



# Ella

from Kitchener

to

Japan

*“Halfway through the year, halfway across the world, and a lifetime of memories in between”*

With 174 days over and 147 days left, my exchange is officially past the halfway mark. Before going on exchange, everyone told me this would be the fastest year in my life. I thought I knew what people were talking about, but I was wrong. It feels like just yesterday I got off the plane in the scorching heat to meet the people I'd spend the next year of my life with. It's a bittersweet feeling, but I wouldn't change it for anything.

When I last wrote a BeaverTale, I had just moved to my second host family. My day started at 7 AM, and though I usually skipped breakfast, I sometimes had rice and miso soup. I'd grab the bento my host mom prepared and leave by 8:05. If the weather was nice, I biked 5 minutes to school, but after November's rain arrived, I walked 20 minutes instead. School ran from 8:25 to 3:30 (or 4:30), and three times a week, I had club until 6 PM, getting home by 6:30. Dinner was at 7:30, and sometimes I'd go to the gym afterwards.



Now, I'm with my third host family, living so close to the school that I can see it from my window. I wake up at 7:30, leave at 8:15, and get home at 6:10. I'm grateful for the shorter walk, especially in the cold and rain. Winter here makes me appreciate Canada. Even though it's colder, the warm houses, schools and cars never let me feel the Canadian cold.



While I'm glad to be closer to school, the move still feels bittersweet. I grew very close to my second host family. We created a tradition of eating chocolate, drinking tea and watching Japanese gameshows while sitting in the kotatsu (low coffee table) with a weighted blanket draped on top and heated from the inside). They taught me how to cook my new favourite kabocha stew (pumpkin stew), and introduced me to the rest of their family. Their youngest granddaughter, Elena, goes by Ella. It sometimes led to confusion at family gatherings but also fun moments. We became good friends and she loved following me everywhere. I miss them but I'm grateful for the change. I'm excited to create new memories, build new traditions, and experience a new way of living with my new host family.

Since November, my Japanese has changed a lot. After taking a month-long break from studying, I had a nightmare where I returned to Canada without knowing Japanese. Definitely not a dream I want to come true. Since then, I've taken my studies more seriously.

Though I don't understand everything, I can grasp the general meaning behind conversations and respond much easier. It's a big upgrade from before. Some days are harder than others, and I sometimes feel like I'm not improving when speaking Japanese, but that's a common feeling with exchange students. Looking back on how I used to speak Japanese, I have definitely improved even if it doesn't feel like I have.

In my last Japanese class, we were reviewing some of the basics for fun. I remembered struggling with the days of the month, thinking, "I won't bother memorizing them". Now, it's second nature. I don't even think about it and often mix it up with English. I do that a lot for other words too. I'll accidentally switch between Japanese and the other languages I know, saying things like "chotto matte" (one second) and "honto?"(really), even when speaking English. It's the weirdest feeling but really proves just how much progress I've made in only a few months.

Language has also played a huge role in growing my friendships. At the beginning of my exchange, my friends and I were mainly using Google Translate to talk. Though it was pretty effective, it made it harder to actually connect. Now we only speak in Japanese. Not only have we grown closer, but it has also made others more comfortable approaching me, leading to new friends in my club and gym classes.

We've started going out a lot more, mostly to restaurants, and we're even planning on doing some local trips once the weather warms up. They like showing me Japanese trends. Even if I don't fully understand them, I still smile and laugh along. I've found that Japanese high school students also eat a lot of snacks. I'm talking about 3 bags of snacks a week.



That's been a good thing for me because my friends really like giving me new snacks to try. They'll call me over, asking me to guess the flavour or eagerly waiting to see my reaction. It turns out I'm not a fan of pickled plums but love Hi-Chew minis. Also, trying new pocky flavours has become another thing we love to do. Chocolate is still my favourite flavour with blueberries coming up close.

While I've grown closer to my classmates, my club has also given me the chance to connect with people I normally wouldn't see. In December, I officially joined Kyūdō-bu (Japanese archery club). Because of exams and winter break, I've only been practising for about two months, but I'm already seeing progress.

At first, I could only watch the other students practice, but that turned into me practising with a resistance band, and then a rubber bow. Since kyūdō is more of an art form compared to the archery we know in Canada, every movement is very precise with you needing to restart if your finger is pointed slightly lower than needed. I spent a few weeks practising with the rubber bow, focusing on my form before moving up to a real bow. Last week, I started practising with a real bow and arrow, and in just a few days, I went from barely being able to keep the arrow on the bow to shooting it fairly straight. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to practice kyūdō, and I'm especially looking forward to receiving my hakama (pleated skirt part of the uniform), which will have my name embroidered on it!



Beyond the actual archery itself, I've also met some amazing new people. Even though it hasn't been long, we're already getting along very well. Since it was just Valentine's Day, I gave them Reese's cups to try, and they all loved them. I also baked them some red velvet cookies. They kept trying to guess the cookie flavour, though unsuccessful, considering red velvet is not a common flavour in Japan. Overall, I love being able to experience Japanese culture in such a unique way.

While most of my experiences with friends have been positive, being an exchange student also comes with bittersweet moments. We've already said goodbye to a few exchange students whose programs ended earlier than mine. I'm so grateful to have met them, and we became close in a very short time. I knew goodbyes would be inevitable, but I didn't expect them to come this early. It's a small glimpse of what the end of my year will



feel like, and I don't know if I'll ever be ready for that. On a brighter note, new exchange students have arrived and will continue to arrive, so I'm excited to meet them and hopefully build new friendships.



Since I am on a Rotary Youth Exchange, Rotary is a big part of my life here. I attend weekly Rotary meetings and give a short recap of my past month once a month. My Rotary has a lot of interesting guests from every field imaginable. My favourite speakers were a guest who talked about The Beatles and an artist who draws portraits. While I didn't understand everything the Beatles speaker said, I recognized the song he was discussing since it's one of my favourites (I Want to Hold Your Hand). The artist was also very interesting since she drew a live portrait in just 15 minutes. What made it even cooler was that I was the subject and got to keep the drawing after. My Rotary members have also been incredibly kind, taking me to concerts and restaurants to get to know me better. I've really enjoyed these experiences with them, and I'm looking forward to what the next few months will bring.

Through Rotary and my time in Japan, I've had the chance to learn more about the culture and explore different parts of Japan. Starting with culture, I feel like it's important to mention a very big celebration that happened. Christmas and New Year! Christmas and New Year in Japan are celebrated quite differently from Canada. While Christmas tends to seem like the main event back home, with decorations everywhere, and music playing on the radio and in every store, that is very different than in Japan. Few decorations are put up, and most families don't decorate at all. In cities with more tourists, you'll see more decorations and hear a couple of songs playing in the store. Christmas in Japan is mainly for couples to go on a date, see illuminations in the big cities and spend time together. For those without a date, they spend time with their family eating chicken and Christmas cake.



Thanks to a successful 1970s marketing campaign, this one kind of chicken became very famous and has stuck with Japan ever since. The campaign said "Kentucky For Christmas", and if you couldn't tell by that, the chicken was KFC. It's so popular that you have to place your order weeks in advance, and they are even sold out after Christmas. I know that because I tried going to KFC the following week and they were all sold out.

While Christmas is more low-key, New Year's is the highlight of the holiday season in Japan. Unlike Christmas, which is more relaxed, New Year's is a multi-day celebration. We started 2 days before December 31st by cleaning the entire house from top to bottom. Then on December 31st, the entire family (10 people) came over to celebrate. We had soba noodles for New Year's since it symbolized good luck and cut ties from the passing year's bad luck. We then hung out as a family eating fruit and talking until the countdown happened. It wasn't as grand as in Canada with everyone counting down, but we said "Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu" which means Happy New Year then went straight to bed as we had an early start to the day on the 1st.



We woke up around 8, and by 9, we left the house to go to the main shrine in my town to pray for good fortune. Then, we went to another shrine to get blessed by a Shinto Monk. My host father and his sons went to a different shrine after to pray for their company, but I decided to head to the store with my host sister to pick up food for lunch. We spent the rest of that day sleeping and hanging out since we were all tired and the next day was another early morning. On January 2nd, we went to the big shrine in my prefecture,

then spent time with my host mom's family before heading to Yakiniku (Japanese barbecue) for dinner. It was an exhausting week, with a lot that happened but a very nice experience to say the least.

In addition to the holidays, I've also had the chance to experience another aspect of Japanese culture, the Tea Ceremony. My Japanese teacher has been very kind in letting a few exchange students and me join her tea ceremony practice. I've only started recently so I don't have much to say about it except there is a lot of detail put into it. Everything down to the placement of the cups or fold of a napkin has to be perfect. It's a lot more challenging than I expected but I hope by June, I'll be able to perform a tea ceremony as close to perfect as one can with less than 10 practices in total.





The last thing I want to mention before closing is my trip to Tokyo. I was fortunate enough to go with my host sister for three days, and it was amazing.



On day 1, we took the Shinkansen to Tokyo Station and headed straight to Shinjuku. There we spent a few hours walking around the shops until we made our way to a small concert hall for a violin concert. Though we visited a lot in Tokyo, the main reason for going was this concert. It was two famous pieces, Sibelius Symphony No. 2 and the Grieg Piano Concerto. I've been to many concerts in my life, so I had expectations going in, but it was absolutely breathtaking. Maybe it was because I was listening to them live, and in Tokyo, but this concert truly felt different from the others. It was one of my favourite parts of this trip, though there was still so much to experience.

Following the concert, we returned to Shinjuku, stopping by a Mega Don Quijote before it got dark. After, we went to Tokyo Tower to enjoy the beautiful view and then enjoyed a nice dinner before heading to the hotel.

Day 2 was packed with more adventure. We started at Meiji Shrine where I got to see sake barrel offerings from the best sake producers in Japan. Then, we headed to Shibuya for the famous Shibuya crossing. After spending more time in another Don Quijote and visiting a few pop-up shops, we went to Harajuku. We went down the famous Takeshita Street, looked through a lot of vintage stores and sat down at a cute Hawaiian cafe.



We then went to Shin-Okubo Korea Town for more shopping before heading back to Harajuku to go to an animal cafe. This was another highlight of the trip since I got to hang out with hedgehogs, chinchillas and otters. Because our slot was right before closing, it was just us in the cafe and we got to speak with some of the employees and have more time with the animals. For dinner, we ate maybe the best noodles ever, tsukemen which is like ramen, but the broth and noodles are served separately.

Day 3 was a bit more relaxed. We started the morning by going to Sensō-ji Temple and Shibuya Sky. Sensō-ji was amazing with street vendors everywhere, huge red lanterns and the smell of incense filling the air. After Sensō-ji we went to Tokyo Sky Tree in hopes of going up, but the weather was rainy, and the view wasn't the best, so we didn't go up. We instead made our way to Shibuya Sky where we were able to get a nice view. The weather was still pretty bad so we didn't get to go up the escalators, but the beautiful view of Shibuya was more than enough.



We wrapped up the trip by taking the Shinkansen back to Kanazawa and spent the night getting a much-needed rest.

As I reflect on these past months, it's hard to believe how much has happened. Every day brings something new, whether it be a new memory, friendship or challenge, and I'll cherish every second of it. I'm so incredibly grateful for all the opportunities given to me and I can't wait to see what the second half of my year has in store. Time is flying by a lot faster than I hoped, but I'll make every moment count.

As for now, I will see you all at my next BeaverTale.

See you next time

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Ella Mironescu

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For anyone preparing for exchange, considering it, or just curious, feel free to reach out to me on Instagram (@ella.mironescu) and I'd be happy to answer any questions! I also share lots of pictures from my experiences here, so feel free to take a look.