



# Ella

from Kitchener

to

Japan

## “Home Away From Home”

Home away from home. An overused and cheesy phrase, but in this case, the only phrase that fits. I knew that, going on an exchange, I'd make new memories, meet new people, and create a new community, but what I never expected was to create a new life. A life where every day seems normal, a life where I fit in, a life where I truly feel at home. This year has been all that and more, and I can't believe there's only a little over 50 days left until it ends.

For a while now, I've been wondering what it'll be like to go home, but now that question has changed to what it'll be like leaving home.

These past few months have been incredibly busy with trips, events, and celebrations. At the end of February, I had an amazing opportunity to learn about katanas and even try one out! My second host dad's friend comes from an old line of samurai, so he has inherited many traditional swords. He shared stories about his family's history, showed us some delicate blades and their various parts, and even taught us how to properly handle one. Though I'm definitely not the best, learning how to draw and sheathe a katana was incredible.

Soon after, I went on a trip to Mie and Aichi prefectures, where I rode the world's longest roller coaster, walked through beautiful gardens, and saw a stunning illumination of Mt. Fuji. I also visited Studio Ghibli Park, where life-sized statues of some of my favourite Ghibli characters made it feel like I had stepped right into their world.





At  
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March, my school held its final sports day of the year with basketball and table tennis as the main events. I was immediately dragged onto my class's basketball team mostly because of my height. Since I'm taller than most of my classmates, they assumed I'd be great at the game, which, to say the least, wasn't quite true. We lost every match, but none of us really minded. We had so much fun just playing, cheering for each other, and laughing throughout the day that we barely noticed how badly we lost until it was all over.



year,



Also in March, I visited Nagano and Fukui prefectures. I explored two beautiful Buddhist temples, one featured an underground, pitch-black tunnel that you had to navigate using only your hands, and the other offered a chance to watch ceremonies where monks prayed and gave blessings.

I also visited the Dinosaur Museum in Fukui, which happened to be hosting a special Pokémon fossil exhibition.

Another highlight was the snow monkey onsen in Nagano. It was definitely my favourite part. There were so many monkeys, and I got to see them up close in the hot spring, as well as running around and playing with each other.

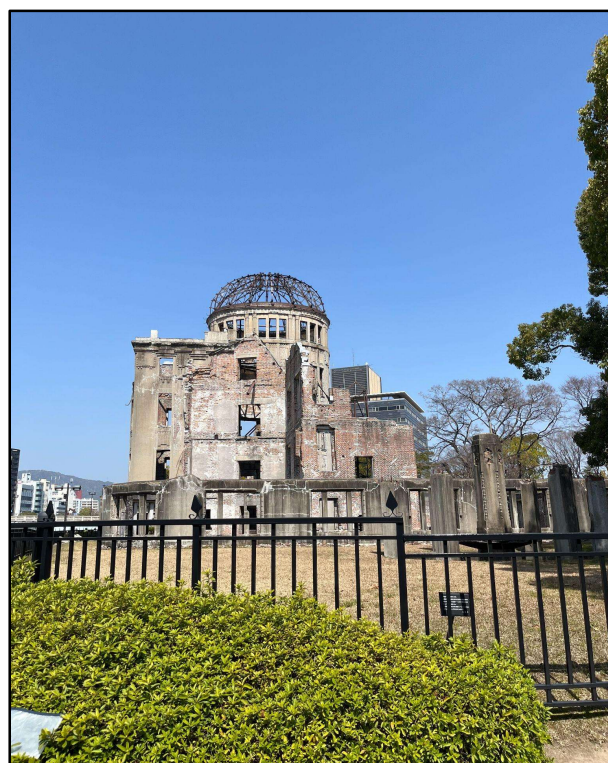




To end the month of March, I went on my 4-day Rotary Japan trip to Miyajima Island, Hiroshima, USJ, and Osaka. On the first day, we visited Miyajima to see the famous torii gate standing in the water. After a long winter in Ishikawa, the warm weather and beautiful scenery were definitely what we needed.

The next day, we went to Hiroshima and visited the Peace Memorial Museum. It was an emotionally heavy experience, but one I'd truly recommend. It gave us a deeper understanding of what really happened, the long-lasting impacts, and what we can do today to help promote peace.

Day three took us to USJ. While there wasn't any travel that day, it was still long and packed with fun. All of the exchange students agreed it was one of our favourite days, full of exciting rides, character sightings, and shared memories. One of our highlights was meeting Cookie Monster at the entrance, and all buying matching plush toys to remember that moment.



On our final day, we explored Osaka. We visited Osaka Castle, then wandered through Amerikamura. By this point, we were all exhausted, so we took our time exploring the shops and just enjoying the atmosphere. Even though it was a more relaxed day, it still held so many wonderful memories.

At the start of April, I visited Kamakura, Ueno, and the Harry Potter Studio Tour. In Kamakura, I went to the famous Tsurugaoka Hachimangū Shrine, where I was lucky enough to witness a traditional Shinto wedding ceremony.



I also visited the Great Buddha, an 11.4-meter-tall statue, the second largest in Japan. It was my first time seeing cherry blossoms in full bloom, and also the first time visiting a beach in Japan, which made the day even more memorable.

The next day, we went to Ueno Zoo, where I saw pandas for the first time! They're so popular that we had to wait in line for 30 minutes just to see them for one minute, but it was totally worth it. After the zoo, we headed to the Harry Potter Studio Tour. I didn't

know exactly what to expect, but stepping into the real sets and seeing actual costumes from the films was surreal. Learning about the entire production journey, from the first book to the final movie, was absolutely fascinating and made me appreciate the films even more.

Soon after our Kamakura trip, the exchange students I practised tea ceremony with, and I had the chance to wear kimonos together! I wanted to wear a kimono for a long time, and I'm so grateful I got to do it with friends. We were also incredibly lucky. The weather forecast had predicted rain all day, but it paused for just an hour, right when we went to take pictures. That's why they call me a “晴れ女” (hare onna), or “sunny weather girl.”



This month, I also moved in with my final host family. I had already gotten close to them since we had travelled together the most, so the move didn't feel like starting something new, it felt like coming home. They've shown a real interest in my life back in Canada, and since it was Easter, we decided to celebrate it together. We went to a bunny farm, and I cooked them some traditional Romanian food that I usually eat during Easter. Although it was different from the Easters I'm used to, I was incredibly grateful to celebrate, and the food truly made it feel like home.



This month was also a really good one for me in my archery club. I had been practising with the same targets as everyone else, and even though I wasn't doing very well at first, I improved a lot, enough to hit the bullseye for the first time! After that, I was given a heavier bow to start practising with, which made me feel really proud of how far I've come. I'm also looking forward to a competition I'll be participating in this June!

To end the month of April, my school went on an excursion. Each grade went to a different location, and my grade walked two hours from our school to the beach. There, we spent the day cleaning up and having fun, not only with our own classmates, but also with a grade from another school. It was a tiring but really fun day, and surprisingly, the route we took to the beach was the same one I used to walk to and from school when I lived with my first host family.

Though there have only been a few days of May so far, it's already been incredibly busy. The month began with Golden Week in Japan. Before coming here, I was told we'd have the whole week off, but it turned out to only be four days, not that I'm complaining, since any day off is a good one! Since we didn't have school, some of my school friends and I went out to Kanazawa to hang out. We had planned to visit what's apparently the second-best melon bread shop in Japan, but unfortunately, it was closed. Instead, we found a cute cafe and had lunch there.



It had been a while since I last went out with them because they've been so busy, but it was really nice to spend time together again.

This hangout especially made me realise how much my Japanese has improved. I didn't struggle to understand them at all, unlike the first time we went out together. One of their grandmothers even gave us friendship omamori (charms from a shrine), which made me appreciate just how close we've become in such a short time.

This month, I also celebrated my 18th birthday! Since I didn't have school that week, my host mom and I made a 7-hour trip down to Shimane and Tottori prefectures. In Shimane, we visited Japan's number one-ranked garden, another beautiful flower garden, and a bridge famous for how steep it is. That night, we stayed in a hotel in a town called "Hawaii." The hotel also had an onsen I had really been looking forward to. It was a lovely onsen, but since the water came directly from its natural source, it was so hot I could only stay in for five minutes!



The next day, we went to Tottori to visit the Tottori Sand Dunes. It was truly an amazing experience. I never imagined I'd see sand dunes, let alone in Japan. The scenery was stunning, and what made it even more memorable was getting to take a photo while riding a camel. On the way back to Ishikawa, we stopped in Kyoto to visit Amanohashidate, one of Japan's top three scenic views. That means I've now seen two out of Japan's three most famous viewpoints. Amanohashidate and Miyajima's Torii Gate. We also made one more stop at another onsen.

This one was perfect, the water was just the right temperature, and I stayed in for 45 minutes just relaxing. Overall, this was the best birthday I've had in a long time, and I don't know what could have made it better.

To end this report, and the month of May, I participated in a Rotary Japanese speech contest. I had been practising for this contest for a month, even though I changed my speech just 10 days before. Despite the last-minute change, I saw how far my Japanese has come since the beginning of my exchange. In the end, I placed first in the competition!



I'm now preparing for the next contest, which will be held between nine Rotary districts. If I place in the top two, I'll get the chance to participate in a national competition with students from all over Japan in Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost prefecture just below Hokkaido.

Overall, these past few months have been incredible. It's crazy to see how far I've come, not only in my Japanese but in how much I've grown as a person. I've made so many memories and gotten so close to the people around me that when I leave Japan, I won't just be leaving Japan, I'll be leaving my family.

I'm so grateful for everyone in District 7080 and District 2610. This year wouldn't have been so amazing without all their support, and I'll definitely cherish these memories for the rest of my life. To anyone thinking about going on exchange, or preparing to leave soon, my advice is: make the most of your year. Put yourself out there, and don't be afraid to stand out. If you can embrace that, this year will be ten times better.

Thank you all so much for this past year.

皆さん、この1年間本当にありがとうございました。

Ella Mironescu

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