



Stephanie

from Burlington
&
Burlington Lakeshore
to
Japan

“The Greater the Risk, the Greater the Reward”

I have always wondered why certain people end up in certain places. Why are some people poor and some rich? Why do some people live in Brazil and some in Italy?

It is likely that no one will ever find the answer to these questions. The best that we can do is search for the place in society that we feel we fit into.

I am telling you this because I believe that youth exchange helps you find your place.

I have been in Japan for 81 days now. I will not lie and say that everything is comfortable here or that there are no bad days, because there are. The things about youth exchange that I fell in love with was the sense of purpose that you feel while participating. The sense that somewhere, in some way you are actually spreading cultural awareness because with youth exchange it's inevitable.

My time in Japan has been very eventful. I feel as though I have learned more than I have in my entire lifetime in just a few months here. I have served tea at a tea ceremony in a kimono, lost my voice singing karaoke, laughed with my Japanese friends until my stomach hurt, walked through the busy streets of Tokyo, eaten foods I do not know the name of almost every day, done many speeches in Japanese to over 1000 people and encountered some of the nicest, kindest and most respectful people that I have ever met.

When I was applying for exchange, I read ALL of the BeaverTales, dreaming about how I would live a fairy-tale life. This caused me to sometimes lose sight of what exchange is meant to be, and I do not want to lead you down that road. Therefore, I am not just going to tell you about all the trips or the amazing places that I have been to because the majority of the time on exchange, you are not on trips. Those photos on social media of beautiful

gardens, shrines and nightlife scenes are just mere moments out of 365 days of living. Instead, I will talk about a regular day here in Japan.

I wake up at around 6:30am to a breakfast lovingly prepared by my host Mom or okasan. She tried to always include my favorite foods and writes my name carefully in English beside the plate. I then get dressed in my uniform, grab my bento box with my lunch in it and jump on the bus to school. The bus ride is about 40 minutes and I arrive to school early (about 7:40am). I usually go to meet my friend Machi and talk with her before school starts at 8:15am. It is hard to explain my feelings towards school in Japan. From an outsider's perspective, an exchange student experience in a Japanese high school would seem terrible. Schools in Japan are extremely strict about everything from the 'no phones' rule to the 'no eating in class' rule (this one really got me since I am one of those people that is always snacking). The first few weeks I spent my days in silence, not able to say more than a few words in Japanese to anyone. Of course, this slowly started to change, and I found good friends that I feel comfortable and happy around. The difficulties I have had in my Japanese school have taught me to appreciate the little things. From impromptu origami lessons from the librarian to a teacher's warm smile, school has slowly become more bearable and very enjoyable at times.

School ends at 4:00pm but I usually have club until 6pm. I joined two different clubs, the kendo (sword fighting) club and the ESS (English) club. Both clubs really helped me adapt to Japanese school life and gave me my best Japanese friends in the process.

After club is over, I get off the bus at Korinbo. Korinbo is the downtown area of my city where the teenagers like to hangout. You can do anything from eat McDonalds to sing karaoke. If I am tired, I will take another bus home right away but if not, I might meet friends and do something fun like purikura (Japanese photo booths) or a photo shoot (because everything in Japan is picturesque) Some days I just go shopping alone or explore a new part of the city as well. I will usually be home by dinner time (around 7pm). At home I will help my host mom with cooking, eat with my family then talk with my host family or work on studying Japanese. I usually go for runs every night with my host Dad as well. This is sometimes my favorite part of the day because it's so peaceful in Japan at night.

I just changed host families for the first time on my exchange. My first host family was amazing. They were extremely welcoming, and I used to really enjoy the long conversations that I would have with them about Canada, Japan, politics, economics or literally anything else. They took me to Tokyo, Kobe and many other beautiful and interesting places as well. My new host family is also wonderful, and I am looking forward to the time that I will spend with them in the future.

Now for the language. By any standards, Japanese is hard. The first month that I was here I found that the more I learned Japanese, the more I learned that I did not know anything about Japanese, yet thankfully this recently started to change. It felt as though in a matter of days I went from only saying a few words a day to being able to communicate solely in Japanese with my friends and family here. Learning a hard language such as Japanese is an extremely daunting task, but I can assure you that when you do manage to learn it, it is much more satisfying because it was so hard. The greater the risk, the greater the reward- a saying that I think can be said for exchange in general as well. Especially for such a challenging country such as Japan, the difficulties I have experienced here make the amazing times even better.

As for the Japanese culture, wow I really am in love with it! Japanese people know how to live meaningfully, which I admire greatly. They work long, hard days but you are able to see their innate joy in simply coming home and seeing their loved ones or going running with a friend. I seriously doubt that Canadians would be so happy over little things like that after 6-day weeks and 8-hour days.

Although life here is often hard for me, I find that I am a lot happier here than I was in Canada because I am adapting to their culture of finding happiness in the little things. I find myself living in the present and feeling more peaceful than I have ever been.

I remember thinking in the beginning of exchange that nothing in Japan is the same as Canada. From the way Coca-Cola tastes to the bathrooms to school to the buses, I have yet to find one physical similarity. As time went on though, I realized that underneath the cultural differences the people were virtually the same. Teenage girls talking about boys all the time, mothers worrying about their daughters, Grandmothers giving their grandchildren too many sweets. My advice to future exchangers is this; learn to find comfort in people rather than things on exchange. Sure, I miss Canadian food, Canadian winters and my family and friends in Canada but this became insignificant in the face of a second set of family and friends in Japan. I learned that the best way to stop missing home is to build a second one, and I truly believe that I have done that.

I think I can safely say that so far, a part of me has found its place in Japan. How much more of me will settle here successfully, it is hard to say, but for now I am happy with what I have.

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Stephanie



