



**Matthias  
from  
Mississauga West  
to  
Switzerland**

*“Empfinden Leben”*

As we go through the motions of life, it's quite easy to get lost within the challenges of every day and lose sight of why we are doing what we are doing at all. And while this “why” is drastically different for each and every person, I've found that the simple act of “experiencing life” plays a large role in this “why” for everybody. “Experiencing life” could mean trying new things or going to new places, experiencing challenges but overcoming and learning from them, forming close connections with others, and I suppose for me, mixing up the words impressive and funeral in a foreign language in a foreign land halfway across the globe from my home.

As of November 9th, my voyage in Switzerland has reached 3 digits. More than 100 days ago, I said goodbye to my family and life in Canada one final time, and boarded my plane to a new life. My flight was fortunately without issues, and I soon arrived in Switzerland. I would then meet my first host family, who welcomed me incredibly warmly into their family and Switzerland as a whole. It was also here that one of my host sisters, Siena, would ask if she could call me “Mättu”. Mättu is a Swiss nickname for Matthias originating from my Canton Bern, and the name I'll become synonymous with throughout my entire exchange. It was here when my daily life of broken German and funny communication began, and as I wandered out of the airport, I would wonder at the incredible beauty of Switzerland for the first of many, many times. It all felt like yesterday, and yet, in the blink of an eye, 100 days have already passed.



My home away from home is the region of Gstaad-Saanenland, a small and incredibly beautiful collection of chalet villages in the mountains of the Berner Oberland. While I might be biased, I genuinely do think that it's quite the pinnacle of alpine villages within Switzerland. It blends in incredibly well with the natural scenery around it, its overall cleanliness and quality of life is on a whole different level, and the community is extremely affectionate and tight knit. There's actually a law in place which permits only the building of wooden chalets, which plays a large role on how beautiful this region stays, and also why it's considered such an expensive place to live.



As for the population, there's actually only 8000 residents in the whole of Saanenland. Another interesting statistic is that there are around 8500 cows in Saanenland, so there are actually more cows than humans here. I even find that I typically see more cows than people in my daily life. Since it's such a small region, everybody knows everyone, and it's become pretty normal for a complete stranger to be able to list out every single host family I have with extremely vague hints. However, one aspect I haven't seen mentioned before about living in such a small community is the trust that's able to build up. There are fridges with cheese, dried meat, and even sometimes beer or wine scattered across the region, where you can take what you wish and pay in a small cash register right next to it. There are no locks, no mechanisms to prevent you from simply taking one and leaving, but since the trust in this region is so strong, nobody steals and I find it quite touching.



The school I go to is the Gstaad Department of Gymnasium Interlaken. Throughout all 4 grades in the entire school, there are only 70 students. In my grade, there's only 17. However, due to this, these classmates have been able to know each other since childhood, and the entire class has been able to develop a strong bond. So, when another student from across the world joins this tightly-knit community, the challenge becomes integrating with them. However, with such a welcoming and friendly class, I can confidently say I've been able to integrate into it, and I couldn't be happier. I'd like to believe I've been able to befriend my entire grade, and I've made many close friends that I'll treasure for a lifetime.

As to the actual school system, it is incredibly different from the one I had in Canada. It's hard to truly explain each and every difference without accidentally writing a whole essay, but I can mention them in a general sense. After the middle school equivalent, students choose to either do an apprenticeship in the trades or to continue studying and go to a "Gymnasium", the high school equivalent here. I've found that for the students going into Gymnasium, Switzerland believes in a well-rounded education, and specialization after. We all take the same courses, like the sciences, history, math, German and English. The only choice for courses that we have is an elective course and a major to specialize in. The major I decided to choose is biology and chemistry, and I've been having a lot of fun in those classes. Another big difference that's particularly unique to my school in Switzerland is that our days are quite long, reaching from 8:20 all the way to 17:45. However, we actually have Wednesdays off. The total hour count per week is about the same, and after 3 months here, I still can't quite decide whether I like it better or not. Whatever the case might be though, I've surprisingly found that I've been enjoying my time in school quite a bit. The fact that my marks don't matter here probably plays a pretty big role.



*"Your lack of German won't matter when the rest of your group is just as lost as you in a German city-wide scavenger hunt"*

When I'm not in school, I've found that there's always something to do. Despite being such a small region, you can always count on an event happening in the near future. There's always something exciting going on, whether it be a seasonal market, a cow parade, a music festival, or something else. Also, since it's such a small community, you end up seeing the same people and really getting to know the community through these events. I've also volunteered for many of these events, being able to give back to the community that welcomed me so warmly, and making memories with the other volunteers and participants. Other than these events, I've hung out with host family and friends, doing and learning so many new things. For example, I've occasionally gone mushroom collecting in the wild, and I can pretty confidently recognize Eierschwämme and Steinpilze mushrooms now! Of course, I can't go without mentioning the hikes and skiing here. My region is completely full with absolutely beautiful hikes, and I've loved every single one I've gone on so far. The skiing season has not quite started yet here, but it's coming extremely soon, and I couldn't be more excited. While Switzerland is generally famous for skiing, it is my region in specific where many of the Swiss go to ski.



*“Anytime anybody offers to take you to do something, say yes. That way, you can find yourself collecting odd orange mushrooms and collapsing at the top of your very first Gipfel-Kreuz.”*

It's time to address the elephant in the room, language. To any future exchange students reading this, I'd like to say that even if you don't study any of it before leaving, so long as you engage with it during exchange, you'll learn it and still have an incredible exchange. Despite that, I still highly recommend you learn the language as much as possible before you leave. Language is the key to truly living in your new country and settling in with the foreign landscape around you, and it's the bridge that connects you to all the others you'll meet on exchange. There also happens to be many other unexpected benefits which come alongside with it. One such example I've found was when it comes to meeting new people. If you're able to decently speak the language, you instantly make a great first impression. It doesn't matter what you talk about nor how broken your grammar might be. It's practically a cheat code to making connections in your exchange.

Language gets to be quite a special case for my exchange, due to the existence of High German and Swiss German. High German is what's used for official matters, but the spoken language is Swiss German, or in my case, Bernese German. Swiss German proves to be one of the largest challenges that exchange students going to Switzerland face. While previous BeaverTales have mentioned how challenging it is, I hope this BeaverTale acts instead as a reassuring pat on the back that the journey is not as harsh as one might think. Don't get me wrong, it'll still be incredibly challenging, and some days you might wonder if you've ever been able to connect with others at all, with the gap that is Swiss German. However, it is a challenge that is completely within your power to overcome, and that is what I wish to emphasize. First of all, your host family is your best resource for learning High German. When asked, they'll speak High German around you and be patient with you, really helping you learn. Teachers typically teach in Swiss German, but they'll teach in High German if you're there. If they don't, simply introduce yourself and ask if they could use High German, and they will. Your friends, when speaking directly to you, will also use High German. When you're in a group of friends, they'll typically speak Swiss German, but I've found that if you ask what they're talking about, they'll catch you up on their conversation, in High German. Sometimes, you'll be able to even pick up a few words and, from that, derive the general topic, to which you can join the conversation with an even more direct question. The Swiss companions you make will also always be eager to teach you new words in Swiss German. Finally, once your base of High German is strong enough, you'll actually find that you'll start to be able to recognize some Swiss German words too!



In only my third week in Switzerland, I set off for a week-long language camp in Fiesch with other exchange students. In the way of language learning, it was a great help, and it was great to learn with others at the same level as me. Where the value truly laid though, was in connecting with the other exchange students. From this camp, it feels like I've been able to connect with the entire world. I now know people who lived their entire lives in Japan, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Taiwan, Columbia, New Zealand, and many, many more countries. We've all come from completely different walks of life, but we've been able to connect through the incredible medium that is youth exchange. Not only are they good friends, they are companions going through the same experiences and the same challenges as me, and through that can such strong bonds be made. I've already made many strong connections with other exchange students, many of which I know I'll hold for a lifetime. Since then, we've been able to meet up and experience more things together, whether it be Rotary organized or organized by ourselves. By the time this BeaverTale is released, I'll be soon on the renowned Matterhorn trip with all the other exchange students in Switzerland, and I couldn't be more excited for it.

Before I had left for exchange, I had believed that my greatest dream to me was to live in such a beautiful place integrated with the nature around it. While it's still a complete dream to me, I was surprised that the experiences that I valued the most on my exchange weren't actually quite like that. It was rather the experiences I shared with others, the walks through cities or hikes through mountains, that I've found myself treasuring the most. I've always thought of connections as



important, but it's through exchange that I've realized how incredibly meaningful they really are. To take it a step further, the connections you make on exchange are even stronger and more incredible than the connections you make elsewhere. It's similar to when you go on a week-long summer camp and form incredibly strong connections with people you've only known for a week, and no other bonds can ever seem to compare. The only difference is that instead of just a week, it's for an entire year.

When preparing to write this BeaverTale, I tried to think of the large cultural differences between Canada and Switzerland. Surprisingly, I couldn't actually think of any huge difference which had blown me away. After considering it quite a bit, I've come to realize that it's not the huge differences that form our distinctiveness, but rather the multiple small differences that make up everyday life. With that being said, I'll go through a quick fire round of all the small differences that I've found.

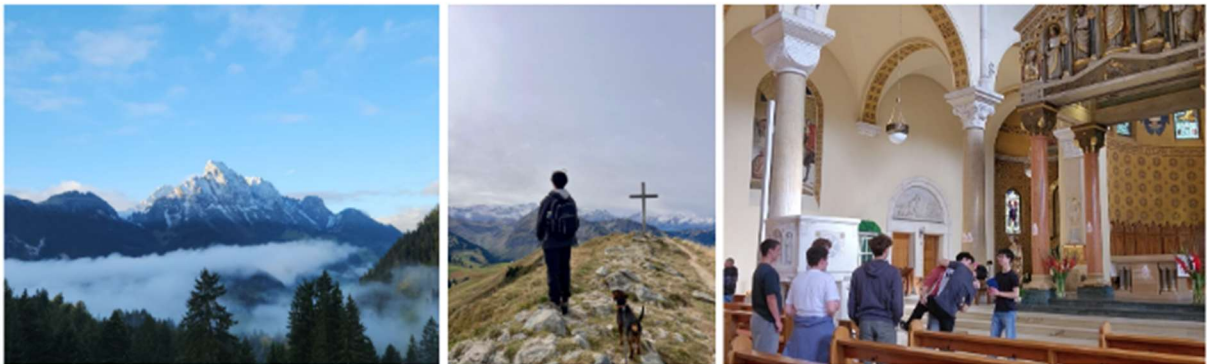
- Despite being 1300m higher above sea level than my home in Canada, weather here is actually quite similar. My host parents occasionally are curious about the weather at home, and I've found myself saying that it's practically the same most of the time. The one difference I've found is that Switzerland gets quite a decent amount of fog compared to Canada. Where I live in Canada, we only get fog for a few days a year, while the cities in Switzerland are practically always in fog during the entirety of autumn.
- Switzerland is known for eating a lot of cheese. I can indeed confirm, I've been eating a lot of cheese. However, it isn't quite in the way I expected. I had expected that I'd be eating cheese as a main dish quite often, but that's not quite the case. Of course, there's meals like Raclette and Fondue, but since they're so hearty, we typically eat it in winter and not as often. Rather, cheese is typically on the side, but it's on the side of practically every meal I eat.



*Matthias Styled Apéro Cheese Board*

Of course, the quality and variety of cheese here cannot be matched, and I don't think I can ever go back to the cheddar or the marble cheese I've eaten back in Canada. The same goes with chocolate here in Switzerland, and I can confidently say I've gotten quite addicted to both. Aside from cheese and chocolate though, Swiss food has felt pretty normal to what I've eaten back at home, whether it comes to pastas or pizzas or other foods.

- I've never been quite interested in politics or history back in Canada, but since coming to Switzerland, I've somehow gotten incredibly invested in them. I've been able to learn about the creation of Switzerland, and European history I never learned about in Canada, like the Holy Roman Empire and Napoleon. On the political side, both Canada and Switzerland are democracies. However, while Canada is a representative democracy, a democracy where we elect representatives to create laws, Switzerland is a direct democracy. In Switzerland, the citizens get to directly vote on whether they wish for laws to come into effect or not, and it's incredibly interesting to learn exactly how it works.
- I drank tap water back in Canada, so drinking it in Switzerland wasn't a huge cultural shock to me. However, I would've never drunk tap water from a public bathroom, but it's quite commonplace here. Not only that, you can guarantee that every single tap here will have the most cold, freshest water you've ever drank. At least that's the case for Saanenland, I can't guarantee that for the entire Switzerland.
- I'm unsure where the myth of the Swiss being closed-off came from. I find that they are actually just as social as the people in Canada. Of course, there will always be people who are not as friendly, but for the large majority, you can go up to them and have a whole conversation about each of your life stories. When I first met the guys in my grade, it was actually them who went up to me and welcomed me, acting like we were already good friends. I can't guarantee it's the same for all of Switzerland, but I can say that the myth of the Swiss being closed-off is thoroughly busted.



*“In exchange, some things will make complete sense, while other things none at all. For example, the mountain on the left is called Rüebli, carrot in Swiss German, since it looks like a carrot. Over 100 days here now, I still don't see the resemblance.”* ■

One concern I've always seen about exchange is having to repeat a year of high school and essentially pushing your life back a year. I must say, I've also had that concern many times before. However, now that I'm on exchange, I can absolutely say it is completely worth it. It has been worth it tenfold, and I've only been here for 3 months. I bring you back to what I said at the beginning of my BeaverTale. For the students reading this, you're probably hard at work studying to get good grades and getting into a good university, and for the adults reading this, you're probably working each day to make a living for you and your family. No matter who you are, I encourage you to simply take a moment to step back and consider the "why" behind what you are doing. The "why" that I've personally been able to find is to "experience life", and nothing quite lets you experience life as much as an exchange year does. After all, it's not a year of your life, but rather, an entire life in a year.

To those students considering applying for youth exchange, I'd like you to consider this. Taking on such a journey will put your life on hold for a year, and you will be entering university one year later than your peers. However, I ask you yet again to consider the "why" behind why you even wish to go to university and beyond. If you happen to have even a bit of the same "why" as I do, I can assuredly guarantee that putting your life on hold for a year will be inconsequential, as the year that you're putting your life on hold for is precisely the "why" that you are doing what you are doing at all.

To end my BeaverTale, I'd like to give a massive thank you to the Canadian Rotary District of 7080 and the Switzerland Multi-District, as well as the Rotary Clubs of Mississauga West and Gstaad-Saenenland for this opportunity to fulfill my "why" to the absolute fullest.

Ciao ciao,

Mätty

"Nicht der Mensch hat am meisten gelebt, welcher die höchsten Jahre zählt, sondern der, welcher sein Leben am meisten empfunden hat."

- Jean Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss Philosopher