



Marissa

from Burlington
& Burlington Lakeshore
to
Switzerland

‘Looking back on my year, I can’t believe how much I’ve learned.’



While preparing to give a presentation to my Host Rotary Club about my exchange year, I looked back on everything I’ve done, the people I’ve met, the sights I’ve seen, and all my experiences which have overall bettered me as a person.

I’ve been able to do some things in Switzerland that are incredibly special. Just last week, actually, I had somewhat of an epiphany when I realised that I can speak a dialect that only a few hundred thousand people in the world know. I walked on a glacier which will

most likely be gone in a couple decades. I visited castles, mountains, cathedrals, memorial monuments, museums, government buildings, and so much more that I could go on about for hours.

It's difficult to really put into words the emotions one feels when in a place like the Basilique de Valère, a building almost a millennium old. It's something that many people don't always appreciate, I find, the history held in the walls of a building. That basilica has lived through wars, plagues, industrial revolution, and changes in the actual landscape on which it stands. Or the Stockalperschloss, a castle that is just a few steps across the cobblestone road from my school. It's partially due to the man who commissioned that building, Kaspar Stockalper, that Valais is how it is today. He was responsible for trade routes from Italy, and really put this area on the map during his time. And he did it all with salt.



There are certainly difficulties in any country, but I truly believe that all the challenges I've faced in the past year have allowed me to grow and become a more aware person. I realise just how important it is to remember how interconnected we all are. It's really the small things that can mean a lot to a person. I couldn't tell you how many bad days of mine have been saved by my host mom just talking to me like a normal person, or a teacher giving me a compliment. Every individual is shaped by so many experiences which build up to

create a full character. Why wouldn't I do everything I can to not only further my own character, but that of others as well? I suppose that's a bit off topic, but I digress.



Interestingly, I'm not so much looking back on my year and feeling sad to leave as I am looking forward to being able to apply the knowledge I've received in the future. My exchange has given me a new perspective on cultural awareness, and reinforced my position that it's unfair to say an aspect of a culture is wrong, rather than just different. There have been plenty of things here which I initially considered strange or impractical, but when I stepped back and looked at it in context, it makes sense.

I've had a lot of fun contesting my own ideas of certain stereotypes. Allow me to provide an example.

I currently live in a very small mountain village of around 200 people. If you were to have me describe what I thought that would be like last June, I would have detailed a sort of behind-on-the-times, rustic looking environment. In reality, however, the differences aren't quite so significant. Yes, there are plenty of rather small houses which have been here for 400 years or so (Fun fact, the highest Roman settlement ever found was right here in Guttet just last year), but the amenities inside deviate negligibly from that which I'm used to at home in Canada. Drinkable tap water, flatscreen TV, induction stovetop, microwave, washer and dryer, etc. Honestly, the biggest difference between here and Canada is probably the transportation, given that I have an hour commute to school due to my having to take a bus down the mountain, plus waiting upwards of 45 minutes to take a bus home, since there is only a bus to my village every hour and a half or so.

Another difference I have with this particular host family is something completely unrelated to Swiss culture; living with young children. Of course, I'm used to being around little kids, but obviously it's a big jump from being tangentially associated with small kids every so often to living with them full time. In a house with only one bathroom, even. That's certainly an experience to learn from.



Finally, I want to take this final portion to express my gratitude to all of those who have helped me get this far, regardless of whether or not they ever see it. To my parents, thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me to go for what I want. I'm incredibly grateful for everything you've given me (especially some stubborn qualities which have gotten me out of some otherwise tough situations, haha) and I can never thank you enough. To my friends in Canada, thank you for giving me a bit of light on days when I feel a bit too far away from home. To my new friends here in Switzerland, thank you for being so welcoming and supporting me along my way. I promise to put in as much effort as possible to stay in touch. To my host parents, I can't express just how absolutely grateful I am for the generosity and hospitality you've shown me. You allowed me into your homes, into your families, and you showed me sides of this world I would have never known otherwise. To Rotary...wow. I feel so lucky to have had this opportunity extended to me, in spite of difficulties (I'm looking at you, COVID). I hope to find a way to show my support for this program so that others can continue to have the chance of a lifetime. Youth Exchange can truly change lives. Lastly, I want to thank myself for endeavouring to persevere through any complications. It may have been incredibly hard at times, but the positive experiences were so worth it. I'm proud of myself for getting through it all for the sake of personal growth.

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