise, they've warmed up to me. Now, they often cuddle with me, and I'm glad that they've allowed me into their little circle of trust.

Living in Japan has brought countless cultural discoveries, some amusing, some humbling, but all enriching. One of the first things I noticed was how different certain everyday habits are here. Take sneezing, for example—no one says "bless you" here. It's a small, seemingly insignificant detail, but when I sneezed for the first time, I felt a strange emptiness in the air. Back home, there's always that little moment of acknowledgment, but here, there's just silence. When someone else sneezed, I instinctively muttered "bless you," and my host family chuckled. They quickly adopted the phrase, and now it's become a running joke. It's a reminder of how easily we can blend our cultures, even in the smallest ways.

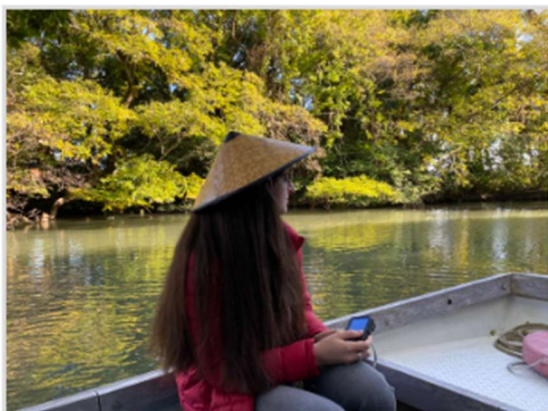
Another funny moment came when I introduced the Canadian gesture of crossing fingers. Back home, we cross our fingers all the time to signify that we hope something will happen, or just as a casual sign of good luck. In Japan, however, this gesture is completely foreign, and I've been met with stunned expressions and questions whenever I explain it. It's been amusing to see how something so natural to me is so

utterly fascinating to my Japanese friends. It's a small thing, but it's one of those moments that makes me realize how much of our culture is embedded in even the simplest actions.

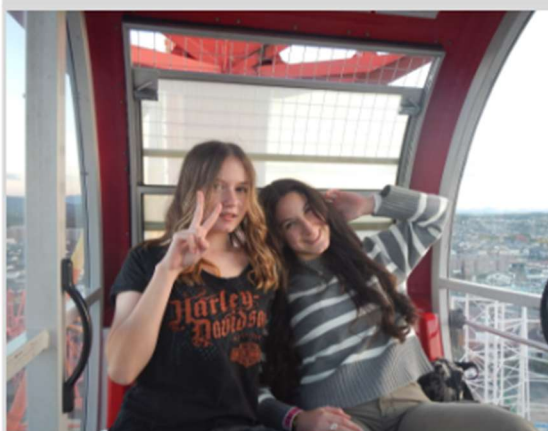
One of the most rewarding experiences I've had was teaching English at elementary schools a couple of months ago. It was such a heartwarming opportunity to give back to the community and engage with students in a way that felt meaningful. I was able to connect with the children, teach them some basic English, and learn from them in return. There was an undeniable joy in seeing their faces light up as they learned new words and expressions. My current host family also owns a few kindergartens in the area, and helping out there has been equally fulfilling. Being surrounded by such bright young minds has reminded me how important it is to nurture and support the younger generation, and I feel incredibly grateful to be able to contribute in this way.

"Collecting pins and Prefectures"

Travelling in Japan has been nothing short of incredible, and I've truly embraced the art of packing light—so much so that I can now expertly throw together an overnight bag in just two minutes flat, complete with a packing list that ensures I'm ready for any adventure, big or small. Is backpacking in my future? At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised. In any case, I'm excited to share some of my personal favourite experiences over the last three months.



During
my school
exam
break in



November, my host family and I dived into the beauty of Saga Prefecture's autumn foliage. The colors were so vibrant that it felt like walking through a painting. Fukuoka's TeamLab Forest was another mind-blowing experience, where digital art and nature seamlessly intertwined to create a world that felt both otherworldly and magical. I also had the thrilling opportunity to visit Greenland with friends, Kumamoto's amusement park—an experience full of laughs and a few heart-racing rides. A peaceful and cultural experience was taking a river cruise in Yanagawa, where we glided through tranquil canals, and ducked under bridges that came so low that if you were to stick out your head more than 10 centimeters past the highest point of the boat, you'd get a nasty scrape from the stone bridge above. To top it off, I watched my first sumo wrestling competition, which—albeit surprisingly—was incredibly captivating. These larger-than-life athletes, with their sheer power and grace, made every move feel like a ritual.



The Rotary orientation in November was a blast, where we celebrated a fellow exchange student's birthday in style, belted out tunes at karaoke, and played Molkky (a Finnish outdoor game) in the beautiful Kikuchi region. A visit to Kikuchi Gorge, with its misty waterfalls and lush greenery, felt like stepping into a fairytale. Later that month, I ventured to Beppu for the weekend, where I caught up with a friend and explored the city, shopping for Black Friday deals and meeting her incredibly warm family. It was one of those trips that makes you feel connected to another place and, in turn, another family.



The highlight of Rotary orientations to date was undoubtedly the one in Okinawa. Okinawa, the tropical vacation paradise of Japan, offered a blend of relaxation and cultural immersion. We wandered down Kokusai Street, a vibrant hub of local delicacies and a wide range of shops, before enjoying a lively dinner at an izakaya, where Okinawan cuisine was served alongside traditional upbeat live music. The next day, we participated in a peace learning experience at Himeyuri, where we learned about the tragic effects of the war and hung 1,000 paper cranes as a symbol of peace. We also visited the Peace Memorial Park, Shuri Castle, and capped it all off with snorkeling in Okinawa's crystal-clear waters. Even though the wind was a bit chilly, the warm water made swimming alongside vibrant fish a surreal experience. Our final stop was the lively American Village, a place that felt like a mix between an amusement park and a quirky American town—festive, lively, and full of energy.



But the adventures didn't stop there. December and the New Year were equally eventful. The Rotary Christmas party brought together exchange students from all over, and we bonded over karaoke and laughter. The mochi pounding ceremony was an experience that left me covered in rice flour but grinning ear-to-ear. And as if that wasn't enough, I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work as a shrine maiden at Kitaoka Shrine, serving amazake (a creamy beverage made from fermented rice) during the New Year celebrations. The experience of greeting visitors and sharing my story with them was incredibly special. Later, I spent the first days of the New Year with my host family in Miyazaki, exploring Takachiho Gorge, practicing New Year calligraphy, shopping for bargains, and playing strategy games.



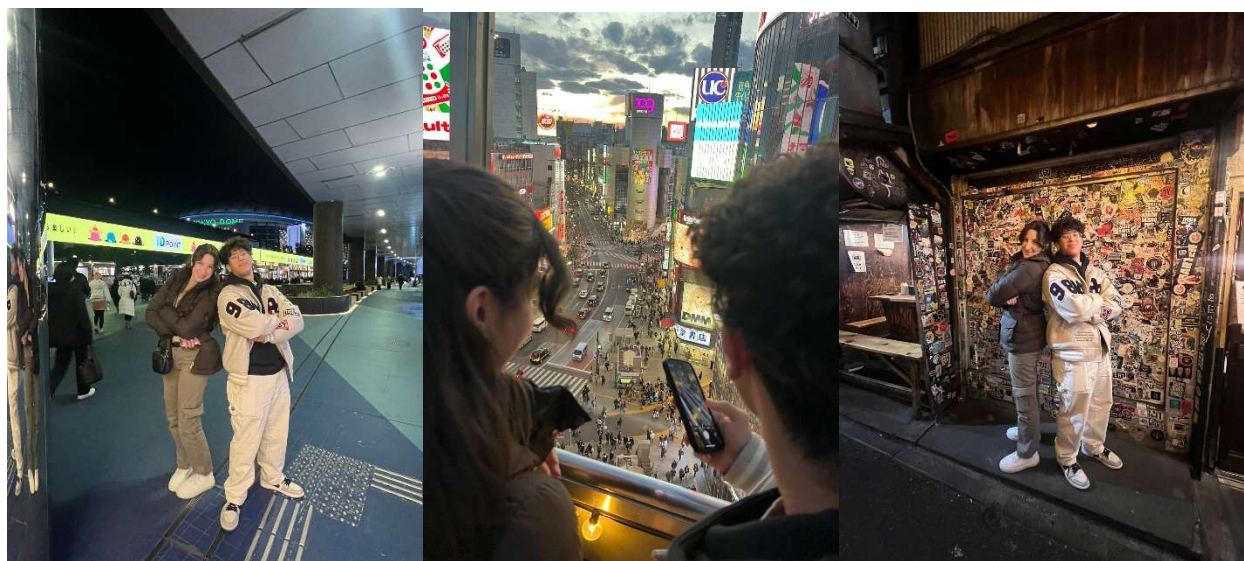
Visiting Yushima with friends, also known as "cat island," was like stepping into a different world. We started the day early, watching the sunrise from the car as we made our way to the coast. After a short 30-minute boat ride, we arrived at the tiny island, which was even more charming than I had imagined. Cats were everywhere, lounging in the sun, wandering through the streets, and curiously approaching us as we

explored. Some were playful and eager for attention, while others simply observed from a distance. The atmosphere was peaceful, and walking through the quiet island with cats trotting beside us made for a truly unique and memorable experience.



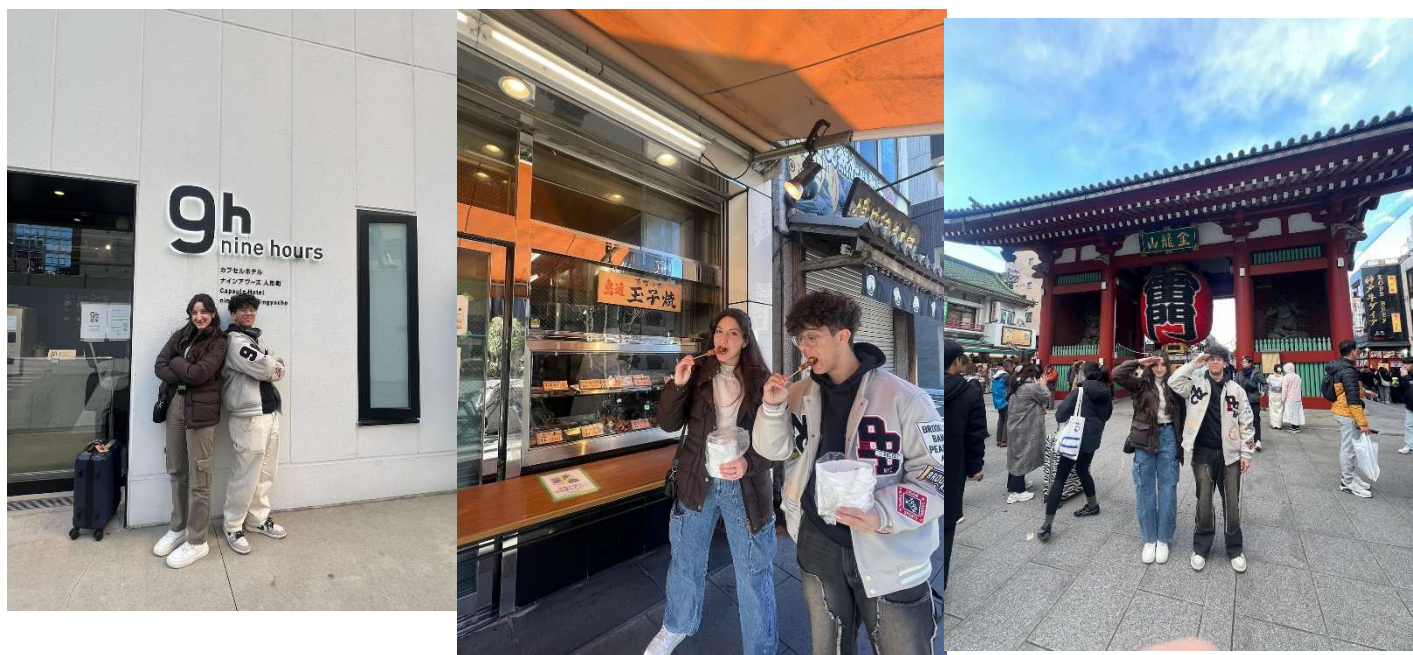
Some trips are fun, some are exciting, and then there are the ones that embed themselves into your soul—Tokyo and Kyoto were exactly that. From the moment my friend and I arrived, every second was electric, every moment an adventure, and every sight something out of a dream.

Tokyo greeted us with the dazzling chaos of Shibuya Scramble Crossing, a place that feels more like a cinematic masterpiece than a simple crosswalk. The energy was contagious—thousands of people moving in perfect, unplanned choreography, the neon lights reflecting off glass buildings, the hum of the city beneath our feet. Being there, in the very heart of Tokyo, felt surreal, like stepping into the pulse of Japan itself.



The night only got better. Seeing Maroon 5 perform live was something I had dreamed about. Experiencing it in a venue as iconic as Tokyo Dome made it even more unforgettable. The music, the energy, the crowd—it was electric. The final notes still ringing in our ears, we found ourselves weaving through the narrow alleys of Omoide Yokochi, where the smell of sizzling skewers and rich broth filled the air. We ate our late-night meal under glowing lanterns, soaking in the cozy, nostalgic charm of the alleyway before making our way back to our capsule hotel.

Now, capsule hotels are something else entirely. Compact, efficient, and surprisingly comfortable, it felt like we had stepped into a sci-fi movie. The sleeping pods were cozy, the facilities were pristine, and the whole experience was just... insane. Tokyo never sleeps, but we needed to, so we got some rest before another action-packed day.



The morning started with yakitori for breakfast (because why not?), followed by a stroll through Omotesando, where luxury storefronts lined the streets, each one more extravagant and expensive than the last. We didn't buy anything—unless you count window shopping and admiring the architecture as purchases—but the experience itself was priceless. From there, we strolled through the vast, tree-lined paths of Meiji Jingu, then dove back into the vibrant chaos of Takeshita Dori. Of course, I had to grab some pins for my Rotary jacket—a small but essential souvenir from the heart of Harajuku.

No trip to Tokyo would be complete without a visit to Sensoji Temple. The towering red gate, the scent of incense, the bustling Nakamise Street—it was everything I had imagined and more. And just when I thought the day couldn't get any better, we ended it at Tokyo Skytree, watching the city stretch endlessly below us as the sun melted into the horizon. Even though the clouds rolled in just before sunset, the view was breathtaking.



Then, just like that, we were off to Kyoto. The shinkansen ride felt like a time warp—one moment, we were in the neon glow of Tokyo, and the next, we had stepped into a winter fairytale. Kyoto greeted us with a blanket of fresh snow, turning the already stunning city into something truly magical.

Kiyomizu-dera, with its towering wooden stage, looked otherworldly under the snow. Every step through its ancient grounds felt like walking through history itself. Then, we wandered through the serene gardens of Ginkaku-ji, a contrast to the golden splendor of Kinkaku-ji, which I had visited before. Kyoto has a way of making you slow down, breathe deeper, and appreciate the beauty in the smallest details.

But the best moment? Fushimi Inari Jinja. As we climbed through the famous red torii gates, snowflakes began to fall, light at first, then heavier, until the entire shrine path was dusted in white. The torii, already striking in their vivid red, stood out even more against the snowy backdrop. It felt like we had stepped into another world. It was quiet, almost sacred, as we wandered through the tunnels of gates, each step leading us deeper into Kyoto's timeless beauty.

Too soon, the trip came to an end. But those few days were filled with enough memories to last a lifetime. From the flashing lights of Tokyo to the serene snowfall in Kyoto, it was a journey of contrasts, of excitement and tranquility, of modern energy and ancient wonder. And as much as we packed into this short trip, I know it was only the beginning. I'll definitely be back.

Japan has been an endless adventure, full of learning, laughter, and exploration. Each trip and every experience added to my understanding of this beautiful country, and I know there are still so many more treasures to uncover. I'm only halfway through my journey, but I'm already collecting memories that will last a lifetime. I'm incredibly lucky to be able to say I've visited 5 of the 9 regions in the country and 13 of the 47 prefectures up until this point. I can't thank the people that have made this possible enough and I'm truly grateful to the warmth and hospitality I've been met with throughout my time in Japan.

"A smile will go a long way. Unless it was a question..."

If there's one thing I've learned on exchange, it's this: say yes to everything. Take every opportunity, accept every invitation, try every new food—even the ones that look questionable. Some of my best memories have come from saying yes to something I never would have considered back home. You never know where it will lead you, who you'll meet, or what experiences will change your perspective. Another crucial point—never underestimate the power of a smile and simple politeness. A warm "thank you" and a genuine smile go a long way, even when words fail you.

That said, exchange isn't just about saying yes—it's about making the most of every second. Time moves differently here. One moment, you're stepping off the plane, wide-eyed and nervous, and the next, you're halfway through your year wondering how it all went by so fast. Every single day is an opportunity to do something new, meet someone new, or learn something new. Of course, that looks different for everyone. Some students need their alone time to recharge, and that's just as important as filling every moment with activities. For me, exchange is about living at full speed, never wasting a second.

Change is constant on exchange. I've always known I liked new experiences, but I've come to realize that I love change itself. So many people fear it—dread it, even—but I find myself looking forward to it with excitement. I recently watched two Japanese students who have become close friends leave for their own exchange in Australia, and while it was bittersweet to say goodbye, I couldn't help but feel excited for them and the incredible journey they were about to embark on.

Fun fact—I actually started writing this report at the same time I started writing my first BeaverTale, simply because I realized how much I have to say about this experience. There's so much I wanted to share about my first few months that I had already forgotten by the time I sat down to write. If there's any final piece of advice I'd give to future exchange students, it's this: document everything. Write, take pictures, make notes, record voice memos—whatever works for you. It doesn't have to

be very detailed or time consuming but having quick notes or photos to go back to make it so much easier to remember and keep track of all the new things you'll be doing, seeing, and trying. Because trust me, no matter how unforgettable a moment feels at the time, with the amount of memories you're making, memories fade faster than you think.

As I sit in my room, 13,000 kilometers from home, I realize—this *is* home now. The streets I once found unfamiliar are now second nature, the language I once hesitated to speak has become my default, and the faces that were once strangers have become some of the most important people in my life.

Somewhere along the way, my casual “*for real?*” turned into “*maji de?*” without me even noticing. I instinctively bow when I say thank you, and yet, I *still* can't figure out how everyone here removes the bones from their fish so effortlessly with chopsticks while I sit there, picking tiny fragments out of my teeth. Some things just take more time.

As 2024 took off, and I hit the ground running in 2025, I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude for this experience and for the people who have made it so incredible. My host families, who have welcomed me into their homes and lives with open arms. My friends, who have laughed with me through language barriers and shared moments I'll never forget. The Rotary members, who pour so much time and effort into creating opportunities like this, changing lives in ways that can never fully be put into words.

And of course, a huge thank you to my family back in Canada, who continue to support me every step of the way, cheering me on from the other side of the world. To my friends back home, who I know are eagerly waiting to hear all the stories I haven't had the chance to tell yet. To my home district 7080 and host district 2720, to my sponsor club of Mississauga and host club of Kumamoto Rindou and to every Rotary club that plays a role in making exchange possible—*thank you*.

Looking ahead, I'm determined to make the most of the months I have left. I want to keep saying yes, keep pushing myself, and keep giving back to this community that has already given me so much. This exchange has been life-changing—and the best part? It's not over yet.

There are still stories to be told, experiences to be had, and memories waiting to be made. I've got a few plans in the works already, and trust me, you won't want to miss what comes next. See you in my next BeaverTale!

またね、(See you!)

アリシア・ドウルチェバ Alicia Durcheva

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If you'd like to follow along with my trip in real time, check out my PolarSteps!

<https://www.polarsteps.com/AliciaDurcheva/14188339-japan>