



Thomas

from

Tillsonburg

to

Italy

I have been in Italy for 64 days. That means 65 days ago I was packing (I strongly recommend not leaving it for the last minute) but I have no regrets because I was spending the time that I should have been packing, with my new brother Diego, from Peru. We spent a lot of time together (mostly in a car), and we got to see parts of Canada that even I have not seen before.

On Thursday September 10th my exchange truly started. I remember this day like it was yesterday. Even though I was not attending school, I woke up for school to go say good bye to my closer friends, and to take Diego out for lunch. Then I went home and finished my packing. To be honest packing for my year on exchange had to be one of the weirdest feelings inside I have ever had. I spent the rest of the day saying my good byes to my dogs and my family before getting into the car with Diego one last time.

When we finally got to the airport everything was going smooth, my mom hadn't yet and my dad was still dad. After getting my luggage and everything sorted out, Diego and I took one last photo before I went through security. On the other side I went to the Tim Horton for one last coffee (which is nothing compared to Italian coffee), and as soon as I sat down at the table it finally hit me like a brick wall, that I was going to be away for a whole 10 months. The plane ride went smoothly. Then before I knew it I was walking through the door of customs into the arrivals section of airport in Milan.

I was extremely confused at first when a group of people came over and started to introduce themselves to me and giving me hugs. After everything settled down, I looked at the face that would become my second family.

Then the culture shock came and trust me when I say it comes in hard and fast. It took me all but 30 seconds to realize I had no clue what people were saying around me; turns out all the Italian that I thought I learned in Canada was no where to be found. Next it was the driving; I got in the car and put my seat belt on, and my host brother Riccardo looked at me as if I had just committed a crime. Even today when I put my seatbelt on he gives me a weird look before remembering that it is what we do in Canada. Although I have to say I recommend putting your seatbelt on here, I truly believe in my host dad's driving ability, but it just gives a little extra comfort around these Italian drivers. Then comes the last major shock, the food! I thought this was something that I was prepared for but oh boy was I wrong. The stereotype about Italians loving their pasta and their food is true, if you multiply that stereotype by ten.

My first three days in Italy were a nice vacation. I went to the first D2050 orientation where I met all the exchange students to my district. We have Mexico, Germany, Taiwan, Finland, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, and also the United States. I truly couldn't have asked for better friends, no scratch that, I couldn't have asked for a better family of exchange students. We talked to each other as if we have known each other for our entire life, and we just got back from travelling abroad for a little while.

This time of luxury quickly came to an end though with my first week of school. Monday through Saturday, from 8:00am to 1:00pm everyday. Honestly I used to hate school in Canada, but it wasn't long before I missed having a two day weekend or the simple act of being able to understand what the lessons are about. I have been extremely lucky though, through many great friends and my Italian lessons three times a week, I'm able to understand most of what is going on. Seeing how I go to a scientific school there are only a few classes I can participate in. These classes being math, English, Design, and Gym. Even in math though I find myself to be lost in translation sometimes.

My city is one for the photo album. Abbiategrasso is an older city where so far I have seen buildings that date back to the 11th century. It is truly amazing seeing all the history of my city. Although it is considered to be a smaller city in Italy, it is much larger than my small home town Tillsonburg in Canada. I take this as an advantage to explore, and learn about the culture and daily life in my town. I like to think that I know my city like the back of my hand, but I still find new places that I haven't been to yet from time to time.

Rotary in Italy is different than Canada. The club here is more sophisticated at their meetings, where the dress code is very formal with everyone wearing a suit and tie, or a long dress. However Rotary is not involved in day to day life like they are in Canada, so I find myself having to plan trips with my host family or simply myself to travel around my district. I am very lucky though that the public transportation here is very easy to use and inexpensive. This has allowed me to go to Milan, and Lake Como to sightsee and meet with other exchange students.

As you know Italians love their soccer. I can honestly say that I have no skills when it comes to soccer, so I had to find another sport to play with my friends. I have joined my class volleyball team and also the basketball team. This has been a blessing for my exchange, because it has allowed me to make good friends that are not exchange students. This has helped greatly with learning the language, but there is still times where we have to use Google translate to make sure that we have the same game plan.

In my second month on exchange we had an orientation weekend in Napoli. This wasn't your ordinary orientation though, not only was it the exchange students from my district but also every district (except for three) in Italy was there. In total there were one hundred exchange students. The weekend was truly amazing; I made countless memories and even better friends. While we were there we got to travel to Pompeii, and tour around the city of Napoli. Although it was beautiful I am going to have to go back, because I didn't spend much time taking the sights in, for I was too busy trying to learn as much as I could about everyone. Also it was a constant exchange of pins, which I have now run out of.

I am also very lucky that the World Expo was in Milan this year. Being able to travel the world in one day is breathtaking. I was able to see many countries, my favourite being the China pavilion. They had a beautiful display of the history of tea, and how it helped shape Chinese culture. I also enjoyed seeing the small African countries, because although they come from the same area in the world their cultures have many differences. I was a little sad when there was no Canadian pavilion because it would have been a great opportunity to show my host family what Canadian culture was like.

Most recently I was able to travel to Lake Como, and I was truly the most beautiful place I have ever seen. It was filled with small winding streets and historic buildings, with a beautiful lake in the middle. What truly complete it though are the mountains that surround the city. I was lucky because usually at this time of year it is very foggy in the area, but when I was there the sun was shining bright and I was able to take in all of the warm fall colours.

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I would like to thank Rotary club of Tillsonburg and District 7080 for making this exchange possible for me because without this exchange I wouldn't have met the people I have and to have the opportunities that I have received. Although I don't think it is possible for me to thank you for how much you have me grow as a person in my time with Rotary.

Thank you very much!

Grazie mille!

Thomas