



Kate

from Burlington Central
to
France

“How Unbelievable My Life Has Become”.

I still haven't fully processed I'm on an exchange. Time has passed quickly. The best word to describe everything would be surreal. Just a year ago everything was so different; so normal. But now, after just 2 months, everything has changed. So, here's my journey so far.

It started on August 28th, when I said goodbye to my friends and family at the airport. I spent most of that day in denial, only letting everything sink in after I turned the corner. Thankfully I wasn't alone on the flight and getting through the airport, as one of the other outbounds in D7080 was also going to France. We spent the 8-hour flight excitedly talking about the incredible memories ahead of us.



Thankfully the flight, airport, and baggage had no issues, so I swiftly made it through that in only an hour. Before I knew it, I was meeting my host dad and brother for the first time, accompanied by a sign welcoming me to France. The rest of the day, I won't lie, was difficult. I was extremely jetlagged and very homesick. Unfortunately, my host family all had to work, so once we got home, they all left, and I was home alone. It was like that for most of the week, but thankfully once the

weekend came along, things started to pick up and I began feeling better.

On Friday, I left for Merlimont with all of the other exchange students in my district. Merlimont is a city on a beach, about an hour from my home in Bethune. It was an amazing experience, and very eye-opening, due to the number of different cultures and languages. I met and talked to so many new people, for the first time in a long time. Cait and I, the other Canadian from D7080, quickly befriended two Americans from California and South Carolina. We spent the weekend getting to know each other, playing fun games, and enjoying the beautiful beach in the sun. We even had an opportunity to rent out Tandem Bikes and ride them through the streets.



Unfortunately, I acquired COVID during the trip to Merlimont and was unable to start school the following Monday as planned. I didn't end up starting school until the middle of the next week, where I met many kind people, and got to begin one of the best parts of the exchange.

About a week later my Host Family took me to a nearby city named Lille, where we walked through town and saw some breathtaking sights including a large chapel, a massive outlet mall, and the largest bookstore in all of France (or so I was told). It was an unforgettable day, and very eye-opening to just how different France was from home.



I'll never forget the beauty of the cobblestone streets, or stained-glass windows that decorated the beautiful chapel. France is truly gorgeous.

Rotary here has been amazing as well; I've been welcomed by a different club nearby as well, and go to almost all of their meetings. I've had many exciting experiences through Rotary with the other exchange students in my area, including movies, cafes, a trip to Paris, and even participating in a memorial for Indian Soldiers. I'm forever grateful for these unique experiences; as I said earlier, just a year ago, I never would have expected this to be where my life would be today.

On October 1st, my Host Family took me to Parc Asterix; an amusement park located on the outskirts of Paris. There we went on a variety of rides, with my 7-year-old host brother and his best friend Nina. We bought some fast passes, brought a picnic, and had such a fun time! I also got to see a spectacular show involving sea zombies and dancing with water. It was truly magical.



About a week later, I went with my class to Chateau Hardelot, which is a castle in Hardelot that has been turned into a museum for tourists. We went and learned about the previous owner, as well as saw the Alice in Wonderland exhibition, which is what we had been learning about in class. Afterward, we went down to the beach and walked for a while, which was a great opportunity for me to make new friends in my class. Everyone has been so nice to me and are always eager to talk. There can be a lot of drama amongst themselves sometimes, but so far nobody has been anything but kind to me, and extremely welcoming.

A few days later, I left at 5:30 a.m. for my trip to Mont St. Michel (a beautiful castle/mini city on an island) with all of my Rotary district. We got on the bus at 6 a.m., and drove for 8 hours, with stops for food. The trip was 3 days; on the first day, we visited an American memorial, ate dinner in a restaurant, and sang songs on our way back to the hotel in Normandy. The city was beautiful, and the experience was honestly surreal. There were times it felt like I was in a movie. The hotel rooms were chosen for us, so I got to meet some new people and we quickly became friends. I love knowing so many people from around the world; not many people can say they have a friend from every continent. The following day we got back on the bus, and drove for an hour to our Hotel, about 10 minutes from Mont St. Michel. We immediately walked over to the castle and got a guided tour through the mud surrounding the outsides.



Everyone wore shorts without shoes, and we even had the opportunity to see (and get stuck in!) quicksand. t's not as scary as it sounds and was so much fun.

By this time there were 2 other Rotary districts with us, so I got to meet more incredible people.

After the mud walk, we all showered and then got ready for dinner. At dinner, there was a big party with hired dancers, and they taught all of us how to do some traditional dances. Most of it was joining hands and moving in a circle, which we still ended up struggling with. But given that there were 90 of us, it was kind of expected. After, we ate and then partied the whole night. Sometimes the Rotarians even joined in! It was so much fun, I loved every minute of it.

The next day was mostly spent driving back home, but we did briefly stop at Mont St. Michel so we could go in. The bus ride home was pretty much the same as the way there, but everyone was very tired from the long weekend, so there was a lot of sleeping too. Overall, my trip to Mont St. Michel was probably one of my favourite moments in my entire life, and I loved every second of it.



A few weeks after Mont St. Michel, my Host Family took me to Paris for the weekend. We left on Saturday and toured the Arc de Triomphe and The Louvre, seeing much more on the way. We stopped at delicious restaurants with my host brother who lives in Paris, and at night visited a spot near the Eiffel Tower so I could see it in full. Saying it was beautiful would be a massive understatement. The amount of excitement I felt seeing it for the first time was unmeasurable; I had always seen it in books, TV shows, movies, or on YouTube, but it didn't compare to real life. It was surreal seeing the thing I had always seen through a screen right in front of me, and that experience was especially enhanced by the beauty of the night and the drizzle from the sky. The experience was similar for the Mona Lisa, which was also strange to see in real life, rather than through a screen.

After spending the night in my host brother's apartment, we started the following day by visiting some street art, the monument of Princess Diana, a boat tour of the Seine River, and the Sacre-Coeur. The boat tour was excellent, as it was right next to all of Paris's breathtaking attractions. I got to see the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and the Notre Dame, all from sitting on the top of a boat. It was astonishing seeing the Notre Dame; I never realised how bad the damage was. It felt like only the front was still intact.

After the boat tour, we went to the Sacre-Coeur, which is a large church on top of a massive hill. After climbing to the top, we went inside, where there was a service in progress. The views from the top of the hill were extraordinary; you could see all of Paris. After the Sacre-Coeur, we took the train back home, and my 2 weeks vacation from school commenced.

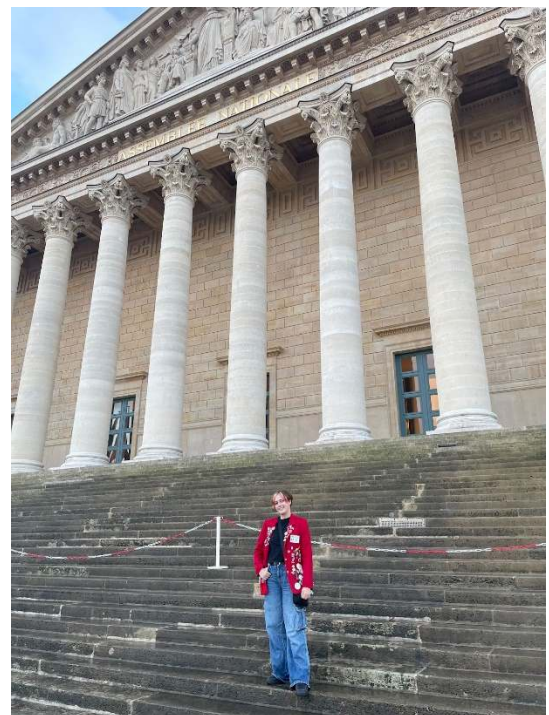


The beginning was mostly just finishing up some schoolwork, but when the weekend came my host dad took me to Vimy Ridge, a Canadian memorial. It was very beautiful and sad; we got a guided tour of the trenches, and I was able to meet many fellow Canadians who all worked there.



The next day, I went to a “football” (soccer) game, which was Lille versus Monaco. Thankfully Lille won with 2-0 points! Our tickets were VIP, so we had an unlimited bar with drinks, amazing seats, and unlimited food too. It was similar to a buffet, but each food station had someone serving the food. I even met one of the players afterward, and got his autograph and a photo with him! It was an incredible day.

The day after that, my Rotary Club took a trip down to Paris. I went, along with my host mom, and the 2 other exchange students in my city (Columbian and Indian). We started the day in a massive museum-like building, which ended up being where Napoleon’s tomb was being kept. I got to see it, along with the extravagant statues and gold-laced walls that surrounded it. His brother was kept in a separate room nearby, with much less spectacle.



After we walked to a restaurant inside of a large, church-like building. It was very old and beautiful, and the food was amazing like always! Then we walked down to the Assemblée Nationale, which is essentially France's White House. It's closed off to the public, but because one of the Rotarians is a politician, he got us access inside. It was very professional, and they even took our phones so we couldn't take photos. The building was very extravagant, and there were many large chandeliers and gold-laced quartz walls. We were even allowed to sit in on an important court meeting, in the Assemblée Nationale's court. It was very serious; we had to be completely silent. Even so, it was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I'm so thankful I was able to go!

On the 4th of November, I switched Host families. So far, everything has been going great; they're all very kind! I've enjoyed spending time with them; especially their daughter who just got back from her exchange in Washington. We recently had a party to celebrate their birthdays, and it was Barbie themed! I got to meet so many kind people and see everyone's crazy costumes; they truly went all out!

I haven't done much since then, but this weekend I'll be participating in a cultural festival with Rotary, and there is much more to come as well! I hope this has inspired you to look into an exchange yourself or given you a good update on just how unbelievable my life has become. I am so grateful for this amazing experience; it means the world to me, and always will. It already hurts to think of saying goodbye.

Jusqu'à plus tard,

Kate