



**Alicia
from
Mississauga
to
Japan**

“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone”

What does being an Exchange Student really mean? A question I’ve just barely started to answer and am eager to dive deeper into.

こんにちはカナダ！ (Hello Canada!)

My time in Japan started 92 days ago, and I want to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to everyone who has made this incredible opportunity possible. Thanks to the support of District 7080, Rotary Club of Mississauga, District 2720, Kumamoto Rindou Rotary, and countless others, these past three months I’ve been able to immerse myself in a new culture and embark on a journey that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

Being an exchange student isn’t just about learning a new language or culture. It’s about discovering your own strengths and weaknesses, and challenging yourself in ways you never thought possible. I’ve barely scratched the surface of what this experience has to offer, and I’m excited to uncover more in the months ahead.

My journey started on March 2nd, 2024, when I walked up onto a stage at Country Heritage Park and was given an envelope with my assigned country. I remember my heart beating faster than it ever had before as I unfolded the letter inside and read out: JAPAN. Before country assignments were announced, we were told a little bit about the countries students had gone to in the past. Japan was known to be a challenging one. The language, being as far from English as possible, and the country being literally on the other end of the world always made it daunting, and I had just read it out as my destination. I love challenging myself and came to the conclusion that this was a way to step out of my comfort zone like no other, so I warmed up to

the reality of my upcoming exchange quickly and began a new course in Japanese on my trusty language learning app, Duolingo.

The rest of the time until my departure passed quickly, and before I knew it, I was saying goodbye to my friends and family and heading to Toronto's massive airport to start my 3-flight, 24-hour long journey to my new home. I got a free upgrade to business class on my first flight, which I thought only happened in movies! It was a great start to my adventure and made me feel more sure and excited about what was to come. I spent 5 hours in Chicago's O'Hare airport before boarding my 13-hour flight to Tokyo. Once again, I got lucky with a free upgrade to a seat with additional leg room, which made the 13 hours go by quickly and comfortably.

As I arrived in Tokyo at Haneda airport, I was expecting an easy connection since it was now a domestic flight, and I had 2 hours. I couldn't have been more wrong about that. Haneda airport had me running in circles after getting next to no sleep until I made it to my gate exactly 2 minutes before boarding closed. I got lucky for a third time when my aisle was completely empty, and I could comfortably enjoy the sunset with free snacks as we flew just under 2 hours to Kumamoto.

Getting off the plane and grabbing my suitcase, my entire extent of Japanese knowledge of 'Konnichiwa' (hello), 'Hajimemashite' (nice to meet you), and 'Yoroshiku onegaishimasu' (I look forward to good relations with you) came into use as I was greeted incredibly warmly by my host club and first host family. Soon after, we headed to an Italian restaurant for my first-ever meal in Japan (very cultural, no?). I spent my first week settling in and getting used to not understanding anything around me... and the heat. I had left Canada when daily highs were 27 degrees to arrive in Japan for their daily highs of 37 degrees. The change was astronomical, and I had definitely packed the wrong clothes for it. Nevertheless, I started to feel at home pretty quickly, and before I knew it, even driving on the left side of the road didn't seem so weird anymore.

As soon as I arrived, I was welcomed very warmly by my entire club and made to feel truly at home by all the members. Every meeting and event since have been fun and engaging, building excellent relationships through meaningful questions about culture, laughter at past memories, and little hints and lessons for both Japanese and English languages. We even hosted an event where I had the opportunity to cook traditional foods from my Bulgarian and Belarusian background for everyone. It was a wonderful experience where I got to cook alongside all four of my host moms. My new Japanese families love asking about my life in Canada and learning more about the culture. My club's favourite facts have been Canadian bills being made of plastic or kids getting drivers licenses at 16 and 17 years old :)



“Sometimes, you just need to follow the crowd and hope they’re heading to class.”

Now, moving onto the place I spend most of my days. My school routine starts at 6:30 when I roll out of bed and pull on my school uniform. I’ve been enjoying having a uniform as it reduces the time I spend picking an outfit in the morning to zero. I put my hair up and take out my piercings to follow school rules before toasting some bread and spreading some jam on top. Paired with a glass of milk or coffee, it makes for the best breakfast. Finally, I grab the bento (lunch box) my host mom makes for me before heading out the door. From my first host family, my commute involved a 7-minute walk to the tram stop, a 15-minute ride on the tram, getting off at the train station, a 15-minute train ride to a bicycle parking lot, and then a 15-minute bike ride to school on my cool new bike from Rotary with my name in Japanese on the fender. Since this routine was during the summer, it was quite enjoyable as it kept me active and let me enjoy the warm (at the beginning, it was very hot) weather. I spent my time on the tram and train flying through Japanese lessons on Duolingo or enjoying the scenery. After switching to my second host family, I now walk 5 minutes to a nearby bus stop and take a 25-minute bus ride followed by a 15-minute walk to school. It’s a quicker commute, but the trams and trains were far more punctual as the buses are often late (I was very surprised by this) and I often need to turn my 15-minute walk to school into a run to make it to class on time.

One of the things that really surprised me when I started school was how different it was from what I had expected. I hate to admit it, but I had a very negative perception of Japanese schools before arriving here. I had heard that schools were strict and that students study all day, with very little time for relaxation or social activities. I was scared that the quiet and disciplined environment would make it hard for me to connect with others, and as an extrovert, I feared feeling isolated.



But the reality was far from what I had imagined, and I have grown to love the rules and regulations of school as I think it has helped me integrate better and feel more equal to my peers. I was placed in a very social and outgoing English class, and from day one, I was welcomed with open arms. The students in my class constantly talk and laugh and took me in as one of their own. Even when we could barely communicate, they tried their best with the little English they had learned in class and included me in their conversations and activities. I won't lie and say school was easy right from the beginning - I was constantly lost and often felt like I was

burdening the students around me as they had to translate for me. I quickly learned that sometimes, you just need to follow the crowd and hope they're heading to the same place you are. After a couple quiet weeks of observation, lots of trial and lots of error, I started to find my place. With a great group of friends to show me around, I realized that while academics are important, there is also a strong sense of community and friendship in Japanese schools.

To make the most of my time, I joined the volleyball club, which has been a fantastic way to meet new people and bond with classmates. It has been amazing to connect with others through a shared love of the sport, and I've made many close friends through it. The experience has also helped me feel more integrated into school life, as we share practices, games, and plenty of good memories. My rediscovered passion for cooking recently led me to join the cooking club, where I've started to learn more about Japanese cuisine and bring home recipes to my host families. Ultimately, I hope to bring them to Canada as well! I have club activities about 3 times a week after school and then head home around 7pm to enjoy dinner with my host family. Some days, I'll go out with friends after school and grab dinner in the city to try all kinds of different foods before coming home around 9 or 10pm.

Outside of classes and extracurricular activities, Japanese schools are just as meticulous about having fun. In early October, my class went on a school trip to Mount Aso where we spent two days doing fun English workshops like escape rooms, giving us time to bond. Two weeks later, my school held our annual cultural festival, which was a fantastic experience. With food trucks serving endless delicious foods of any flavour you can think of, performances that had the whole school on their feet singing along and jumping to the beat, it was easily the best display of school spirit and community I have ever seen. My class's performance of 'Zootopia' was a crowd favorite, and it was the cherry on top to make the experience unforgettable.

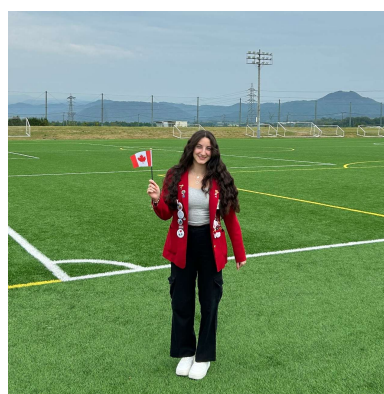


“Spending my time on 50% new experiences and 50% trying to read the menu without Google Translate.”

When I first arrived in Japan, the language barrier was a significant challenge. As someone who loves to talk, not being able to communicate properly with the people around me was frustrating. Simple conversations that I would normally navigate with ease felt impossible, and I quickly started to rely on non-verbal communication to be able to express myself and overcome this. I've been diligently studying Japanese using Duolingo and WaniKani (huge shoutout to these two platforms!) which have worked wonders. This consistent practice has paid off, and I'm proud of the progress I've made so far. That being said, there are days when I feel unable to communicate without Google Translate, and days I can spend entire evenings with my host family leaving my phone untouched. My confidence in the language fluctuates often and I feel that as soon as I get the hang of one concept, five new ones come out of nowhere to confuse me all over again. Nevertheless, my improvement is evident. I've gone from knowing a total of three words on my first day to now understanding the main ideas of most conversations and being an active participant. I've switched from thinking in English with few Japanese thoughts to thinking in Japanese with few English thoughts. What once was an extensive use of “that's crazy”, has become an extensive use of やばい (yabai), meaning “that's crazy” in Japanese. At times, I find myself forgetting English words, which has happened a lot more than I'd like to admit within the last two weeks! The feeling of being able to communicate in a language so different from any I've previously known is unmatched. However small and few those moments of accomplishment may be, they are all the motivation I need to keep going. Learning Japanese has been an incredibly fascinating journey, especially given three complex writing systems: Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. I've learned to read Hiragana and Katakana, albeit slowly, and I've started learning Kanji. I'm still far from fluent, knowing only 250 characters, but I'm determined to reach a high level of proficiency, aiming to eventually master the 2,000 most essential ones. For now, my Kanji knowledge is equivalent to that of a second grader, but I'm making steady progress every day.

I've read my fair share of BeaverTales, and I'd say it's a pretty even split of focusing solely on trips and exciting events versus digging deep into 'a day in the life.' I've already given a rundown of my school day and I'm dying to share some of the travelling I've had the privilege to do. I've been incredibly fortunate to travel around Japan, and I can't even begin to express how grateful I am that trips have become part of my weekly routine. As of right now, I have visited 3 of the 9 regions in the country and 7 of the 47 prefectures. With the help of my Host Club and Host Families, I am well on my way to reaching my recently set goal of visiting at least one prefecture in each region and at least a third of the prefectures in the country!

I've done some travelling to do presentations for a variety of Rotary Clubs around my home prefecture. During these presentations I introduce myself, my life in Canada and some of my experiences in Japan, before sharing Canadian culture by talking about landmarks, foods, nature, animals, and more. These 20 - 30-minute presentations are fully in Japanese which is a challenge that has been great for learning the language. With each presentation I gain confidence, network with new people, and get to see a new part of the prefecture.



Rotary trips have been incredibly fun and I've been on two trips with my district so far. Although my host district is small with only three inbound students, it sure is mighty. My first weekend in Japan was a Rotary orientation in Mount Aso, which allowed for the eight students, both inbound and outbound, to become close very quickly. I was reunited with a Japanese rebound student that had been in Canada last year and made strong friendships with the others.

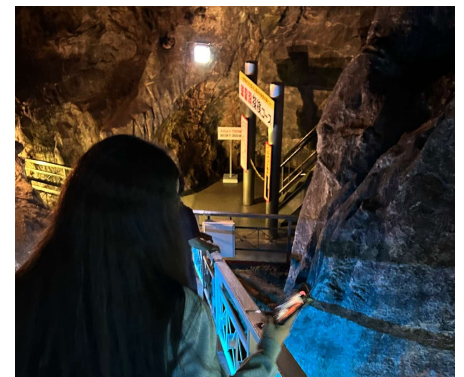


My second Rotary trip with the district was to Nagasaki. This trip was with all the Rotary districts in Kyushu (the southernmost of Japan's four main islands), and it was great. We visited Huis Ten Bosch, a Dutch-themed amusement park, and spent the night in a beautiful hotel on top of a hill with a stunning view of the city. The following day, we learned about the history of Nagasaki at the Atomic Bomb Museum, which was a sobering experience. It was fantastic to meet more Rotary Youth Exchange students and hear about their adventures across Japan.





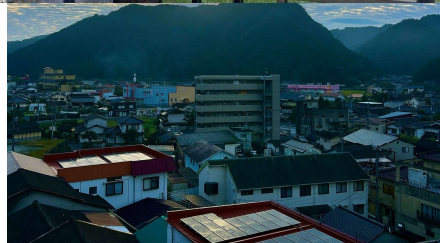
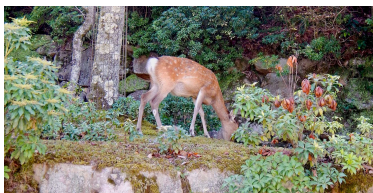
I've had countless opportunities to explore Kumamoto (my home prefecture), such as learning its history at Kumamoto Castle, enjoying traditional sweets and matcha at Suizenji Jojuen Garden, visiting well-known landmarks such as Yachiyoza Theater and Tsujunkyo Bridge, and having the honor of sailing on the Japanese destroyer Harusame. I got to wear a traditional kimono and be professionally photographed at a shrine, go stand-up paddle boarding in Minamata, make matcha myself in Aso, and attend as well as participate in cultural festivals. With my second host family, last weekend I even had the chance to experience seeing the wild dolphins located on the western edge of the prefecture in Amakusa, spending a weekend by the sea instead of the city at a traditional ryokan with a private onsen! Each of these experiences has offered valuable cultural insights and has been a source of great memories and learning.



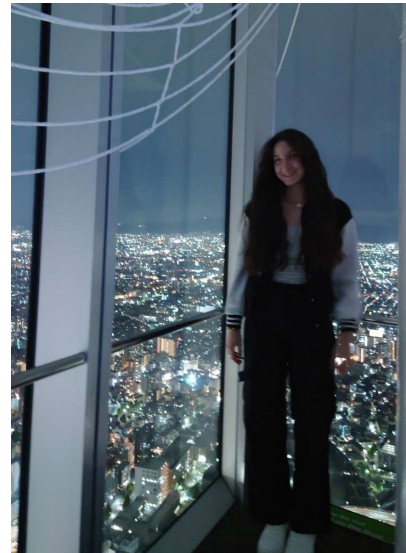
I had the incredible opportunity to travel to Hiroshima and Okayama with my first host mom in September. We started our adventure on Miyajima Island, where we toured the beautiful landscape and made friends with the free roaming wild deer. We sampled the island's delicious foods, like the famous Momiji manju before heading to Hiroshima. There, we tried the local specialty, okonomiyaki, a savory pancake filled with layers of ingredients, which was a true taste of Hiroshima's culinary culture. Next, we visited the world-famous Atomic Bomb Dome and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which left a lasting impression on me. That evening, we stayed at a traditional ryokan, where I had my first true onsen (hot spring) experience. The serenity of the bath, paired with the beautiful sunrise the next morning, made



the stay unforgettable. I woke up early just to witness the stunning view from our room before indulging in a huge breakfast filled with every food I don't know the name of. We spent the next day in Okayama, soaking up the sun at a friend's grape farm before heading back to Kumamoto on the bullet train.



Just three weeks ago, I had the chance to explore Osaka and Kyoto, and it was an unforgettable trip. Osaka's Abeno Harukas was absolutely stunning, offering one of the most breathtaking views I've ever seen. The experience was made even more special with a private tour to the helicopter landing pad, where I could see the entire city and beyond. While in Osaka, we spent an exciting day at Universal Studios Japan (USJ), where I was amazed to see my favorite movies and games come to life—it truly felt like stepping into a fairytale. In Kyoto, I was captivated by the beauty of Kinkaku-ji (the Golden Pavilion), Yasaka Pagoda, and Yasaka Shrine. We also visited the world's first Starbucks with tatami mats, a unique blend of tradition and modernity. Dinner was at the Nishiki Market, where I had the chance to try an incredible variety of local foods, each more delicious than the last. This trip has become one of my favorite memories, and I'm so grateful for the experience. I can't wait to return to both cities in the future to explore even more of what they have to offer.





One thing I absolutely can't pass up talking about is the Shinkansen, Japan's famous bullet trains. Since I first learned about them, I've always been so curious about what it would feel like to ride one. And let me tell you, it did not disappoint. The experience of riding the Shinkansen is incredible—smooth, fast, and efficient. It's not just transportation; it's an experience in itself. The first time I rode the shinkansen, I was in awe of the speed and the quietness of the train even while traveling at such high velocities. I've been lucky enough to have ridden the Shinkansen six times already, and each trip has been just as exciting as the last. The precision and punctuality of the system

is remarkable, and I can't wait for the trips to come!

I truly can't say enough how great of an experience I had with my first host family. They were incredibly caring and kind, always easy and fun to talk to, and they did everything in their power to offer me as many opportunities and experiences as possible. I truly felt part of the family and feel that I've made a second home for life. I will forever cherish the memories of exploring new places with my host mom, the fun drives with my host dad, the love and cuddles from their dog K, and most of all, our daily conversations over dinner full of laughter, learning, and the best of memories. Being hosted by them has been one of the greatest gifts and I'm forever grateful to them for their hospitality and eagerness to show me their country and culture. I truly hope to someday repay them for their kindness and have the opportunity to show a similar kindness to others.



As the weather cools down and I find myself only mildly sweating in the fall heat compared to burning in the summer, I continue my adventure. Each day, full of curious stares from locals

seeing a foreigner in a Japanese school uniform, and the small victories I feel from successfully reading a sentence or even a single Kanji character on my walks to and from school, I am constantly reminded of the importance of stepping outside my comfort zone. What began as a leap of faith into the unknown is now a life-defining experience, shaping me into a more confident, open-minded, and culturally aware individual. The months ahead promise even more lessons, and I am ready to embrace them all.

Japan truly is a beautiful country, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have been assigned to Kumamoto for my Rotary Youth Exchange. For someone who loves breathtaking sights, stunning natural landscapes, and exciting new adventures, Japan has been the perfect place for me. I'm a girl who loves staying busy, and I have been busier than ever before... which says a lot for anyone who knows me. From the serene beauty of Kumamoto Castle and the peaceful landscapes of nearby mountains, to the awe-inspiring sunsets and sunrises, every day here feels like a new discovery. I'm deeply grateful to Rotary, to my Sponsor District 7080 and Host District 2720, and to my Sponsor Club the Rotary Club of Mississauga and Host Club the Kumamoto Rindou Rotary Club for making this incredible opportunity possible. I'm excited for all the experiences yet to come and the many more adventures I'll have as I continue to explore this wonderful country. The journey so far has been unforgettable, and I look forward to sharing what lies ahead!

またね、 (See you!)
アリシア・ドゥルチェバ
Alicia Durcheva

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

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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>