



Serena

from
Kitchener
to
Japan

“It’s not another trip or vacation”.
“It’s a second life”

As if a fleeting dream, I feel like I stepped off that plane a moment ago, yet now, December is just around the corner.

August 22nd, 2023, As I first arrived in unknown territory, anxiety filled my mind. The anticipation and excitement that had kept me going during the long flights to my city, Beppu, had turned into exhaustion and hunger. I had already faced some crazy travel experiences, including a frantic sprint through the Tokyo Narita airport to catch my connecting flight and the unfortunate loss of my cherished journal. However, my arrival in Japan marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life, and it was time to immerse myself in a world of unfamiliarity.

That same day, as soon as I walked to the baggage claim area, without a place nearby to put on my Rotary Canadian Red jacket, I was greeted by my host family and Rotary Club. Instantly, all the Japanese I had worked hard to practice left my brain, and the only words that escaped my lips were "Konnichiwa"(hello) and "hajimemashite" (nice to meet you).

After the awkward greetings, with a sigh of relief, I arrived at McDonald's for my first meal in Japan.



Seems just like yesterday I was eating those chicken McNuggets in that amazingly clean McDonald's. My first few days in Beppu were mostly me getting settled. On my second day, the mayor of the town welcomed me, while simultaneously sending Miki (my oldest host sister) off on her exchange to Canada. With my limited knowledge of the Japanese language, I managed to introduce myself and do a short interview for the newspaper, with help from my trustworthy friend, Google Translate.

My host family has been a delightful surprise. The smaller Japanese homes took some time to get used to, and sharing a room with my host sister, who often stayed up late to study, was an adjustment. Every member of my (first) host family has their own busy schedule, but we always somehow manage to gather everyone to eat around the same table for dinner. I've come to embrace the busy lifestyle they lead and have learned to cherish the close-knit bond we've developed. I am sad to say I only have a few days left with this host family, but I get to come back to their house next June, a month before I leave. I hope to improve a lot in my Japanese so I can talk to them about everything when I return to, as they like to call it, my "base camp".

Next, my experience with Rotary in Japan has shattered preconceived notions. While it's true they uphold certain rules and standards (most times intimidating), the warmth and empathy of the members exceeded my expectations. My previous worries about fitting into their strict environment were unfounded, as they have been patient with my Japanese. One particular highlight was when I was invited to participate in a Rotary baseball tournament. I even had the chance to bat a couple of times for their team, fully decked out in my host club's baseball uniform.



Being the only Rotary inbound in my district has been a challenge. I am toggling between two districts, and the other one is considerably distant. I've only had limited interactions with them during my first orientation and the trip to Hiroshima. I've made many close friends with the other inbounds in that district and this divide means missing out on their regular activities and meetings. Although the distance makes it difficult, I am grateful to be able to visit many places through both districts.

Since coming to Japan, I've been to Hiroshima, gone to onsens (hot springs), karaoke rooms, and beautiful castles, but my exchange is much more than travelling. It's the day-to-day that really makes my life here. It's one of the things people often confuse with the typical Japanese life shown through anime. In reality, Japanese high school is quite different.

Getting used to it proved to be a surprisingly smooth transition. Despite getting lost on a few occasions, the kind-hearted students are always willing to help. Standing out among the students, it is hard for me to go unnoticed. As I navigate the hallways, people often wave and say hello in English and when I respond they cheer in excitement. I feel like I'm living the celebrity dream most days. Also, the atmosphere is unlike North American high schools. People are genuinely kind, and bullying is nearly non-existent. I've made genuine friends within no time, and my daily routine became second nature. I am also in a different class than typical Japanese high school students. I am placed in a GC (Global Communications) class where the focus is on English classes. Unfortunately, this has set Japanese learning back, as many students prefer speaking English with me to practice.

My daily routine begins at 6:30 AM, with breakfast thoughtfully arranged by my host mother, often consisting of various bread selections from the convenience store. Then, I change into my school uniform and make sure my skirt is below my knees (I've gotten in trouble once because my legs are almost too long for my skirt). Next, my journey to school is a 30-minute walk, occasionally opting for the bus. Luckily public transportation in Japan is remarkably efficient.

I love walking across the river to pet the adorable stray cats.



At school, I usually do my own studies with my iPad and textbooks, because I cannot understand most of the normal lessons. At lunchtime, they sell cheap and delicious food. If I don't have a Bento (lunchbox), I buy a hot sandwich or cream-filled sweet bread. I also sometimes have library time or extra Japanese lessons with the other Canadian exchange student in my class. Then, after school, there are clubs. My school has so many interesting clubs, like archery, sailing, calligraphy, art, band, and more. I have yet to try all of them. Currently, I am in the (bijutsubu) art club, and occasionally, I go to the shoudoubu (calligraphy club). In the art club, the other Canadian student and I are creating a Canadian-themed painting to showcase to our school. On the days I go to clubs, I stay at school until 6 pm, and my host mother usually drives me home.

Next, I'll talk about some extra things I've noticed in my Japanese high school life. My class is mostly girls with only a few boys. Japanese students, especially girls, cheer very loudly for handsome guys but avoid direct interaction, and teachers typically don't mind the noise. Trust in students is evident; lockers have no locks, and when class starts, everyone is suddenly silent and ready to study. I enjoy when girls get ready together early in the classroom, applying subtle makeup (not too much since it's not allowed) and helping each other with their hair.

We also had our school festival, which was amazing, everyone got to wear colourful T-shirts and all the classes put on short skirts. The sports festival was also great, we did Oodama okuri, Mukade racing, Tsunahigi (Tug of war) and Taifu no me. Initially, I dreaded the idea of long school days and a busy schedule, but I quickly fell in love with it. I enjoy staying late at school with friends and practising Japanese calligraphy and art. While I don't love staying up late studying, I appreciate the weekend rest. No phones in class help me stay focused, and uniforms eliminate the need to pick an outfit every morning. All my initial fears have become part of my normal life, and I feel I fit into the Japanese high school student lifestyle well.

Before coming to Japan, I had read many BeaverTales about exchange students' experiences. However, most seemed to focus on happy moments and accomplishments. And while those are great, I wanted to offer a deeper view of youth exchange, including all its ups and downs. If you're considering or preparing for an exchange, I hope this can provide insight into the realities you might encounter.

Learning the Japanese language is one of my biggest challenges. No matter how much immersion you have in any language, it is undeniably difficult, and you have to study hard. As for not liking seafood, it's true that I had yet to eat much of it before arriving, and I realized I'm not a fan of most types. However, it's perfectly acceptable to politely decline and say "kekko desu" (no thank-you). It's always better to be openly honest, especially when getting used to completely different things like food. When I first arrived in Japan, so many things were different, but as I got more settled it got better. I was constantly worried about my image and how people would perceive me, but I soon realised none of that mattered and to just be myself and try my best.

Homesickness was another layer of complexity. It wasn't the constant ache I had imagined, but a weight that ebbed and flowed. It was also heavier around Halloween, one of my favourite holidays, that is not celebrated the same here.

In the beginning, everything was different and overwhelming, but little by little, I'm gaining a deeper understanding of the Japanese way of life. This first BeaverTale has been a glimpse into the unique experiences and challenges of my first three months in Japan. While it hasn't always been smooth sailing, the personal growth and lasting memories make every moment worth it. I'm embracing the uncertainty, welcoming the challenges, and continuing to evolve into a better version of myself with each passing day. Thank you to everyone supporting me on my journey, I am truly grateful for this opportunity, and I can't wait for what lies ahead.

また次回まで、さようなら

Until next time, Sayonara

Serena Gillespie (セリーナ・ガレスピー)

Pictures below:



Representing Canada in my Rotary districts.



Everyone lined up at the sports festival, routines are very strict.

Our class performance for the school festival on the big stage!



Celebrating Halloween with my foreign friends in a karaoke room (keeping busy helps with homesickness).