



Mackenzie

from Milton

to

Germany

*“Alles zu seiner zeit”
“Everything in its time”*

We’ve finally reached the closing chapter of my exchange year—and I can hardly believe how fast the time has flown. So much has happened since I first arrived, and I’ve grown in ways I never could have imagined. It’s difficult to fully capture everything I’ve experienced, but one thing I can say for certain is that I am so glad I took this leap. Without this exchange, I wouldn’t have seen the world the way I have. I wouldn’t have had the chance to truly live in a different culture, build lifelong friendships, and grow both inside and out. This year has shaped me deeply, and I know I’ll carry the lessons and memories with me for the rest of my life. If I could, I’d recommend Exchange to absolutely everyone.

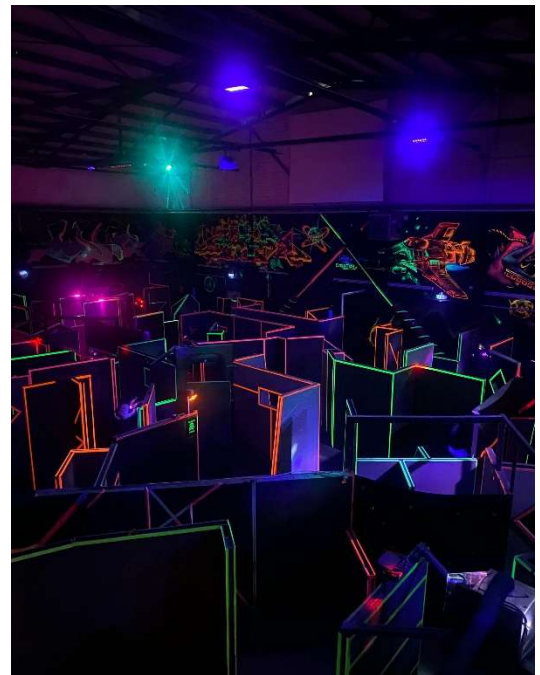
Let’s pick up where we left off, in March! While this month didn’t hold as many big trips as others, it started with something truly special: Karneval. Karneval is a beloved tradition in Germany, especially in the Rhineland, where I’ve been living. Originally, it was meant to scare away winter spirits; people would wear scary masks, sing, dance, and fill the streets with noise to welcome spring. Today, it’s a vibrant, joyful celebration that brings entire cities to a standstill. The streets are full of color, music, confetti, and costumes of every kind. Kids and adults alike take part in the fun, dressing up as animals, knights, witches, clowns, you name it! I dressed up as a pirate and spent the weekend celebrating with my school friends and fellow exchange students. That weekend was also a Rotary gathering in Düsseldorf, a city known for its Karneval spirit.



One of the most famous celebrations, though, is just next door in Cologne, where the Rosenmontag parade features massive floats, marching bands, and candy flying through the air. Everyone yells “KAMELLE!”, the magic word to catch sweets from the floats. The weekend was more than just fun and celebration. It was also about building deeper connections with the other exchange students. We spent time playing silly games to break the ice, laughing over shared jokes, and working in groups to strengthen our bond.

One of the highlights was an intense (and slightly chaotic) laser tag match. Imagine 40+ teenagers packed into a room, all ready for battle. My team didn't win, but the

energy, competitiveness, and laughter made it one of the best parts of the day. We followed that up with free time in the city, enjoying meals together, exploring, and just enjoying each other's company. It was one of our last big Rotary weekends together, and we all knew how special it was. We finished the day at a massive indoor/outdoor pool, complete with slides and fun areas to relax. But more than the activities, it was the people and the moments spent side by side that made it unforgettable.



There's something uniquely powerful about the connection between exchange students. It really is like a family, a big, chaotic, global family. We come from different backgrounds and speak different languages, but we understand each other in a way few others can. We've faced the same struggles, homesickness, culture shock, and moments of pure joy. And through all that, we've built bonds that feel unbreakable. Sure, we've all had our moments of being tired, off, or making small mistakes, but there's always this incredible level of understanding and support. We know we're all navigating the same rollercoaster, and that makes all the difference.

We wrapped up the weekend with a costume contest, and the creativity on display was amazing, from hilarious to heartfelt. There were two winners: the solo costume went to a fellow exchange student from Peru dressed in a colorful, traditional (but hilarious) Peruvian outfit, and the duo costume prize went to two students who dressed up as Doner Kebabs, a staple food here in Germany and a definite fan favorite.

March wasn't filled with big trips or major events, aside from the excitement of Karneval, which was colorful, loud, and absolutely unforgettable, but in many ways, it was one of the most meaningful months of my exchange. Instead of constant movement and change,

March gave me a chance to settle into life here more deeply and enjoy the simple moments with the people around me. Most days were spent just hanging out with my host family and friends, but that time turned out to be exactly what I needed. I found myself really appreciating the slower pace. Going for long walks through the neighborhood, having coffee with my host mom while chatting about our days, or cooking dinner together in the evenings. I even helped bake a traditional German apple cake one weekend, and though I probably slowed things down with all my questions, we laughed a lot, and the result was actually pretty delicious. With friends, we had cozy movie nights at someone's house, played card games (I'm still not great at Skat, but I'm trying!), or just hung out at the local bakery after school, sharing pastries and stories. One Saturday, we spontaneously biked to a nearby village just to explore and ended up finding a tiny, family-run café where we stayed for hours talking. Nothing was planned, but those spontaneous days became some of my favorite memories. It was in these simple, unplanned moments that I realized how lucky I am to have met such kind, welcoming people here.



I didn't need sightseeing or constant adventure to feel fulfilled, just being included, being listened to, and being part of everyday life was more than enough. It made me feel less like a guest and more like I belonged. I've learned that real connection doesn't always come from doing big things, it comes from shared laughter over nothing,

from helping with the dishes after dinner, or from texting someone just to say, "Wanna hang out?" The people I've met here, my host family, my classmates, my friends, have made a place that was once foreign feel like home.



April started off with a fun surprise, a spontaneous day trip to the Netherlands with a friend for some shopping. It wasn't anything over-the-top or overly planned; just a casual adventure across the border to explore a few stores, grab a coffee, and enjoy a change of scenery. But looking back, that short trip ended up meaning more than just new clothes or a good deal. What really stood out to me wasn't the shopping itself, but the opportunity. The simple fact that a friend I'd made during my exchange invited me along, and that I was able to say yes, hop in a car, and experience a new country for the day. That small moment made me reflect on how powerful connections can be when you're open, curious, and willing to engage with the people around you. Being on exchange puts you in this unique position where every person you meet could lead to a new experience, a shared memory, or a chance to see the world from another perspective. That trip to the Netherlands may have been short, but it reminded me how important it is to build and nurture relationships. It's not about "using" people, but about appreciating the doors that open when you're kind, respectful, and genuinely interested in getting to know others.

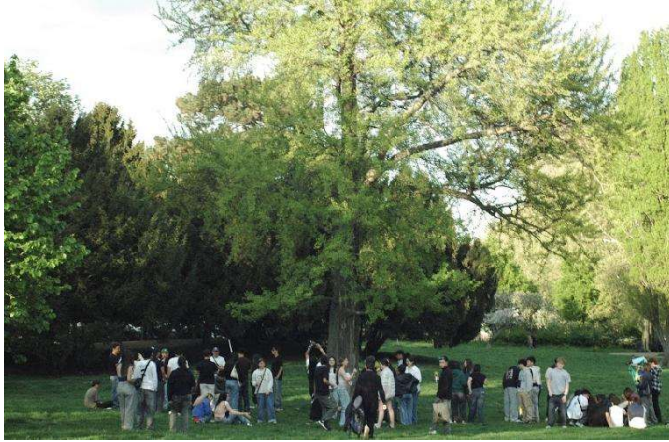


If March was about slowing down and appreciating the small things, then April was the exact opposite: fast-paced, exciting, and completely unforgettable. I had the chance to go on a Europe Tour with 120 exchange students from all over the world, and it was one of the most intense, fun, and life-changing experiences of my entire exchange. We traveled across 8 countries in 19 days, covering some of the most iconic cities in Europe. It felt like something out of a dream, every morning waking up in a new place, every day packed with adventure, history, new food, and laughter. We were a huge, chaotic, beautiful family of teenagers from every corner of the globe, brought together by curiosity and the shared experience of being exchange students.

Our journey began in the City of Light. Paris was magical. Seeing the Eiffel Tower sparkle at night felt like something out of a movie. We cruised the Seine River, admired the artwork in the Louvre, and strolled through Montmartre, where I had the best crêpe of my life. There was something surreal about finally seeing all these famous landmarks in

person. Avignon brought us into the heart of southern France, with its medieval walls and charming streets. We visited the Palace of the Popes and had time to relax in the sun. Then came Nice, where the blue waters of the Côte d'Azur were almost too beautiful to be real. We walked along the Promenade des Anglais, ate fresh baguettes by the beach, and just soaked up the Mediterranean vibe. In Barcelona, everything felt alive: the colors, the people, the food. We explored Park Güell and stared up at the awe-inspiring Sagrada Família. One night, we all watched a flamenco show, and it was impossible not to be moved by the energy and emotion of the dancers. Tapas, churros, and the late-night buzz of the city made it one of my favorite stops. Though it was a short visit, Monaco felt like stepping into another world. Everything was glamorous, the yachts, the cars, the famous Monte Carlo Casino. We didn't gamble, of course, but walking through the tiny principality made us feel like we were in a James Bond movie. Venice was like a watercolor painting come to life. We wandered through winding alleys, took a gondola ride, and stood on Rialto Bridge watching the boats drift by. Then came Rome, a city bursting with history. We visited the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and threw coins into the Trevi Fountain, hoping for another trip back someday. And then, Vatican City, on Easter Sunday, no less. We were among tens of thousands in St. Peter's Square, watching Pope Francis deliver the Easter Mass. It was moving and powerful, even if we didn't understand every word. Just being there, in that moment, felt like history. Elegant and rich in culture, Vienna was a peaceful contrast to the energy of Italy. We saw beautiful palaces, listened to street musicians, and tried Sachertorte, the famous chocolate cake. It was a city that made me want to slow down and breathe in every little detail. Our final stop was Prague, a city straight out of a fairy tale. The Charles Bridge, the Astronomical Clock, and the castle on the hill made it feel magical. We spent our last night walking the cobblestone streets together, taking photos, singing songs, and not wanting it to end.





Looking back, it wasn't just the cities that made this tour so unforgettable, it was the people I shared it with. Imagine 120 exchange students, all speaking different languages, learning about each other's cultures, dancing in the streets, trying new foods, sharing headphones on long bus rides, and laughing until it hurts. We bonded in a way that only happens when you're constantly out of your comfort zone and

surrounded by others who understand what that feels like.



This trip reminded me why I chose to be an exchange student in the first place. It reminded me how big and beautiful the world is, and how much there is left to discover. Most of all, it made me realize that the friendships I've made here, on buses, in hostels, and wandering foreign streets, are ones I'll carry with me for the rest of my life.

After the whirlwind that was April, May felt quieter, less thrilling on the surface, but just as meaningful in its own way. With the end of my exchange approaching, there's this bittersweet awareness that time is running out. It's not the kind of month filled with big

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At the same time, there's a part of me that's beginning to look forward to returning home. Not because I want this experience to end, but because I now see home through a different lens. Life in Germany has been so different from life in Canada, different language, customs, people, but both have shaped who I am. I've come to understand that this isn't about comparing which is better. It's about accepting that both are parts of me now. As you may come to learn, *"Exchange isn't just a year in your life, it's a life in a year,"* and I don't think anything has ever felt more true. This year has been full of challenges, joy, growth, and change. And while May may not be filled with major events, it's a quiet reminder that sometimes, the most meaningful moments happen when you're standing still and looking around, realizing how far you've come.



Spending a year as an exchange student in Germany has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life. Coming from Canada, I anticipated cultural differences, language challenges, and new friendships, but what I encountered went far beyond expectations. It wasn't just about living in a different country; it was about

discovering myself through new eyes, in a new world. Being an exchange student isn't easy, but that's exactly why it's so rewarding. It's a year of emotional highs and lows, constant learning, and incredible growth. It teaches you that the world is full of people who are different but fundamentally the same. Most of all, it shows you that home isn't a place, it's the connections you make and the growth you experience wherever you go.

As this incredible journey comes to a close, I want to express my deepest thanks to Rotary and to everyone who has supported me along the way, my host families, my friends, my counselors, and everyone who made this experience not just possible, but unforgettable. Your guidance, generosity, and belief in the power of youth exchange have truly changed my life. This year has taught me more than I ever imagined, not just about other cultures, but about empathy, resilience, independence, and connection. I sincerely hope that Rotary continues to support and grow this exchange program, because what it offers isn't just travel, it's transformation. I know there are so many other students out there who, just like me, are ready to step into the unknown and come out stronger, wiser, and more open-minded.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I will carry it with me always.

Herzlichen Dank für all Ihre Unterstützung und diese unvergessliche Zeit!