



Alicia  
from  
Mississauga  
to  
Japan

*“The greatest journeys answer questions you didn’t even think to ask at the beginning.”*

In just 55 days, I will be leaving my family and friends to return to my family and friends, and it honestly feels like my heart is in two places at once. The fact that I’m already at this point feels surreal. This year has flown by faster than I could’ve ever imagined. Sometimes it feels like I’ve only just arrived, and yet, here I am, less than 2 months away from the end.

It’s truly insane to think that in less than a year, I’ve added a whole new language to my list. When I first arrived, I never thought I’d be at the point I am now, where Japanese feels more natural than English. I haven’t even really been studying anymore, the real lessons have come from the people around me. Texting with friends, having real conversations, feeling like a part of this world, has helped far more than apps or textbooks. My N3 test got pushed to December in Canada, so I have a bit more time to study, but honestly, I already feel so far ahead of where I imagined I’d be.

*“Be the bridge beyond language and culture.”*

Making the most of every single moment of this exchange has been my mission, and looking back, I’m proud of how much I’ve squeezed into every day. Lately, life has been a whirlwind. I’ve been hanging out with friends, attending the Osaka 2025 World Expo, competing in my school’s sports festival, writing and performing speeches, and becoming a senior (again!). I’ve witnessed cherry blossoms bloom and fall, celebrated unique Japanese festivals, and realized how little time I have left to savor it all.



Saying goodbye to my third host family was one of the hardest things I've done here. They welcomed me with open arms and gave me the kind of freedom and trust that made me feel truly at home. The bond I built with them, especially my little 2-year-old host sister, is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. I'm going to make it my mission to visit her as she grows, and I'll never forget that tiny hand that always reached out for mine.



Just two weeks ago, I moved into my last host family, marking the beginning of my "lasts." My new family is incredible. My older host sister and brother have already been showing me around and making me feel so welcome. I'm excited to spend the rest of my exchange with them.

In the next two weeks, I'm going to pack in as much time as I can with my friends and family here... and practice mountain climbing too... but we'll get to that in a minute.



This time around, I'm not going to give you a play-by-play of everything I've done in the last few months. You can see all that on my [PolarSteps](#), but what I really want to share is the incredible stuff I've got coming up in my final two months, things I'm sure will make you want to keep checking my [PolarSteps](#) as I go.

And since my other two reports were a bit on the long side, I'm keeping this one short (or at least I'm trying to). If you want the long version, I can talk for hours. Reach out anytime :)

First up, I'll be going to the Kagawa Prefecture in the Shikoku region which will add a couple more tallies to my prefecture/region travel goal. I'm really excited to see the raw beauty it has to offer and try their famous udon noodles!

A couple days later, I've got my Japan tour. I can barely contain my excitement! We'll be visiting Tokyo and DisneySea, followed by Hokkaido, and ending the tour in Aomori. It's going to be an experience of a lifetime. I also ranked first in the qualification round and was selected to compete in a speech competition there going up against the best exchange students in Japan!



Right after that, I'm off to Nara. I recently gave a speech at our District 2720 conference about the impact of youth exchange programs on world peace, and it went so well that I was invited to

present it at a Rotary club in Nara, a city hours away on the shinkansen from Kumamoto. It's such an honor to have my words reach even further than I imagined.

Just after that, I'll be celebrating my 18th birthday!

But the biggest adventure? The one I'm counting down the days for: Mount Fuji. Before I wrap up my exchange, I'll be climbing Mount Fuji. A two-day climb that leads to the top where we'll watch the sunrise. The anticipation is making me giddy, and I've already started preparing for the challenge. It's going to be one unforgettable way to say goodbye to Japan.

### **Some advice from my experience:**

- Pack light. I barely brought anything, and I don't consider myself much of a shopper, yet I still don't have space to bring things back. Trust me, bring only what you *need*, or stuff you're happy to leave behind. And maybe an extra suitcase too.
- Your diet? It's going to change. Don't expect to stay the same weight. It'll either go up or down. But that's part of the experience and nothing to worry about.
- Homesickness is different for everyone. I've never really felt it, and honestly, I'm dreading leaving Japan. Sure, I'm excited to see friends back home, get behind the wheel again, meet people face to face, and get ready for university. But the thought of leaving this life I've built here, my new family, my new friends, and my routine... it breaks my heart.

*"It's not a year in your life, it's a life in a year."*

I often find myself thinking how much I'm going to miss Japan's natural beauty. It's everywhere, in every little detail. I catch myself snapping photos of the smallest things, and my friends and family laugh at me. But that's the thing about this place, it's beautiful, even in the ordinary.

The only thing I would do differently if I had the chance to spend another year here would be exploring more of the club community here. The club culture in Japan is on a whole different level compared to Canada, and I know it would have given me a completely different experience.

I've grown so comfortable in Kumamoto that it feels like my second home. Honestly, I feel like I know this city as well as the one I grew up in, if not better. I'm so incredibly grateful for this experience. It's opened doors I didn't even know were there. I've gained so much from the friends I've made, the families I've joined, and the countless unforgettable moments I've had.

Thank you to all the clubs and districts involved, Rotary District 2720, Kumamoto Rindou Rotary Club, Rotary District 7080, and Rotary Club of Mississauga, and to all my friends and family for supporting me through this incredible journey.

In the end, somehow, this truly wasn't just a year in my life, it was a whole other life, lived in the span of just one year. This life has been more than I could ever have imagined. A life that will stay with me forever, and one that will shape me as I move forward into the years to come.

Now, I'll go back to hoping the rainy season doesn't drown me on my way to and from school, and enjoy everyday as best as I can instead of counting down the days I have left.

I'll see everyone soon.

またね、  
アリシア・ドウルチェバ  
Alicia Durcheva

P.S. Feel free to reach out to me at any time :)

Instagram: [alicia.durcheva](#)

Email: [alicia.durcheva@gmail.com](mailto:alicia.durcheva@gmail.com)

If you'd like to follow along with my trip in real time, check out my PolarSteps!  
<https://www.polarsteps.com/AliciaDurcheva/14188339-japan>