



Victoria
from
Oakville Trafalgar
to
Japan

“We All Slept on Tatami Floors”

お久しぶりです。

Time has been going by so quickly here in Japan and I can not believe that it has already been three months since my last BeaverTale report. I am now approaching the six month mark and am past my halfway point.

Shortly after my last Beaver Tale I had my first switch of host families. I was so sad to leave my first family as I had gotten very close to them and they introduced me to Japanese culture. My new host family includes five people, but there are only three of them currently living at home. I have three host siblings: a 19 year old brother who attends a university in Tokyo, a 17 year old sister who is on a Rotary Youth Exchange in New York State and a 14 year old sister who lives at home with me. Over the past two and a half months, I have gotten very close with them too and again I will be sad to switch families. This host family has kept me very busy as they are always taking me places and showing me around, which I have enjoyed.

At the end of November I had my school trip and we visited Okinawa. Okinawa is in the very south islands of Japan and is surrounded by tropical beaches and corals reefs. On my trip to Okinawa, I visited many different war landmarks such as Shuri Castle and the United States Air Force base. Also, I went snorkelling in the sea and to the aquarium. As all the tours were in Japanese, it was difficult to understand everything, so I did research about most of the locations before hand so that I was able to get the most out of my experience.

At the beginning of December I had my first overnight Rotary orientation where I was able to meet all the outbound students for the upcoming year. My district here in Japan only exchanges with Canada, America and Australia so all the outbound students are working on their English. During the orientation, all the inbound students had to give a speech about themselves in Japanese and the outbound students had to give a speech about themselves in English. I couldn't imagine me giving a speech about myself in Japanese before coming to Japan! Then we all had time to interact with each other and talk to one another. Shortly afterwards, we had a buffet dinner and went to an indoor 5-story arcade, where we all sang karaoke, roller skated and had lots of fun! The next morning, we all broke up into smaller groups and talked about our home countries to the outbound students and shared information about any culture shock that we had experienced. We signed all of the Australians flags as their exchange ended in January and then all got lunch together. It was lots of fun meeting the outbound students and I wonder who is going to come to Canada.

I am continuing to attend monthly Rotary meetings where I do a brief speech about what I have done in the past month. In December, my host Rotary club had a Christmas meeting where I was able to wear a kimono and see three out of four of my host families, including my first family whom I hadn't seen since I had moved. In January, I had another Rotary meeting that included all eight Rotary clubs in my city where we had one large meeting and all of the exchange students in my city attended. There were geisha's who performed and it was an interesting experience.

This past Christmas was my first Christmas spent away from my family. On Christmas Eve, I was with one of my exchange friends and we spent the entire day together as we were both feeling the same emotions of not being with our families on Christmas. On Christmas morning, it was definitely strange waking up in your host family's house and not being surrounded by all your family. Shortly after waking up, I FaceTimed all of my family back home and opened all the gifts that they had mailed to me. It was nice being able to talk to them and see them all in one place, but it was definitely tough to see them all together, while you are sitting in your bedroom all alone on Christmas morning. In Japan, Christmas is not really celebrated but my host family invited their family members over to our house and we all had lunch together. I am not sure if everyone actually came over to celebrate Christmas or if it was more because it was a Sunday and the family decided to get together. The day after Christmas, most of the exchange students in my district got together and we all did a gift exchange. We were all happy to see each other and spread the Christmas spirit.

Shortly after Christmas, my host family took me to Tokyo for my first time. I am living in a city here but it was nice to see such a large city. Our first day in Tokyo, we had lunch in the Tsukishima district, had monjayaki (a type of Japanese pancake) and went to Tsukiji, which is the largest fish market in the world. I ate some amazingly fresh sushi and saw all sorts of types of fish. We finished the day with some shopping and we were all exhausted from all the walking around. Our second day, we went to

Harajuku, which is where all of the Japanese characters are and where everyone dresses up in the Japanese fashion of "cute." Then we went to Yokohama, another city in Japan, and went to Yokohama's Chinatown. On our last day in Tokyo, which was also the last day of the year, we went to Asakusa which is a temple and made wishes for the New Year.

We got back to Kanazawa late at night on the 31st of December and despite the fact we were all exhausted from Tokyo, I celebrated the New Year at my host family's home with them. On New Year's Day we had a large family breakfast and later drove to a different part of the prefecture (province) that I am living in. My entire host dad's family came as well and we all stayed at the hotel together. We had a traditional Japanese New Year's dinner, helped make mochi (rice cake) and then went to an onsen (public bath). It was only my second time going into an onsen and I am still getting comfortable with the whole idea. The hotel was a very traditional style hotel and we all slept on tatami floors (which are made using rice straw). The next day we returned to Kanazawa and the entire family went to a local temple and prayed for a healthy, happy and a successful year. All of the New Year experiences were completely different from what I am used to in Canada and they were experiences that I will never forget.

When I first came to Japan, at school whenever I went anywhere the students would freak out and everyone wanted to be my friend. A few months later most of the novelty of me started to fade away, (although still to this day I have some school friends who freak out when they see me in the hallways or especially around the city), so it took some time to make good school friends. In the past month, I have gotten very close to quite a few school friends who I am now hanging out with outside of school and am always speaking Japanese with. After the Christmas break, lots of students at my school realized that I can actually speak Japanese and that I understand what they are saying which has made school a lot more enjoyable. The Japanese are pretty quiet people and a lot of the time they are nervous to approach me, but most of my classmates are now getting more comfortable with me being around.

Over the past five months my Japanese has improved so much. I am not fluent, but I am able to have full-on conversations with my host family, teachers and friends. I still attend Japanese lessons twice a week and do lots of self studying. In the past month or two, I am feeling like Japanese is finally starting to make sense and it is way less overwhelming than it was when I first came here.

Choosing to go on an exchange has definitely been one of the best decisions I have ever made. I would not be in Japan if it was not for Rotary and everyone who has helped along the way. I am excited to see what the next five months will bring and I am sure that I will keep enjoying my life in Japan.

Thank you,

Victoria