



Isa
from
Burlington Lakeshore
to
Japan

To begin this BeaverTale, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude firstly to Rotary for making this blessing of an experience possible for students like me, secondly to my sponsor district and sponsor club for accepting me into this program and supporting me throughout my outbound year, thirdly to my host district, host club, and host families for welcoming me with open arms into this beautiful country, and finally to my family and friends for all the support and love they've given me throughout this whole process. Without a single one of those, I wouldn't have even been able to begin considering taking this wonderful opportunity. Now, if I may, I'd like to tell you all about just how wonderful

it's been!



At Toyama Airport with my first host parents on either side of me

80 days ago, on August 27th, 2025, my 15-hour flight to Toyama Airport left Toronto Pearson Airport (thankfully with me on it). Despite all of what I had read in previous BeaverTales, heard from past exchange students, and thus expected, I left my family at the security gate with some solid goodbye hugs, parting

words and dry eyes, coming to terms, surprisingly quickly, with the fact that I would be spending the next year in a country foreign to most everything I've ever known. After a 4-hour layover in Tokyo, I landed safely in Toyama with no trouble and was warmly greeted by my first host family and a few Rotarians, being taken to my first host family's house after some introductions and photos, marking the beginning of this amazing new chapter of my life.

Before I properly dive into my BeaverTale, here's some context for my situation here in Japan: I'm living in the city of Takaoka in the Toyama prefecture of mid-western Japan, a city which has a population roughly the size of Burlington at around 170,000 people. The key difference, however, is that Takaoka is a rather rural town with very few apartment buildings and many open fields of rice paddies and crops outside of its downtown area.

The hustle and bustle, if you will, of the city is concentrated around Takaoka Station, from which my host family lives about a 10-minute drive away. As far as the environment here goes, as far as I've observed, there are trees lining every major road, as well as some utterly beautiful mountains in every direction (which have recently become even more beautiful with the first snowfall). The weather here is much warmer, with summer staying around 40 degrees and early winter currently at around 10. In addition to



The view from the south side of Takaoka Station

this, it's also far more rainy—so much so that you'd probably be better to forget your phone, wallet and keys than your umbrella when going out.

Host Family

At this point in my exchange, I've stayed with my second host family, the Karasawas, about as long as I did with my first, the Shimas, spending around a month with each. And, I can confidently say that I love them both and am so grateful for the connections I've built with them.



Me carrying Toki-chan (left) and Sou-chan (right) (they got tired)

With the Shima family, I stayed with my host parents, Yukimi (host mom) and Kazuki (host dad), and their adorable cat, Osamu. Throughout my one-month stay with them, their son's ex-wife, Yuu, and her two little boys, Tokinari and Sousei (but I know them as Toki-chan and Sou-chan respectively), would also come by the house or along with me and my host parents on trips, so the family felt much bigger than just me and my host parents. Having Toki-chan and Sou-chan around also really helped me to bond with my host family more, as, with the kids, I could just play and goof around without needing any language skills at all. Now with my second host family, the

Karasawas, I'm staying with my host parents, Kaori (host mom) and Takahiro (host dad), as well as my host grandparents, Hideo (host grandfather) and Akiko (host grandmother). With my second host family, in place of crazy kids, I have improved language skills to help me with building that connection. In fact, I've found I've actually been doing a fair bit of bonding with my host parents through language, whether it be Japanese or English. From my first day with them, both my host parents have expressed an interest in the English language, and at various times throughout my stay with them, I've been challenged to try and explain things that come so naturally to me in a language that does not—which, I must admit, has actually been rather fun.



Playing Cribbage with my second host parents

So far, my main bonding moments with my second host family have been in the simple, everyday conversations or errands, which has made me confident that this will be a relationship that will not shortly die.

Language

Since arriving in Japan, my Japanese has improved heaps. Despite my best efforts to study the language before I arrived, when I finally came to Japan, I found I knew a lot less Japanese than I thought I did. However, as I practiced speaking and listening to the language day after day, it started to come much more naturally. On top of this, as time went on, my brain began to absorb some of the Japanese around me little by little on its own and I began picking up several helpful words, phrases, and grammar constructs for everyday life—which, when I realized that was happening, I was rather taken aback. Pretty cool how our brains just do that, don't you think? Of course, I did this all in tandem with regularly studying Japanese but compared to how much I was learning from my studies back in Canada, I've been improving way faster.



The view out the music room window, with my friend, Terai, enjoying it too

In fact, due to this improvement in my understanding of Japanese, I was able to, with help of my host family and friends, find kanji for my name! For those reading who don't know (which I'm sure, given that I'm writing this in English, is the majority of you), 漢字/kanji (literally translating to "Chinese letters") are characters used very often in the Japanese language that came to Japan from China in the 4th century and served as the

language's first writing system. Just like in Chinese, each character has its own meaning and pronunciation(s) and Japanese names are often written in kanji, with very few exceptions. Thus, like many exchange students who come to Japan, I wanted to make for myself a name in kanji that matched the pronunciation of my name as best I could. Early on in my exchange, my first host family found kanji for the first name most people know me by, Isa, with them deciding on 愛咲/Ai-za, roughly meaning "love blooming."

My last name, Reynolds, presented a much bigger challenge with how long it is, as Japanese names typically consist of only 1-3 kanji, but this time I had some of my own ideas on what kanji might work for it. After a lot of consideration and consultation with my second host family, we decided on the 4-kanji name of 礼乃柳澄/Rei-no-ryuu-su, which

means something along the lines of “pure willow tree of courtesy” or “courtesy’s elegant purity.”

In contrast with the worries around living life in a different language that I had before I came, I’ve found the Japanese language to be one of the parts of my exchange that I’ve enjoyed most. Since I began my studies, I’ve been so fascinated, not only by how the language works, but also by how it reflects Japanese culture. Here’s an example to illustrate what I mean: in Japanese, the way you conjugate a verb (ex. the difference between “do”, “does”, “is doing”, “will do”, “won’t do” etc.) can not only change its tense and whether or not it’s positive or negative, but also changes its formality, reflecting the value placed on politeness and respect within Japanese culture. For example, the difference between 食べる/taberu (to eat) and 食べました/tabemashita (did eat) isn’t only the tense of the verb, but also how polite it is, with the latter being more informal (used with friends and family) than the former (being used teachers, strangers, elders, etc.). On top of this, there are even more formal conjugations which can either exalt the person being talked to or about, or humble yourself—but I won’t get into those, as I’m sure you can already see the culture difference in my first example.

School



Me with my homeroom teacher, Yoshimizu-sensei, on my first day seeing the school

When I first started school here in Takaoka on the 1st of September, I was seriously shocked at how different it was from Ontarian high school. For starters, rather than changing classrooms and classmates every period, students here will stay with the same classmates in the same classroom all day (with exceptions for classes like gym and the arts). Additionally, our class schedule isn’t repeated daily like it is in Ontario.

Instead, our classes change based on the day of the week, with us having 6 or 7 shorter classes a day, as opposed to 4 longer ones.

It's also very typical for students all across Japan to wear a school uniform at both public and private schools. Now, all that's well and good and to be expected for school in a different country—but here's what really threw me for a loop: all the students clean their classrooms and the halls everyday, even going as far as emptying the trash cans! If you asked most any high school student in Ontario to do that, a riot may very well start and, by the end of it, you'd probably just end up making the school messier. I'm being hyperbolic, of course, but hyperboles aside, you can definitely see the difference in the cultures there. Despite the countless differences, though, whether it's school schedules, transportation to and from school, or even starting every class with standing and bowing, I've found I've grown accustomed to school life here and it's all just become rather normal now.

As for extracurriculars at school, I've been a part of my school's "Light Music Club" (AKA Band Club) since day one of my schooling here. What's more, not only did I get invited to join the Band Club on day one, but I was also asked to play drums for their next performance at my school's festival that was coming up in mid-October on the same day. Naturally, I said yes and spent the next month and a half practicing the two songs I was asked to play everyday. Now that that performance is done, though, we're preparing for our next performance coming up in February, for which I'm playing drums for four songs.



Prepping for the school festival...

Friends



A handful of the Band Club members and friends

Keeping in the vein of Band Club but moving over to the topic of the friends I've made here, I've found a nice little group of friends with some of the other first year students in Band Club. On the first day I showed up to a club meeting, I was swarmed by a group of club members as they asked me a plethora of questions with the

help of their broken English, my broken Japanese and a lot of Google Translate, which, I

must say, was a pretty great way to break the ice. Since then, I've had plenty of bonding experiences with them, making memories that I'll be sure to not soon forget. In addition to that group, I've also grown close with a group of boys in my class, spending most of my lunch breaks in the cafeteria with them since my first day. All in all, everyone at school, students and teachers alike, have been so welcoming, patient, helpful, and supportive and I'm beyond grateful for their kindness.

Of course, though, as is the case for most exchange students, I have also had the opportunity to connect with the other Inbound exchange students here in District 2610. Due to the fact that we're all from either Canada, the US, or Australia, the shared language and similar culture help us all to connect in no time. Since the first time I met them all, we've gotten plenty of opportunities to see each other, both at and outside of Rotary events, and with always being a great time.

Food

Switching gears to the subject of food, a staple of any country and beautiful representation of its culture, I must say I've been loving Japanese food. Although I wasn't big on East-Asian cuisine before I arrived, I decided to come to Japan with the goal of eating 100 different Japanese dishes before I returned home to Canada, as I knew that would be a great and simple way to both push me out of my comfort zone and indulge more in Japanese culture. So far, thanks to both of my amazing host moms, I've eaten around 80 different dishes that I've considered to be unique to Japan. Due to how close I already am to reaching that goal, I'll probably end up raising it, but we'll see about how much, given that the number of new dishes I'm coming across every month is declining. Up to date, out of those 80-some odd dishes, some of my favourites have been yakisoba, unagi (eel), sukiyaki, tempura, and melon-pan.



Me enjoying a very delicious dessert at a conveyor belt sushi place

Highlights



My class' pro-wrestling match (I'm in the bottom right corner, left person)

One of the biggest highlights of my exchange so far has been my school's previously mentioned 文化祭/Bunkasai, literally translated as a "culture festival," but more so just a school festival. Over the course of this two-day festival, many-a-thing took place, but I'll just hit on the highlights. In preparation for Bunkasai, some classes put together performances for the first day of it, most of which were dances to popular Japanese songs. However, my class, for whatever reason, decided on doing pro-wrestling (i.e. a WWE-type wrestling match). For this pro-wrestling match, I was asked to announce in English while the fight was happening to fill in the gaps while my classmate, who was the actual announcer for all the Japanese people in the room, thought of what to say. It was really rather hilarious just getting to say whatever I wanted into the microphone and having everyone compliment me for how "cool" my English was afterwards.

On the second day was the Band Club's performance and it was so much fun. I'll never forget when I walked out from backstage to hop on the drum kit and some students screamed "Isaaa!" and everyone cheered for me. All in all, Bunkasai was an absolute blast and a very unique experience that I am so very grateful to have had.

Another big highlight was a trip to Kurobe Dam I went on with my first host family during my last weekend with them. And, let me tell you, this trip was the shabang, with us taking a cable car, bus, and gondola ride up and through the beautiful mountains I'd been admiring from afar ever since I arrived in Takaoka, all with the purpose of seeing, not just your ordinary dam, but the tallest dam in all of Japan at 186m tall. That was definitely a peak (pun intended) experience of my exchange, but



A selfie with my first host parents in front of Kurobe Dam

some other highlights include visiting the Great Buddha Statue and Zuiryuuji Temple in Takaoka on my first day here, getting to see and join the procession of a local lion dance festival happening in the neighbourhood of my first host family's house, and getting to participate in a local omikoshi (portable shrine) festival with my second host family, where I actually got to carry the shrine and perform the ritual with the other people in the procession. After all of these amazing experiences and more, I can't wait for what's in store for me on this exchange journey, being sure to receive every opportunity with curiosity, wonder and gratitude.

Even after only 2.5 months here in Japan, I can say with certainty that applying for this exchange program was a decision I will never regret, and one that I am beyond grateful that I was able to make. Japan has taught me so many valuable lessons and changed me in so many ways that I know will serve me well throughout my life. Thank you to all the people who have made it possible for me to experience a totally different culture and way of life so that my perspective of this pale blue dot might be so greatly expanded.

本当にありがとうございます/hontouni-arigatougozaimasu (Thank you so so much)

またね〜！/matane (See you later!)

礼乃柳澄 愛咲

アイザ・レイノルズ

Isa Reynolds

P.S. If you're interested in following along with my exchange in real time, please feel free to follow my exchange Instagram account at @isas_rye_adventures!