



Emily

from

Mississauga

to

Poland

“The Bitter Sweetness of the End”

It's hard to believe that the end is almost here. It still feels like just yesterday I arrived. And now, it will soon be time to pack up again, and say goodbye to my family and friends, to go back to my family and friends on another continent. However, the whirlwind that the last few months of your exchange usually are have been wonderful.

In March came the trip that all of the exchange students in Poland look forward to: Euro Tour. As most European countries in Rotary Youth Exchange do, Rotary Poland offers to all of its Inbounds the opportunity to go on a trip through various countries in Europe. This year we went to six countries—France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Monaco and Vatican City—over a span of 22 days, making it one of the longest Euro Tours in Europe. Most rebounds you talk to, from Poland as well as from elsewhere, will tell you that Euro Tour is one of the highlights of your exchange. And that it was. As well as getting to see some of the greatest European cities—Paris, Barcelona, Lisbon, Rome, and Venice, just to name a few—it was a great bonding experience for the 50 of us who went. Although 22 days is a long time to spend day in and day out with anyone, especially on the days where we would be driving for 14 hours in a bus, but we became closer for it. Through extraordinary experiences, such as the fact that it *snowed in Madrid* (we were all wearing shorts and skirts. We were beyond freezing), or waiting two hours to get in to the Vatican, we relied on each other.

On the whole, we visited Paris, Madrid, Toledo, Lisbon, Sintra, Seville, Granada, Cordoba, Barcelona, Avignon, Cannes, Nice, Monaco, Florence, Vatican City, Rome, Verona and Venice. One of the things that I really enjoyed about the cities we went to is that they weren't all very well-known. I had never heard of Toledo, or Sintra, or Granada before we had gone to them. Going to the less “touristy” cities—though they were still packed with tourists—meant that we got to have a more well-rounded experience of the countries we visited. This also applied to the countries we visited; I knew very little about Spain and Portugal before I went. It was very different to France and Italy, where a lot of the country is famous for certain things, that there is almost a checklist of things to do while in the country, as well as the stereotypes associated with them. For example, in Paris you visit the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, l'Arc de Triomphe, and eat escargot, French cheese, etc. For Spain and Portugal, there wasn't that need to fill my expectations of the country, because I didn't have any. This made me

a lot more free to just see the cities as they are, instead of what I want them to be. This was particularly great for Lisbon, which ended up becoming one of my favourite cities in Europe.

As soon as I got back to Gdańsk, I had another travel opportunity: my 3-day class trip to Warsaw. I had already been, but was excited to be able to see more of the city. Although the itinerary was primarily places I'd already been, it was interesting to see them again, knowing more about Polish history as I do now. It was a great way to bond with my classmates as well.

Coming back to reality after a month off travelling was difficult. But I realised then how much the Trójmiasto felt like home. Coming back was slipping back on a glove that fit perfectly. Strangely enough, my Polish was also better, despite having not studied it for a while. I suppose that my confidence grew over time, which made it easier to put myself out there even more in Polish. I missed my Polish friends, and it was great to be able to see them again.

Goodbyes are never easy. No matter the context, or which side of the Atlantic they happen on, parting is always both bitter and sweet; not always in the same measure, but always a mixture. My first time, saying goodbye to my family, my friends, and all I'd ever known, was not easy. But excitement and promise of a whole other life on a whole different continent, and the assurance of seeing my loved ones again, made the decision to leave a lot easier.

In just 6 weeks, I will have to say goodbye once again. But this time, the bitter will be in much greater measure than the sweet. Unlike my departure for exchange, my return home is not filled with only excitement and anticipation, but uncertainty; uncertainty over when I will see these people, who over this year have become such a big part of my life, again. Uncertainty over the reaction of those I left behind to the person I am when I return. And above all, uncertainty over how one fits in one's life when the one you left may not fit you anymore.

The first round of goodbyes come in just a matter of days. First, to one of my closest friends on exchange, Valentina, who because of logistical reasons and problems with her ticket has to return sooner than expected to Mexico. Then, to the rest of the exchange students. Our final meeting will be in Mielno, a few hours down the Baltic coast. We all are going in to this final weekend knowing that this will most likely be the last time that all 60 of us will be in the place again. It's saying goodbye to people who have become another family.

I'm not completely ready for my exchange to end. But part of me knows that you are never fully ready to close the book on a chapter of my life like the one that I have just had, to say goodbye to the person you are on exchange. The beauty is in the ending of an era, though. The value is in the fact that it doesn't last forever, and learning to be okay with that. It's applying what you've learned here to your old life, and using the knowledge and maturity you've gained in new ways.

To conclude my third and final BeaverTale, I would like to thank Rotary, on the international, district, and club levels, for your support of youth exchange and of me personally. And most of all, to the people who individually made this possible: Rotarians, my host family, as well as my Canadian family. None of this would be possible without each of you.

And to the next generation of outbounds, leaving very soon to their countries: Good luck!

Thank you again,

Emilka