



Mackenzie

from Milton

to

Germany

“Was hast du zu verlieren?”

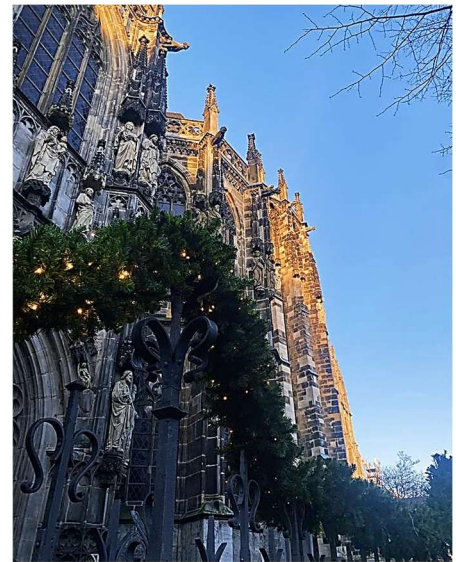
“What do you have to lose?”

This year is honestly flying by. It feels like not long ago, I was writing my first beavertail, and now I'm already on to my second. This sudden time skip has really made me more aware of how important it is to be grateful for every experience, as it can be quickly fleeting. A lot has changed and happened in the last three months, and I'd love to share it with people.



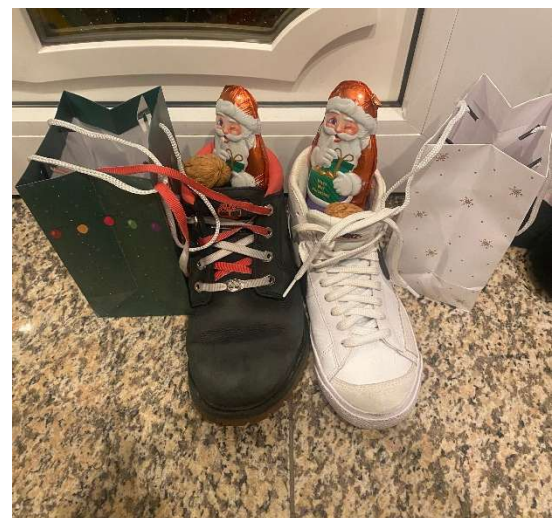
My adventure continues as we go into November. November was filled with ice skating and decorating as the streets quickly began filling up with Christmas decorations. Here in Germany, they take Christmas very seriously. In almost every city, from big to small, there is a beautiful Christmas market. These markets are like no other and are truly a sight to behold. Over the last couple of months, I've visited many Christmas markets, ranging from all over here in Germany to even in another European country!

On the weekend, welcoming us to the beginning of December, we had an amazing Rotary weekend with my district's inbounds, which was filled with so much fun and laughter. We spent our weekend doing some team-building exercises to further our bond as inbounds and then visited a beautiful Christmas weekend in Aachen. While we enjoyed our weekend, we even got a special visit from "Santa," who brought gifts to those who were nice this year (of course, that was all of us)!



These weekends are always especially special as inbounds, as it allows us all to grow closer and learn more about each other and our own experiences as exchange students. It's also especially fun to be a group of 40 kids all thrown together into a school without any lessons or teachers, something I always dreamed about as a kid!

I would also love to mention a very interesting tradition celebrated here in Germany in December called Saint Nikolaus Day. On the eve of the 5th of December, you have to clean one pair of shoes and leave a single shoe outside of your house. The next morning awaits a shoe filled with chocolates, candies, and walnuts. On the 6th of December is the actual Saint Nikolaus Day, this is a day where a man dressed as *der Heilige Nikolaus* (St. Nicholas, who resembles a bishop and carries a staff) goes from house to house to bring small gifts to the children.



Accompanying him are several ragged-looking, devil-like *Krampusse*, who mildly or not so mildly scare the children. If you've been naughty this year, your shoe gets filled with a coal-like object, however, when you've been good, you are greeted with a wonderful shoe full of presents. This was an experience unlike any other, as I'd never heard about it before, nor heard of something similar. Thankfully for me, I was good this year, and my shoes were filled with lots of candies and small gifts. It was also a very cute experience to come to class the next day and have everyone share what they got for Saint Nikolaus Day with each other!



As we progress through December, lots have happened. On December 7th, I got the chance to go to Poland again with my host family. This was a very different experience for me compared to last time, as this time it was Winter! So instead of streets filled with beautiful blooming flowers and the hot sun beaming down on me, it was filled with gorgeous string lights and the cold, icy Polish weather. We only stayed for a weekend, but there I got to visit one of the most famous Christmas markets in all of Europe, the Kraków Christmas market! There, I was introduced to lots of history as the city of Kraków is especially known for being one of the oldest cities in Poland and also used to be the capital of Poland up until around 1596.

While in Poland, I bought a very special handcrafted pottery piece for my host mom. As a tip for upcoming exchange students, it's important to really pay attention to what your host family really likes. Especially when it comes around to Christmas time or birthdays as no matter how small or big the gift is it's important to make it somewhat meaningful as your host family has welcomed you into their home and have helped you to make this dream possible and so showing your gratitude by noticing what they like can really make a big difference to them.

While still present in the month of December. It was time for a German test. Now this wasn't something to be scared of, as no matter what the result was, I was still proud of how far I'd come with the language. However, after taking the test, I was especially proud of myself as my skills with the language had progressed a lot better than I had previously thought they would. In general, the German language is relatively easier for native English speakers as there are many similarities between the spelling of words and pronunciation of words. However, German grammar is pretty complex. My personal daily routine that I've been conducting here in Germany is just rambling in German. The more you actually speak the language, the better you get.



I ramble to anybody who will listen to me ramble, and this has been great for my German-speaking skills, as people love to help you with the language. They will always give you small helpful suggestions and corrections, and since many Germans have very good English, they know the translations to most words, so if you ever don't understand a word in German or don't know the German translation of an English word, it's the easiest to just simply ask. It helps you to improve your language and also shows others that you are trying to make an effort, which is always greatly appreciated.



As we near December, it comes around to the day most of us wait for all year round, which is Christmas Day. Here in Germany (but also generally in Europe), they celebrate Christmas Day on the 24th instead of the 25th. Christmas Eve is now the most important day of the German celebration. But there's no Santa Claus coming down the chimney (and no chimney!), no reindeer (the German Santa rides a white horse), no waiting for Christmas morning! Families with young children often keep the living room or other room closed off, revealing the Christmas tree to the excited youngsters only at the last minute.

The decorated Tannenbaum (Christmas Tree) is the center of attention, the exchanging of gifts, which takes place on Christmas Eve, either before or after dinner. Weihnachtsmann (Santa) is the bringer of gifts that don't come from other family members or friends on Christmas Eve. It was an especially special experience for me to celebrate Christmas this way, as it was different compared to how I celebrated it back home. It was also just special to be a part of a different family and have them share all their little Christmas quirks and traditions with me. This time of year especially made me feel grateful for what I have and for having been granted this opportunity in life that I wouldn't trade for anything else in the world.

Shortly after Christmas was time for another trip, this time to the beautiful South Tyrol. South Tyrol is an Italian province, but it is especially unique as it borders Italy and Austria and is an especially German area. Speaking German, Italian, and Ladin, the region bridges its cultural contrasts.



South Tyrol also has another very unique feature about it; with its rugged Dolomite peaks and lush vineyards, it is both Alpine and Mediterranean at the same time.

The next 5 days were spent with a group of around 80 exchange students skiing in the beautiful, rugged Alps. This was a very exciting experience for me and many others, as some had never even skied in their lives before, and now they were doing it in the amazing Italian Alps. This experience was honestly surreal, long days spent improving my ski skills, and then spent partying and having fun with my fellow inbounds through the night.



A special day was New Year's Eve, the day spent long and tiring, and then as night approached, the festivities filled everybody as well as some together dancing and singing. When it finally was the time to start the countdown the excitement and nerves are almost too much, and when the clock strikes midnight fireworks go off and everyone just comes together, congratulating each other on the new year and embracing one another with hugs as well as sharing this very important moment in not only our exchange year but also our lives. It was honestly a beautiful experience to have, and I can't even begin to express how special it was for all of us.

After the Ski Tour, life was back to normal as our Winter Break here in Germany was now over and school continued, not that this was a bad thing. Over these last past couple of months, I have become very close with many of my classmates, closer than I ever could have imagined. Some of the people I have met just in my school are people that feel like I've known them for years. As my exchange progresses, I am realizing just how hard it will be to say goodbye to all of this. But for now, I am trying to live in the moment and not dread the future, as it will just be another new experience for me to wait for.

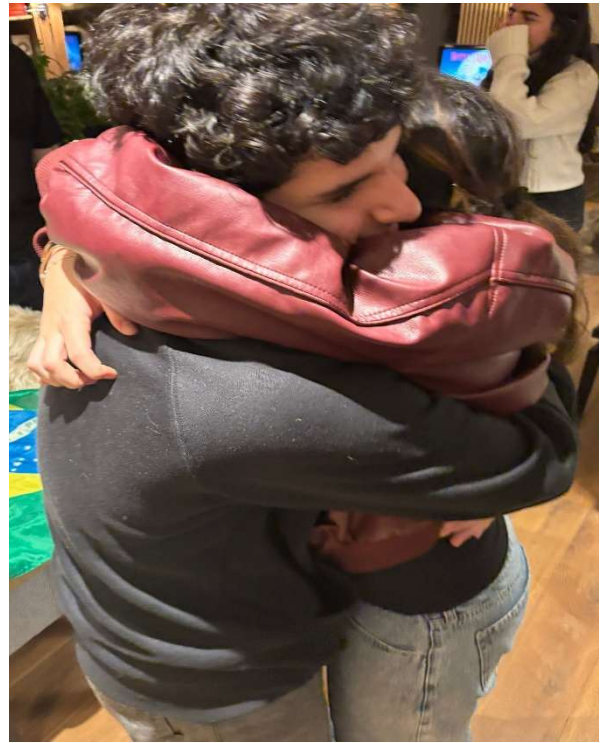
In January was time for another presentation for my host rotary club. The club president had invited me and the other exchange student in my club to join them all for dinner and present our Germany trip for all of our club to see, and how could we say no to that? I and the other exchange student prepared a very nice and detailed presentation to present

to the Rotarians, practicing our German with one another and really putting all of our efforts in to it. However sadly we had a small technology problem when it was time to present, and we weren't able to show our beautiful presentation that we made to the Rotarians. However, we acted quick on our feet and continued our presentation while also bringing in souvenirs to show around the room rather than what we had previously planned. This was honestly a great alternative as it was way more interactive for the Rotarians and still allowed us to show off our German. Something that I've learned as an exchange student is to not dwell on the mistakes or errors that happen daily but rather to learn to switch that around for the better and to be quick on your feet with it. In your exchange year you will make lots of mistakes, and things will happen sometimes that were unexpected, but instead of stressing out over it, it's important to let go and just problem solve as best as you can as dwelling over every little mistake will hold you back from so much and not allow you to truly grow as an exchange student or as a person.

The middle of January is when I switched host families. It was hard to say goodbye to my previous host family as we had gotten so close, and they had done so much for me that it felt like having to say goodbye to my family again. We spent the last couple of days together just enjoying each other's presence before it was time for me to pack up my stuff and move to my new home. My new host family has been nothing but welcoming since the beginning and helped me very quickly to feel comfortable and get all situated into my new surroundings. I now currently live in a cute beautiful home with my host mom, host dad, host sister, and host brother. This time it is a little different for me as I am now the youngest of the household and currently the only child still attending school. On my first day back to school since moving, my host brother and sister walked me to school to show me the way as I now only live around a 20-minute walk from school, which has been a huge relief as I get to wake up a lot later than I had to before. It's also a really great location as I am a lot closer to the Hauptbahnhof (main train station) of my new city which is Essen. I specifically live in a part called Essen Werden which is only one part of the very big city of Essen, Its also been wonderful as I am closer to a lot of my friends from school now since I am living closer to the school now.

If I could give any tips to future exchange students when moving host families, it would be to just be yourself and be comfortable, of course it's a little awkward at first because it feels like your living in a strangers home, but when you integrate yourself into the lives of your host family it soon become like your own home. Personally, I do this by just simply offering to help with chores or join them in their daily routines, or even just watching a movie with them as a family. This helps both you and your host family to feel comfortable quickly, which makes everything a lot better for everyone.

As the end of January came around, it also meant it was time to say some hard goodbyes. If you didn't already know, there are many types of exchanges that people can choose to make. Long term, short term, and even when you arrive in your host country. For this time specifically, it was the winter inbounds. These are exchange students that came last winter as they live in countries where the school system is a little different due to the opposite seasons. Sadly, this also means that they had to leave this winter. It was a hard thing to say goodbye as you're not quite sure when or even if you will see these people again in your life, but all that you can hold onto is the memories that were shared together and how you were able to become so close over such small amounts of time. This can also reflect on your exchange as an overall as at the beginning of your exchange you don't really realize much, you don't notice the relationships forming and the bonding from all the time spent together, but as time begins to fly you slowly come to the realization one day of just how fast things are going. It's important to live in the moment and be thankful for what and who you have at the time as it could soon leave you.



As we welcome February it just so happened to be my birthday! This was honestly one of the most amazing times for me as turning 16 is especially a big thing here in Germany as it presents many more new opportunities to you. My host family helped me to plan my birthday as it was a really special one for me as I've always imagined being a 16 year old. The age of 16 is constantly highlighted all through movies and tv shows as a very important age, so since I was a little girl, I've always dreamed of this day and it

finally arrived. So alongside my host family we rented out a party room for me to celebrate



my birthday, surrounded by all my friends, ranging from exchange students to fellow classmates. This party resulted in over 40 teenagers all crowded into a room together. It doesn't sound the best, but it was honestly one of the most amazing times of my life, so many people all showing up and being present to celebrate. I'm so thankful to have met so many amazing people in such a short amount of time and it's all because of Rotary, without Rotary I wouldn't have had this experience therefore never have had the opportunities that I have had while being here.

I hope that the experiences I have shared and the tips I've given can help to convince others to make this wonderful decision that will change their lives for the better, and also help future exchange students with any of their experiences or troubles that they can relate to. Exchange was the best decision I have ever made in my life, every day I am so thankful I took that leap of faith and applied to this program as without that little faith and courage in me I wouldn't have made it this far and had these experiences.

Thank you again to Rotary and for those who supported me in this journey. I will never be able to express my gratitude in words, as there isn't a word that means enough in any language to express how thankful I am for this year. I'm also grateful to myself for having the bravery to do this because what do you have to lose in this life? You only live once.

Vielen Dank für alles, bis zum nächsten Mal! Viel Liebe