



Kailin

from

Guelph Trillium

to

France

“Bonjour”

A while ago, I found myself in a French city with art deco buildings and roofs of black slate and orange clay, all very typical for the North of France, where I’ve spent this past year. I was in the city for day long field trip with my theatre class at the local theatre. In the evening, we had two hours of free time for dinner, so I went for a walk in search of something to eat. The sidewalk seemed long and winding, and I hadn’t a clue where it would lead. It was an adventure.

My first stop was at a travel agency I’d spotted by chance; I figured it would be useful to have an idea of where to go. I asked for directions to the nearest Carrefour, the quintessential French supermarket. The travel agent started responding in English, but I told her I understood French, and from then on we conversed in French. It felt normal; the verb conjugations and nouns flowed naturally into sentences.

I was following the travel agent’s instructions to Carrefour when on my way I stumbled across the Furet du Nord, a chain of bookstores which are a staple in the North of France. I strolled into the bookstore and looked around. A sense of familiarity struck me as I realized I’d been here before, earlier in the year during an afternoon outing with some friends; and then I remembered how to find my way downtown from the bookstore.

Upon arriving downtown, the feeling of familiarity persisted, even though it had been months since I’d last been here. Memories of the overcast winter afternoon when I first arrived at this spot flashed back to me. I remember how impressed I was by the “beffroi” - that’s belfry in English; now beffrois have become a familiar sight to me as they are found everywhere in the North of France. These ancient towers are a reminder of how long people have been wandering these streets for, how I have joined my footsteps with theirs, how in the future, countless others will walk the same path.

That experience in rediscovering a French city rather sums up what exchange is like. The name of the city is not important because exchange is not so much about where you go as it is about what you make of the experience. When you first arrive, everything feels new and unfamiliar; the days seem to stretch on forever because everything is a grand adventure. Gradually you start to become familiar with your surroundings, you start to recognize patterns, you become comfortable. You develop the ability to communicate what you want to express, and with that ability to communicate, you become independent, capable of finding your own way around. One day, you look around and realize that you have a life here. You have a routine; you know this is place, just as it has gotten to know you. You are home.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has supported me and made this remarkable journey of a lifetime possible - to Rotary, my host families, my family and my friends. From the bottom of my heart, thank you! Merci!

It's hard to believe it's already May and summer is fast approaching. Birds are chirping songs of spring and the days have lengthened after a mild winter. In wintertime, it would be dark when I left for school and dark when I returned home. Now it's light when I leave in the mornings; the sun shines on the walk home and well into the evening.

One upside to winters in France is that they're milder than in Canada; average temperatures this winter hovered between zero to ten degrees Celsius. I can count on one hand the number of times it's snowed in Northern France this year! It's rained a great deal more than it's snowed; Northern France is well known for its rainy climate.

The first snow of the winter took place at night; it was dark and consequently I missed the chance to see it. It would be months after the first snow until white flakes would grace the fields of Northern France again. One morning at school, in the middle of first period French class, the second snow of the season struck - big, fluffy snowflakes literally started pouring from the sky. Everyone was momentarily distracted from our French lesson as we stared at the sudden blizzard which had materialized outside.

All the snow, however, melted by lunchtime, and when I walked home from school in the afternoon it was sunny again.

I've changed host families again and I am now with my third host family. They live downtown in a house dating from the eighteenth century. Their house is located about two minutes from the city's train station and about a twenty minute walk from my high school. It's convenient being within walking distance of everything!

My host family also has a second residence in the countryside; it was built in the seventeenth century and they're working on restoring it. My host father prefers doing the restoration work himself as a personal project of sorts. He's been working on it for over ten years and has yet to finish! He often visits the countryside during weekends to work on the house, and I enjoy going with him because it's tranquil out there, surrounded by nature. Furthermore, my host father keeps a wide assortment of animals at the country house - chickens, ducks, geese, sheep, and even a donkey!

In these last few months of my exchange, I've been trying to see as much as I can before this year draws to a close. My host Rotary club, the Rotary Club of Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, has been great about including us exchange students at club outings and helping us discover the region. With Rotary, I visited the Villa Cavrois, a modernist mansion built in 1932. There was an artistic elegance to the simplicity of the building; every element of the building served a purpose. Take, for example, the children's playroom, which consisted of an oak floor mosaic and a deliberate arrangement of silver nails against silver panelling. There was nothing flashy about the room, on the contrary, every item it contained was functional. Despite that, there was something impressively striking about the deliberate simplicity, the careful thought and design hidden behind what seemed to be nonchalant clean lines and empty space.

My host Rotary club also took us to visit the Château d'Hardelot, a French castle built in the Tudor Revival style. The castle houses the Cultural Center of the Entente Cordiale and explained key events in the long history of Anglo-French relations. The amity and complex history between the two nations was symbolized by a flag flying at the top of the castle, which combined the French tricolours and the Union Jack. I adore castles and am fortunate to have had the chance to visit many during my time in France! Another castle that stands out in my memory is the Château de Cercamp, a local castle which used to be an ancient monastery. A Rotarian, knowing my fondness for castles, kindly took me there! When we visited, Cercamp was in the process of being restored. The tour guide was also the owner of Cercamp and he was personally involved in the restoration process! It was inspiring to meet someone so passionate about the castle's history and preserving its heritage for generations to come.

I travelled around Europe with three different Rotary bus trips, a 1 of which were incredible! The first trip took me from Paris and Barcelona, with stops in various French cities along the way. Key attractions included two French castles, the Château de Chambord and the Château de Chenonceau, as well as the Sagrada Família in Barcelona. During our visit to Chambord, it snowed! For many exchange students, this was their first time seeing snow, so naturally snowball fights ensued; and afterwards, hot chocolate at a café.

The second trip was a tour of Europe encompassing five countries; Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. One of the highlights of the trip was the time we spent in Italy, where we stayed in a hotel by the Mediterranean Sea. On the day we visited Milan, it was deliciously warm and sunny. To top it off, there was a store by the Milan Cathedral which sold rose shaped gelato! You could pick multiple gelato flavours and the employees would put petal shaped scoops of gelato in a waffle cone to form a rose. There is nothing sweeter than gelato rose petals on a sunny day!

The third trip involved a ferry from Calais to England, and visits to London and Canterbury. We had the chance to visit the Canterbury Cathedral, watch The Lion King musical, see the Big Ben, cruise along the River Thames, ride the London Eye, and much more! During my visit to the Victoria and Albert museum, I had cream tea at the V&A Café, the world's oldest museum restaurant! The restaurant consisted of three rooms; the largest included chandeliers, high arched ceilings, and stained class windows; to sum it up, the perfect setting to relax while sipping tea!

In addition to travelling with Rotary, I've also travelled independently. During the April holidays, I visited a friend living in the Auvergne region, which is located in the centre of France. To get there, I took a train by myself; the journey included two hour layover in Paris to change train stations, and thanks to the help of many kind strangers, I was able to navigate my way around the Paris metro system, despite it being my first time taking the metro in Paris!

In Auvergne, my friend's host family took us to visit the Puy de Dôme, a dormant volcano. We took a train to the top of the volcano, where we were greeted with breathtaking views of the surrounding area. We were fortunate that it was a clear day because it meant we had unobstructed views of the Chaîne des Puys, a chain of cinder cones, lava domes, and maars. Aside from sightseeing, you could also paraglide off the Puy de Dôme. Numerous paragliders dotted the blue skies, like colourful dandelion seeds drifting in the wind.

Auvergne presented an entirely different landscape from the North of France, where I've been living. Mountains were everywhere in Auvergne; in comparison, the North of France is extremely flat. There's a joke in the North that the only mountains we have in the region are the "terrils", which are mountains made of leftover waste rock from the coal mining process. Northern France was once played an important role in the coal industry, but that industry has slowly died out - now all that remains are reminders of what used to be.

Just like how once this year draws to a close, all that will be left of my exchange are reminders of what happened during this marvellous dream of a year in France. There will be physical souvenirs, like the Eiffel Tower key chains I bought in front of the Eiffel Tower one sunny Paris afternoon, and there will be intangible souvenirs, like the memories of laughter while exploring the streets of an unknown city with new friends who were strangers just hours ago.

Exchange is memories of joy that will last a lifetime, and memories of challenges that made you stronger because you pushed through all the tears and frustration, learning about yourself and the world around you, so you could transform into someone new, someone confident and independent. Exchange is changing from whom you were when you first stepped off the plane and onto the soil of a country that would become your new home; exchange is stepping off another plane, returning from one home for another, and being proud of whom you have become.

Amitiés,

Kailin