



Elizabeth

from
Waterloo
to
Brazil

"Yet Another Six Months of Adventures"

Presidente Prudente, Brazil

WOW. Has it really been six months already??? I can't believe that I've been living in this beautiful country for half a year! The past three months, since I last wrote to you, have been filled with even more amazing experiences and memories, all of which I will cherish for the rest of my life. It's hard to put these wonderful experiences into words. But I'll do my best to explain how incredible, and sometimes challenging, my Rotary Youth Exchange experience has been and what a huge impact it is having on my life, now and I'm sure into the future.



First things first. Since Brazil is in the southern hemisphere, the months of December, January and part of February are the time for summer vacation. It is also the hottest time of the year. Let me tell you, if you didn't already know, Brazil is hot. Very hot. The temperature reaches the high 30s for much of December, January and February. So my Christmas in Brazil was a big change from my normal snowy and cold Christmas in Waterloo, where everyone snuggles up in big, warm sweaters and blankets by the fire, sipping hot chocolate.



In Brazil, it was the complete opposite! My wonderful host family (my second host family) took me to the beaches of Paraná on the South Atlantic Ocean, about 480 kilometres south of Sao Paulo.

All of my friends warned me to bring plenty of sunscreen and a hat because of how pale I am. But, man oh man, I wasn't expecting that much heat! We arrived the day before Christmas Eve and it was about 35 C — hot, but not extremely hot by Brazilian standards. By the next morning, it had risen to 40 C, with humidity. As you can imagine, as a Canadian who is used to cold and snow, I wasn't doing so well! I got a little sick that day because of the heat, but that didn't stop me from spending Christmas Eve on the beach drinking coconut water from a fresh coconut with my toes in the sand. Brazilians love food and they love to celebrate, so that evening we had a huge Brazilian barbecue, called a '*Churrasco*', danced some samba and ate until our stomachs couldn't handle anymore. Later, we did a kind of 'Secret Santa' activity where we had to describe our assigned person and poke gentle fun at them, which was hilarious! Then we shared presents, had dessert and played card and board games. I think the last person went to bed around 4am, which isn't unusual in Brazil! It was such an amazing Christmas, so different from my normal snowy one, but, wow, I will never forget my Christmas of 2016!



The following week my host brother and I travelled by bus back to our home city, Presidente Prudente, to spend the New Year with friends, while my host parents stayed at the beach with their friends. We ended up cooking a lot of interesting food for ourselves, as well as eating a lot of take-out! We ended 2016 with a relaxed *Churrasco* with our closest friends, watched fireworks, and talked about the year to come. We finally said our goodbyes as the sun started to rise (again, typical for Brazil!) The beautiful oranges and pinks of that sunrise will be burned into my memory for ever.



When my host parents came back to Presidente Prudente, we spent a few days just as the family, which was really nice. I absolutely adored this host family! I called my host mum 'Mae', and my host brother was, and is, just like my real brother, just from another mother.

We got along so well I was always happy to just have a relaxing family day together. I spent the rest of the Brazilian summer travelling around and visiting the other Rotary exchange students in nearby cities, as well as just spending time with my Brazilian friends here in my city. I also ate a lot of *açaí* (fruit ice cream) this summer to try to beat the heat.

As Brazilian summer came to an end, I moved to my third host family, with whom I'm currently living. As always, switching families is a little bit difficult, but this family, like my previous host families, has been very welcoming. They also have three teenagers, so it was easy to make myself at home here. I've been lucky with my host families. I find it so interesting to be an exchange student — you become part of your host families and get to see how other people live their lives, from morning to night. I always love to help out my host mothers in the kitchen because I find it such an easy way to spend quality time with them, as well as to learn a few cooking tricks!

The other day I woke up and I had this complete feeling of happiness. I don't know why, or what the exact source was, but I think it was just because the night before I was thinking about how amazing the exchange experience is. I'm living half way across the world in the home of a family that I don't know all that well, but they generously take me in as another child. This is what is so amazing about the Rotary Youth Exchange Program. All these people in Canada and in Brazil have worked countless hours for me to experience this new culture, to study in another country, to meet new people from around the world and to build international connections. It's truly amazing and I am so grateful to all of you.

Now for a little update about my month to come. This next week I'll be heading down to a more southern state called Santa Catarina for a ten-day vacation at the beach! Then I'll come back just in time for Brazil's famous holiday, Carnival! I'll be going to a city very close to mine, called Benards, with a group of my closest Brazilian friends. I can't wait to experience this amazing holiday. Ever since I arrived in Brazil, everyone has been telling me about Carnival and now I'm about to experience it first hand!



The following week, all of the exchange students will be going on a weeklong trip to Rio de Janeiro! This is going to be an amazing month and I am so thankful for everything that the Rotary Exchange program offers. I can't imagine what my life would be like if I hadn't applied to the program over a year and a half ago and if I wasn't fortunate enough to be selected.

I'd like to take a moment to talk about how this yearlong exchange is such a "game changer" in the life of a young person. Living in another country without my parents, my siblings, and my friends seemed so scary at first. But I still got on that plane with a huge smile, my passport ready to be stamped, and an open mind, ready for the most enriching year of my life. I say 'enriching' because I think that's the perfect word to describe exchange. I have learned so many amazing things and formed the most amazing memories. For example, when a four-year-old boy from an Amazonian tribe took my hand and led me in a traditional warrior dance, or when the Portuguese language finally began to click in my head. I have also learned some important lessons from things that didn't go exactly as planned or when something came up that I wasn't expecting. One example: I got really sick when I first arrived. It was the first time I had been sick without my mum being close by and able to make an appointment for me with our family doctor. I learned quickly that miming and acting things out can really help when you don't know the language! I was mum-less and English-less, but within that first week I learned so many things about this country, about my acting skills, and about how language barriers don't have to restrict you. There are mothers all around the world, everywhere you look; just because she might not be your real mother, a hug from her can make all the difference.

These past six months have been the most amazing (and hot) months of my life! I am so grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Rotary Youth Exchange Program. I can't wait to see what the next months have in store for me!

Tchau for now,

Elizabeth