



Serena

from
Kitchener
to
Japan

“Bittersweet Bidding Goodbye”

Goodbyes are difficult when you grow to love what you're leaving.

Introduction:

Although I have not bid farewell quite yet, this is now my last BeaverTale, marking less than 2 months left of my exchange. Meaning I am preparing to leave and say hello to familiar faces back in Canada. Soon the feelings of being homesick will transfer from missing friends, pets, and family in Canada, to missing my new friends, pets, and family in Japan. I suppose I can't escape this fate; I chose this path so I might as well embrace it!

Last report, back in February, I thought I was on top of the world, and that I peaked in experiences on exchange. Little did just freshly 17 Serena know that I had much more exciting adventures to come. Without further ado, let's get into it! From moving to my last homestay, improving Japanese, Japan Tour, and lastly giving speeches.

Please enjoy reading about my experiences. If there's something I miss, feel free to contact me about any questions you may have!

Host Families

Currently, I am with my fourth and last host family, and I couldn't be happier. They are a wonderful family with whom I've formed the closest bond with. This family has four dogs, which adds a lot of fun and excitement to the household and makes it easier to deal with missing my pets in Canada. Also, there is a younger host sister and brother who have become like real siblings to me.



During the break, I spent countless hours playing Minecraft and Mario Kart with my host siblings, creating memories that I will cherish forever. All combined we have 4 Nintendo switches in just one house! We also occasionally play Oni (tag) outside when the spring weather decides not to pour rain on us. This host family has truly made me feel at home. Their warmth and kindness have created an environment where I feel welcomed and loved. It's going to be incredibly hard to say goodbye when the time comes to leave. The thought of parting from them fills me with a bittersweet taste, as I'm grateful for the wonderful times we've had but sad to be leaving such a special part of my exchange experience behind.



I hope that their children will have the opportunity to come on an exchange to Canada in the future. Who knows, maybe I'll even be their host mother! I would love to welcome them into my home and return the kindness and hospitality their family has shown me. I have all intentions of keeping in touch with this host family until long in the future. All the more reason to not forget Japanese!

To any future or current exchange students, cherish the relationships you build with your host families. Each family will offer a unique experience, and forming a close bond can make your stay truly unforgettable!

My Memories

March:

Let me recount some of the memorable moments from my March in Japan. One delightful experience involved preparing pancakes for my host family, complete with authentic Canadian maple syrup. I also made Poutine and taught them about "Taco Tuesdays". I got to go for a fantastic time bowling with fellow Rotarians before indulging in a delicious yakiniku (Japanese BBQ) dinner.



Driving in the mountains with my host family, I tried dango-jiru, a local delicacy. I will deeply miss Beppu's mountain scenery when I return to Ontario. Photos can't capture the same way they glow in the sunlight. I enjoyed practising Japanese with friends, and my 3rd host dad's homemade Napolitan and pizza were the best. I shared insights into Canadian teenage makeup trends with school friends and gave them a taste of Canadian snacks.



A highlight was a trip to Yufuin with my Sri Lankan friend, Eesha. We enjoyed a horse carriage ride, souvenir shops, a cat cafe, and Korean cheese dogs. Together, we wore kimonos during Hina Matsuri in Kitsuki, picked strawberries, and explored the local area. We also visited Hita's Attack on Titan sites, Rakutenchi, and Kijima Kogen.

Participating in an SDG (Social Development Goals) event allowed for collaboration and personal growth with my classmates. I enjoyed helping them with English. Unfortunately, I caught the flu between events and stayed home for a week, watching TV and getting much-needed rest. I seem to get sick very easily in Japan.



As my time with my third host family drew to a close, I cherished bonding moments over meals and cultural activities. I hope they come to visit me in Canada one day.

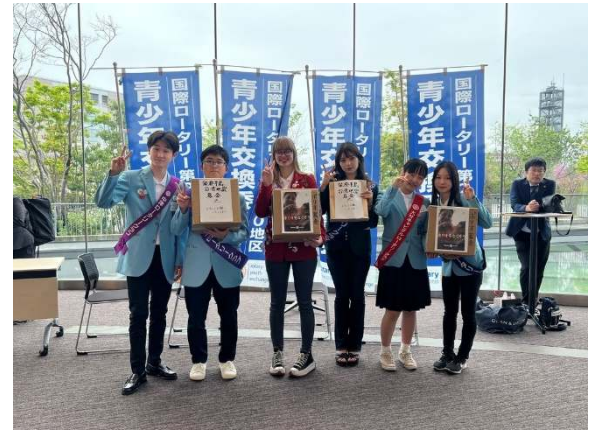
April:

April is when the Cherry Trees bloom! During this month, I tried Asa-maku (McDonald's Breakfast) for the first time during Himatsuri (Fire Festival). This Fire Festival is unique to my town in Beppu and it is where they safely burn one side of a mountain to look like lava which relates to the warmth of Beppu's famous Onsens (Hotsprings)! Watching Mt. Ogiyama burn was so cool I was surprised it was safe. Moving to my fourth host family was, again, wonderful.



Experiencing sakuras (Cherry blossoms) for the first time was magical. I went on a picnic with my friends in Oita, where we enjoyed sandwiches, yakiniku, and snacks, and took some beautiful photos. The next week, I spent a weekend in Kumamoto with Rotary, indulging in ramen, going to karaoke, and celebrating the birthday of the new inbound student, Sachi. We stayed in a hotel and attended a huge Rotary event the next day, where we helped set up and raised a lot of donations for the Taiwan earthquake.

I bonded with Sachi, the inbounds, and next year's outbounds, becoming good friends. I also gave a presentation, received a cute My Melody gift from a Rotex, and took many pictures together.



A new AFS exchange student from Thailand arrived at my school, so I helped her out and we joined Japanese classes together. Helping her showed me how much my Japanese has improved. But she is already better than I was at the beginning. My host mother made me amazing bentos almost every day, and I tried LUUP (electric scooter thing), which was fun. I also made more Canadian food for my host family, as well as for my Sri Lankan, Japanese, and Thai friend. We had a school excursion, but heavy rain cancelled it early. We only got to watch a calligraphy performance, and by the end, the kanji looked like they were melting off the page from the water! At a Rotary event at Beppu-Higashi Rotary Club, representatives from Taiwan came, and we raised more donations for the earthquake. I enjoyed many traditional Japanese performances and tried sashimi, though I still don't love it.



My host family and I travelled to Nakatsu to see Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire with English words and Japanese subtitles. It was a fun mini-trip, and I'm glad everyone enjoyed the movie. I went to ROUND 1 (indoor amusement place) with Rotary outbound for the first time. Round 1 is like if you take Skyzone, arcade, roller skating, hoverboards, etc. and put it all into one building. It's a super fun place, and I loved roller skating the most.

Japan is so beautiful in the spring, with the sun shining on the mountains and newly blossomed flowers. I love the warmer weather, though I'm a little scared of the upcoming heat!



Fav things recently:
Country Ma'am vanilla flavour cookies, ramen, my host family's dogs, stray cats, Disney (specifically Baymax), Ghibli, etc.



JAPAN TOUR!

I had my Japan tour, which was the best time I've had since coming to Japan. I was no longer the only inbound in my area, as someone from Australia joined us in April. However, I did still have to represent my district and compete in the youth Japanese speech contest!

I only went out with 4 people total (adult, me, other inbound, and one outbound) we got to have a special trip that differs from the typical going to see temples, castles and so on...

Ghibli Park:

First we went to Ghibli park in Nagoya for a full day. It was a gorgeous park. I felt like I was really in the movies! We also got to watch an original Ghibli short film that can only be seen at that one mini movie theatre inside the park! Such a cool experience and unique to Japan.



DisneySea and Disneyland:



Then we travelled to Tokyo to visit Tokyo DisneySea the next day. Fun Fact: Tokyo Disney is actually in Chiba, not Tokyo! Anyway, we had premium tickets for all the attractions and even stayed in the Disneyland Hotel, which allowed us faster entrance into Tokyo Disneyland! It was amazing, beautiful, and super fun.

The other two girls and I decided to rent school uniforms for our two days at the Disney parks. It's a cute tradition Japanese girls do when they go to Disney, so of course, I chose the pinkest one I could find and wore that the whole time!



DisneySea was an amazing experience, unique to Japan. On the other hand, Disneyland was quite similar to the Disney parks in America. After those fantastic two days, I officially added "visit all Disney parks around the world" to my bucket list! By the end of the trip, my wallet was crying from all the souvenirs I bought. In Japan, it's a huge culture to buy souvenirs for everyone—classmates, the current host family, my main host family, family back home, and of course, myself. So, I spent a lot of time shopping.

After a long day at Disneyland, we took some purikuras (photo booth pictures) and then headed by plane the next morning to Yamagata. It was the perfect end to an incredible Disney experience, and despite how tired I was, I couldn't stop thinking about all the wonderful memories we made.

Yamagata:

Yamagata was where the youth exchange conference was held! And to be honest it was the best part of the whole trip! Even compared to all the theme parks. The reason why is because of how many people I met, and how many friends I made with so many people around the globe.

I was super nervous for the speech contest and I practised a lot! Especially because it had to be exactly 3 minutes, that was difficult. And guess what!! My blood sweat and tears paid off because I got 2nd Place!! I was so surprised by myself, and again how far I've come with the very hard language it is, Japanese. Obviously I still have many areas of Japanese I struggle in, like vocabulary, so I plan to keep studying past my return, to not lose all the time I spent learning to communicate.



Other than the speech, we had an event where we grouped with people from our countries to make a traditional dance routine to present to everyone after dinner time. That was quite difficult considering Canada has so many mixed traditions

and culture over time. We decided to go with a Scottish dance routine as most people in the group had Scottish heritage and knew traditional Scottish dances. I was quite surprised to meet so many people with similar backgrounds to me. Then after all the groups performed their dances, a professional group of Japanese dancers performed Hanagasa Dance, which uses a straw hat with bells attached. It is the traditional dance in Yamagata and was spectacular to see and participate in at the end! Then at night, we went into the Onsen Bath and slept until the next morning when the speech winners were announced, then took many photos, and said our last goodbyes. It is hard to believe all the friends I made, I will not see them for a long time, and quite possibly never again! I do however hope to meet everyone again in the future.



Goals and Conclusion

As I wrap up my final BeaverTale, I'm filled with bittersweet emotions. The countdown is on, with less than two months left of my exchange in Japan. My exchange has been a whirlwind of unforgettable moments and personal growth, and I am grateful for every bit of it. Reflecting on my journey, I realise how much I have changed. From moving across the ocean with barely the basic knowledge of the Japanese language to immersing into a new culture and winning speeches, every step has been an adventure.

My time here has taught me resilience, adaptability, and the importance of cherishing every moment.

Thank you for following my adventures through my BeaverTales. Everyone's support has meant the world to me. The friends I've made, the families who have welcomed me, and the cultural experiences I've had are all things I will miss deeply. In Japan they love Winnie the Pooh, and call him Pooh-san! So... as Pooh-san once said....

"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard"

-A.A. Milne, Winnie the Pooh

さようなら。 (Sayounara)

Farewell.

Serena Gillespie (セリーナ・ガレスピー)



All GC (global communication) students in my school from year 1 to 3!



Ghibli Park Buildings



Cute animal Bentos my host mom made.



My prefecture is where Attack on Titan was made, and I visited their statues.

Saw Mt. Fuji from the Tokyo airport!



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