

LETTERS FROM ABROAD 2017



Rotary International District 9800 Youth Exchange Program

Experiences and Images from our Outbound Youth Exchange Students for 2017



www.rotariyouthexchangedistrict9800.com.au



Outbound Students 2017

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Secretary		Peter Lamping	
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District Governor 2017-2018		Peter Frueh	
District Chair Youth Services		Maria Silber	

A Message from the District Governor



US President Franklin Roosevelt said “We cannot always build a future for our youth, but we can always build our youth for the future.” It was with this objective that Rotary International commenced its first short term exchanges in the 1920s. The year long exchanges of the modern Youth Exchange program commenced in 1958 between Australia and the USA. Today 80 countries regularly participate and 9,000 exchanges take place each year.

There is probably no greater program to promote peace than Rotary International’s Youth Exchange. The students involved grow personally by living in other families, in another culture and often speaking another language. Their development of confidence, public speaking, resilience and a world view are often dramatic and many go on to achieve great things in their life. Often they will then point back to that exchange year as the point where they built their life perspective. The ripple effect of the youth exchanges spread through their schoolmates, host and home families and the host Rotary club members. It is a great example of Rotary “Investing in People” in this case youth.

The current World Rotary International President Ian Riseley (who is from Melbourne) has said “If every youth got a chance to do youth exchange, there would be no wars”. You can’t make war with people you know, understand, value and grow to love.

Long before international travel became accessible for the average person, Rotary was investing in Youth Exchange. Even today where travel is more accessible, we only go as “tourists” and don’t get the deep cultural appreciation and person connections possible with home hosting, international schooling and often language immersion.

The Youth Exchange aims of fostering goodwill, friendships, peace and understanding between countries of the world is as relevant today as it has ever been.

We wish our outbound students all the best as they face their many challenges but gain from the support and opportunities they receive. We welcome our inbound students and try and provide them the best of experiences they can have and the support they need. The Youth Exchange committee do a wonderful job as do the host clubs, families and other supporters.

Peter Frueh

**District Governor - District 9800 2017-18
Rotary International**

A Message from the Youth Exchange Chairman



Welcome Friends, to the Eighth Edition of the D9800 Youth Exchange publication “Letters from Abroad”. I know it’s publication at this time of the year is always eagerly awaited. D9800 outbound Youth Exchange students tell their stories of their year on exchange, enabling our many followers to become “armchair participants” in our 2017 Outbound Rotary Youth Exchange students’ many and varied experiences during their year abroad.

Among the aims of Youth Exchange is the promotion of goodwill, peace, understanding and friendship in the world. Youth Exchange is an educational and cultural exchange providing opportunities for students to live with Rotary approved families, whilst attending school on a regular basis in their host country and immersing themselves in their host countries culture, customs and language

and making lifelong friendships with people from across the globe.

Long term youth exchange is very challenging for young people and requires great courage, commitment and resilience. Our 2017 outbound students have challenged themselves this year and have shown remarkable resilience during what can at times be a difficult year, whilst at the same time being the “best year of their lives”. Youth Exchange is definitely a life changing experience.

A year away from one’s family, home and friends is a very challenging experience for anyone let alone a young person aged between 15-18 years, some of whom have never been abroad before their exchange year. Our D9800 OutBounds land in a foreign country where they commence their exchange not knowing anyone nor indeed the language. However our Rotary Youth Exchange Ambassadors soon acquire family and friends and a new country and language, thanks to the power of Rotary International and the Rotary International Youth Exchange program. The Rotary family and network is particularly important and provides the necessary support and family to enable our students to quickly immerse themselves in their new country, its customs and culture and their year’s education in a foreign country. Their host country becomes the student’s new home and the ties to their host country grow stronger as the year progresses, to the point where our Youth Exchange students feel they have two countries and multiple families and are reluctant for their exchange year to end.

During their year on exchange our Youth exchange students participate in their host Rotary clubs service projects and upon their return I would urge our students and their families to continue their involvement and connection with Rotary by participating in their sponsor Rotary club’s many programs and projects as well as those of our D9800 Youth Exchange committee, perhaps by hosting an inbound student.

Thank you to our outbound students who have contributed to this year’s edition of “Letters from Abroad”. Your contributions make for inspiring reading. I wish you all the very best for your future. Please keep in touch with our committee and your sponsor Rotary club. Thank you to the “Letters from Abroad” team for their magnificent work in producing such an outstanding publication year after year and this year is another wonderful edition. My thanks to the exceptional and hardworking Youth Exchange Committee members for your dedication and commitment to the Youth Exchange program and our students. Our sponsor and host clubs and families I gratefully acknowledge and thank you for your ongoing support for the D9800 Youth Exchange program, without which our program would not be the hugely successful program it is, promoting international peace, goodwill, friendships and understanding.

Gabrielle Morgan

Rotary D9800 Youth Exchange Committee

ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE A CHANCE OF A LIFETIME! HOST FAMILIES INVITED NOW!

Rotary Youth Exchange invites kind and caring Host Families within the community to assist local Rotary Clubs offer an outstanding exchange program to young people from all over the World.

A Host Family is a vital part of this cultural and educational exchange and typically hosts a student on a voluntary basis for a period of between 10 to 16 weeks. In doing so, a Host family officially becomes a Friend of Rotary International. The Host Family plays an integral role in offering the student the experience of a new culture and language, whilst at the same time learning about a different culture from a young leader. It is a direct window to the world for all members of a Host family. You not only share a young person's hopes and dreams, but more importantly, you make those dreams possible.

Hosting is the beginning of a lifelong friendship and connection with a student and family overseas. Whilst it can be challenging to help a young person transition to a new culture and ease into the surroundings, it is always fun and the rewards are immeasurable.

Host Families in the Rotary Youth Exchange program come in many shapes and sizes! Young children, older children, no children at all, extended families and older generations – all have been successful in hosting Exchange Students.

Please consider this amazing and rewarding opportunity now. Enquiries are most welcome.

Further information is available at www.rotaryyouthexchangedistrict9800.com.au

"LETTERS FROM ABROAD"

IS COMPILED AND PUBLISHED FOR THE
ROTARY INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT 9800 YOUTH EXCHANGE PROGRAM
BY BARRY MULLEN

CEILIDH WRATTEN

Denmark

Sponsor Club - RC of Daylesford

My name is Ceilidh Wratten, I am 17 years old, and for the last 9 months I have been living and studying in Denmark.

The first reaction most people have when finding out I came all the way from Australia to live and study in Denmark for a year is; "Why Denmark?" As an Exchange Student, this is probably the most frequently asked question you receive.

I chose Denmark as my first preference because I was interested in its school and social system. I didn't know much about Denmark before I came, but I had heard stories about the free education and healthcare, and couldn't quite understand how the Danes had managed to make this system work so well (later, I found out that this was a result of the enormous taxes that they pay!) but other than this there weren't a whole lot of reasons I chose Denmark. The destination wasn't something that was important to me. Of course, now I am so grateful I came to Denmark, and I don't regret a thing.

Something that initially worried me about coming to Denmark was the fact that most people spoke perfect

English. This worried me because learning another language was a part of Exchange that I found very important. Despite my worries, I think that the fact most people spoke English worked to my advantage. In my first few months I focussed on making friends and being closer to my host family, but I didn't worry too much about the language. After 3-4 months, people started to get tired of speaking English, which was okay because, by this point, I had already developed close relationships. At 4 months, I was starting to understand lots of Danish, but I still wasn't at the point where I was comfortable speaking the language. When I moved to my second host family, around 5 months after I came to Denmark, I asked if they could speak only Danish to me. At 6 months, I was speaking Danish a lot more, and now, at 9 months, although I am not fluent, I am speaking only Danish to my friends, family and teachers at school.

I have many friends in Denmark, whom I am very grateful for, but it wasn't all easy from the beginning. When you move to a completely new place, know no one, feel like you don't fit in, and have no friends, it can be very confronting, but if you work on your relationships it can be very rewarding. For me, when I

Meeting my host family for the first time at the airport (left);

Me, a new Exchange Student, a rebound and my councillor.



first arrived in Denmark, many people found me interesting. My classmates asked me a lot of questions, but after the first few weeks I wasn't so new anymore. By showing that I was interested and trying to learn their language and culture, people talked to me more, and I developed better relationships. When on Exchange, I feel like it is very important to not give up. For me there were days when I was tired and just wanted to stay home and sleep, but by getting out of bed, going to school or to town and having a conversation with someone new, I developed the best relationships I could ever wish for.

I am lucky to have travelled a lot with my host families, my friends, my school and my host Rotary club. I have been all around Denmark, I went to Germany with my class and I have even been to Sweden on two occasions, once with a friend and another time with my host family. I have travelled to so many amazing places during Exchange, but one that stands out for me would have to be the 18-day bus trip around Europe with other Exchange Students in Denmark.

Euro-tour was incredible. Not only were the places we visited absolutely stunning, but travelling with 40 other Exchange Students from all over the world was also an amazing experience. I made a lot of friends, and have memories that will last forever. We started the tour by taking the ferry to Germany. From there we drove to Czech Republic, then to Austria, Italy, Monaco,

France, Belgium, The Netherlands and then finally we drove back to Denmark through Germany. It is incredible to say that I have seen the Berlin Wall, Saint Marks Square, the Rialto Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, the Mona Lisa, Anne Frank's house and so many more extraordinary places and things. I also ate pasta, pizza and cannoli in Italy, and chocolates and waffles in Belgium. Euro tour was most definitely a highlight from my Exchange year.

I have been lucky to have three amazing host families that I get along with very well. All three of my host families were also very different, something that I am grateful for because I have experienced different Danish lifestyles. I was also very lucky to have host siblings in all three of my families, with younger siblings in my first and last, which has undoubtedly helped me with the language. I am very happy with the bond that I have with all three of my host families, a bond that I am sure will last a long time.

As well as being an incredible year, of course it has also been difficult. It is emotional to spend a year away from your family and friends in a foreign country. But you learn from difficult situations. I have learnt to deal with so many emotions and this has made me become much more independent. This year, I have learnt many vital life lessons. Exchange is one of the most enriching, eye-opening experiences, and it is extremely worth it.

Presenting Australia to a class in my local Primary School





View of Copenhagen



In Nyhavn (left)

With my first host sister when she arrived back from her year of Exchange in the USA; a friend I have for life (below left)

With my second host family (below right)





Euro Tour in Vienna



Visiting a local Castle

FILIPE ORTIZ

Sweden

Sponsor Club - RC of Glen Eira

Where should I start? My year has been amazing so far with so many great experiences it is hard to describe. When I arrived I instantly had something to adapt to, the cold. I had just left the extreme Brazilian summer, gone through Australia which is also known for its ridiculous warmth, to be greeted with snow at the first step out of the airport. Adapting to the cold was my first challenge and with winter coming soon I know I will have to do it again and this time I imagine it will be much colder as I am spending December and early January here.

On my second weekend, I was already invited to my first Exchange Student meet up, a ski trip where I met my first group of friends who later became my Exchange family. I had a ton of fun learning to ski and getting to know so many Exchange Students. Later I went to the language camp that Sweden holds for new Exchange Students where I met the other people who had just started their journeys with me. During this period I also began school, which made my days feel less empty. Soon I started playing table tennis where so I could stay active and do something I enjoyed and had wanted to do for a long time.

Once I had my first holidays, I went to my host family's winter cottage where I improved my skiing

drastically, tried going into the sauna and jumping into snow right after and went to a McDonald's ski through because why not? Later in March I experienced something even most Swedes have only dreamt of - I went all the way up to the north of Sweden, to a town called Kiruna. During my time there I got to see The Ice Hotel, the iron mines, the northern lights, I got to ride a dog sled, play football on the snow, ice fish, and eat reindeer. After that, Easter came. I celebrated it with another Exchange Student's host family, and I could not have asked for a better Easter. I am hoping to also spend the New Year with them.

During my time in Sweden I was fortunate enough to be taken to different places around the local area by the Rotarians in my club, who are always excited to show me everything and expose me to experiences I've never tried. I played boule, hunted elks, fed cows and did tons of fun stuff while also getting to meet their families. Rotary organises a bunch of trips during the Exchange year but by far my favourite was the Europe Tour. I got to ride a bus around Europe with my Rotary Exchange family and see a bunch of cool places along the way. I got to visit 10 countries in total counting the detours. From Denmark through Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy, France and a few others. I am so

happy I got to climb the Alps, go to the Eiffel Tower, tour in Venice, and look at the Berlin wall. And that wasn't even a glimpse at the amazing experiences I had on the tour.

Once summer came, my schedule became full in a matter of days. I went on a sailing camp, celebrated "Mid Summer" the Swedish way, and went to several people's houses for dinners, lunches and what not. I even went on a mini-yacht trip! My summer holidays were great and I cannot wait for winter. I am excited to try the Swedish

Language
Camp



Christmas; hopefully it will snow since it has been a dream of mine to experience a white Christmas.

I have learnt a lot, not just about Sweden and the language but about myself, other people and just in general matured a lot. While in Sweden I have done a few talks and presentations in schools and with Rotary, got to travel around Sweden and see lots of places and towns, big and small. But it would not have been the same without the most crucial part of being an Exchange Student, my host families. They are the ones who cared for me throughout my time in Sweden and I could not be more grateful. With my host families I got to experience Swedish traditions, their habits, native food, and travel to awesome places, learn how to ski and travel on boats. They helped me out with any

emergencies and were always trying to make sure I got to try everything I've wanted to try, looking out for things they knew I was keen on trying. Like joining a table tennis club or learning the piano.

Overall I think my Exchange has been successful and I have no regrets, it has been all I wanted and more and I don't want it to end any time soon. As the language comes along and I get presentations out of the way and check the last things off my bucket list I feel more and more at home here not really wanting to go back and that is what Exchange does. It gives you another home somewhere around the world. Before this journey ends, planning for more travel has already begun. With both old and new friends and family I can't wait to see what the future holds.



Stockholm
from inside
Parliament
(above)

The
Northern
Lights in
Kiruna (left)



Ice Hotel (above)

Family Yacht trip (above right)

Midsommar (right)

GENEVIEVE COX

Germany

Sponsor Club - RC of Richmond

“Wie Dumb bist du?”

“How dumb are you” was my first immediate thought after stepping of the plane at Frankfurt International Airport. I could already feel the cold nipping at my fingertips, seeping into my legs; the type of cold that you never really ever manage to shake off, at least not until after Easter when you finally see the sun again. It was my first day in Germany, one of those days that you will always remember for the rest of your life. I don’t remember all the details (if you were to ask me what time my plane arrived, what I had eaten - I’d be at a complete loss) but I do remember three distinct things beyond the cold:

My host family welcomed me in a confusing mixture of German (that I couldn’t understand) and English (that after exactly 24 hours of travelling I felt that I couldn’t understand). The butterflies in my stomach felt like they were thrashing around in the Mosh pit of a heavy metal concert. The distinct and utterly despairing feeling that I was an absolute idiot for getting myself into this situation.

“How dumb are you?” I barely knew these people, this culture and yet there I was; standing in the middle of Frankfurt Airport, the first day of my 355

days away from home. Ten days off one year I would be living in Germany as an Exchange Student.

It was not the first time that I would take a moment, lose focus and just think to myself “How dumb are you?” during my Exchange; it actually turned out to be a common event:

The second time was in my third day in Germany, my first day of school. A teacher with presumably very nice intentions of asking me about myself, stopped me in the middle of class and attacked me with an overwhelming (and seemingly unending) flurry of German.

I sat there, eyes wide with astonishment and embarrassment that I had understood exactly none of what she had just said. I turned left to my host sister, silently begging for her help and while she answered all of the teacher’s questions with the finesse of a first born language speaker, I sat there with my newly adopted mantra running through my head- “How dumb are you?”

I couldn’t even answer the most basic of questions in the language of the country I had gone to, how was I ever going to understand what was happening?



Exchange friends and friends

After that the moments that made me pause and repeat my mantra became indistinct, but very common; If I got lost on the way home “How dumb are you” if I pronounced a word wrong “How dumb are you” If I accidentally used the casual form of German, instead of formal at a Rotary meeting “How dumb are you”

But in all of my despair that I was an idiot I slowly found myself learning to love this strange, confusing and scary land. I learnt the benefits of a punctual society, I learnt to slowly love the language that I was learning with its literal translations and efficient methods (handschuhe, nackschneke, umarmung are a few examples). I never learnt to love the school, but I learnt to love the way pupils were treated by teachers and adults.

Slowly my Mantra of “How dumb are you” became “I love this place.” The change was slow and

eventual, but I wouldn't be thinking anything else now. I truly do love this country and its people.

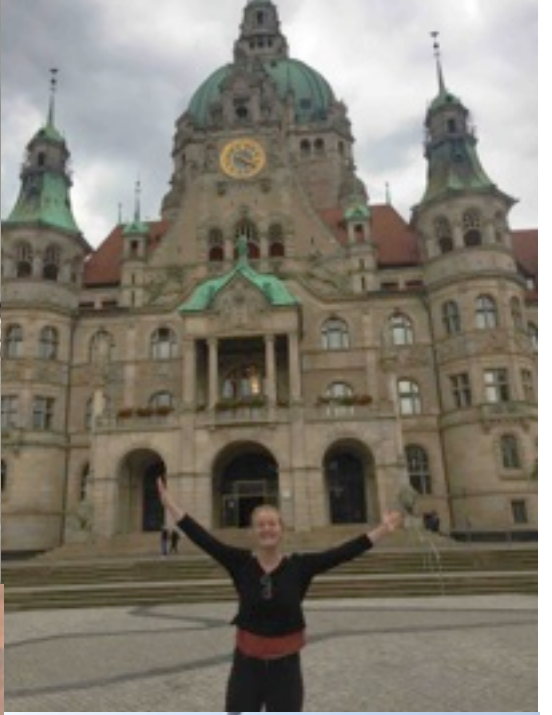
I love the lazy Sundays and busy week days, I love the tiny towns and old churches, I love the Bavarian forests and nature walks, I love the history soaked deep into the soil of this country and I really, really love the pretzels.

I will never forget how stupid I am, but it is something I have learnt to accept; just as I have learnt to accept the other portions of myself. I will forever thank Rotary for providing me with this opportunity to live abroad. I would never trade my idiocy, for it has brought me here, to my second home. I answer proudly now “ja klar bin ich dumb.”

I am a proud idiot, a proud Australian, a proud German and a proud Exchange Student.



Oktoberfest in Munich (above); Eurotour memories in Budapest (above right); meeting new Districts and new friends at camp (right)



Clockwise from top left:- Eurotour in Venice; Exploring the Hanover Town Hall; representing the Australia at Koln Cathedral; Eurotour again; American Rotary Youth Exchange friends; Eurotour memories in Venice.



HENRIETTA SCHMIDT

Taiwan

Sponsor Club - RC of Essendon North

大家好!

It's hard for me to believe, but I have just entered my 10th month of Exchange. I feel that I have changed so much already and experienced so much in such a short time. I have made friends from all over the world, eaten food I never would have considered and learnt a language I still think is impossible.

I remember my first day in Taiwan almost perfectly. I arrived a little tired, a little stressed and beginning to rethink the entire Exchange thing. Going through the airport with a girl who would soon become my closest friend was crazy. We collected our luggage and said goodbye, suddenly I realised just how unprepared I really was. My family drove me to our house, a farm on the edge of Taoyuan. We dumped my stuff in my room and then left for a house warming party. There I experienced major culture shock. It basically mirrored any social gathering with my real family. Lots of food, lots of people and lots of yelling. It's not angry yelling, but when you've just got off a plane and your basically falling asleep where you stand, people screaming "are you hungry" in Chinese is terrifying.

The culture shock didn't stop there. The next day I went to my first Rotary meeting. In Australia, we eat a meal, have a guest speaker, maybe a raffle. Taiwan Rotary involves feasts, karaoke and toasts. People swarm around tables toasting everything. And the food!

First full day in Taiwan and I'm already enjoying ducks blood! (Just kidding, it's not my favourite... Too slimy)

As the days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, I just accepted it. I go wherever people want me to go, I eat whatever they want me to eat. I've seen beautiful mountains, met a million people and eaten a variety of blood. I'm basically a vampire at this point.

But Exchange isn't just about the food and I am a student. I go to one of the best schools in Taiwan and it is crazy! The school day begins at 7:30, with testing. I don't even arrive until 8:10 for the first official class. Then 9 hours of school (including a one hour break) and it's over for the day. Except of course there's always cram school! And even after cram school, students have homework. I get classmates texting me at 1:00am because they are stuck on some English work. The students are so dedicated to their work, it is so impressive. Everyday I am blown away by my classmates work. I hope that in Australia I can study as hard as them.

One of the great things about being a Rotary Exchange Student is our Chinese classes. Twice a week I get to learn more about the culture, as well as the language of Taiwan. I'm currently learning to do Chinese painting and I also learnt calligraphy. Our teachers introduce us to the different holidays and help

Welcome on arrival in Taiwan



us understand the traditions of Taiwan. There's no better feeling then realising you understand a conversation and can actually speak for yourself.

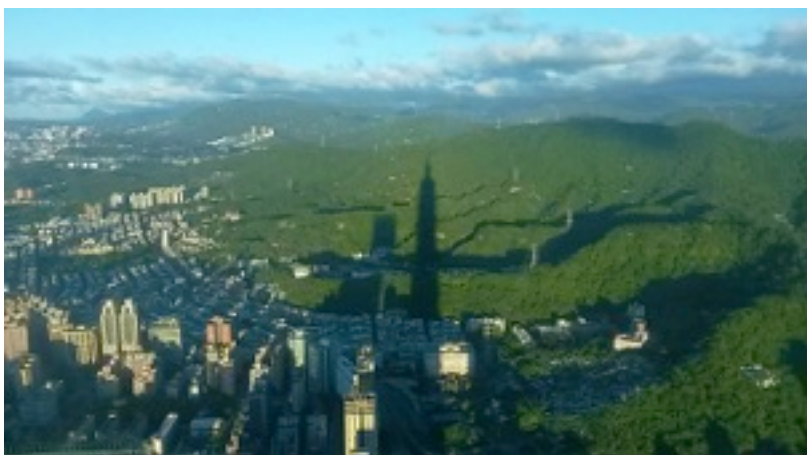
One downside of being an Australian Exchange Student was that I had to say goodbye to almost my entire district (35-ish students) as only 5 of 40 had arrived in January. When they were leaving I spent a bit of time looking at goodbye quotes. I came across one that said "I wish there was a way to know you were living in the good old days before you actually left them", and it occurred to me that my Exchange will probably be part of my "good old days". I try to enjoy every moment but I do sometimes, especially as my Exchange draws to a close, think about saying goodbye to people I may never see again. I'm counting down the days before the end and it is kind of scary. And

depressing... But Exchange is great and you should definitely do it.

Seriously, I would like to thank so many people for this amazing opportunity. My parents, for supporting me in this and Australian Rotary for sending me. Taiwan Rotary, for hosting me and organising all our amazing events. The other Exchange Students who are always ready to hang out. My host parents, for letting me stay in their homes. My host sisters, Sharon, Amber and Wendy for being there and helping me always. Amber's friend, who also took me out a few times. My classmates, who made the long school days a lot more bearable. My Chinese cultural and language teachers, for making the learning so fun. And finally, my Chinese class. My four closest friends on Exchange.

I chose to come to Taiwan because I wanted to experience a completely different culture to Australia and Taiwan has done nothing but be so beautiful and unique. For a country that you can easily circle in two days, it is unimaginable and exciting and I have enjoyed every moment of it.

From Henrietta Schmidt~吕安妮



Clockwise from bottom left:- Representing Australia at the CKS Memorial; my host sistera Sharon, Wendy and I at Bali, an old street in Taipei; view from Taipie 101; a flower I painted in Chinese Painting class.

JULIET BAKER Germany

Sponsor Club - RC of Bendigo

Before going on Exchange, I had no idea what to expect. Rotary does a great job of preparing you, but there's only so much you can learn from your home country, still as an outsider. But once you get to your Exchange country, within days you have learnt so much. It soon becomes your second home. You learn about your host country; its history, culture, people, food, the similarities and differences, but you also learn so much about yourself as a person. An Exchange year will change you, but I think in the best way possible.

I was in Germany for my Exchange year, in an average sized city (about 150,000 people) called Flensburg, situated on the border of Denmark and Germany (I can now say I've walked to Denmark!). It is a beautiful city filled with the German culture, and I am completely in love with it. So much so that I'm considering doing my university studies here! I never knew that such a culture existed. That's just one of the many exciting parts of being an Exchange Student; learning a new culture. It will really open your eyes to the world and how different and complex it is. You find yourself often thinking about how life would be different growing up in

your host country. You also learn so much about other cultures from your Exchange friends!

You will get so many opportunities to travel on Exchange, so make the most of every possibility. Even if that means going into town with some friends, because trust me, some of my best memories have started that way. I often went to Hamburg and other cities close to me with my friends (or of course in my city), which was awesome and I have some of the best memories with them. Of course there will also be chances for you to travel to other countries. My school did a ski-trip to Austria that I was lucky enough to go on! Also the Rotary Orientations are always great times to explore new cities. We went to Munich for one of my last orientations, and it was amazing! And in Europe there is a "Euro Tour", and in other countries they have similar trips. In my District we went to so many places, and we travelled for 3 weeks. I went to Prague, Vienna, Rome, Pisa, Monaco, Paris, Belgium, Amsterdam and a few more cities. It was probably the best experience of my life and I will have those memories forever. My host family often took me places too. We travelled to Berlin, Sylt (an island a few hours away from my town) and even Sweden. I was really lucky to have so

District
Group
Photo,
Munich

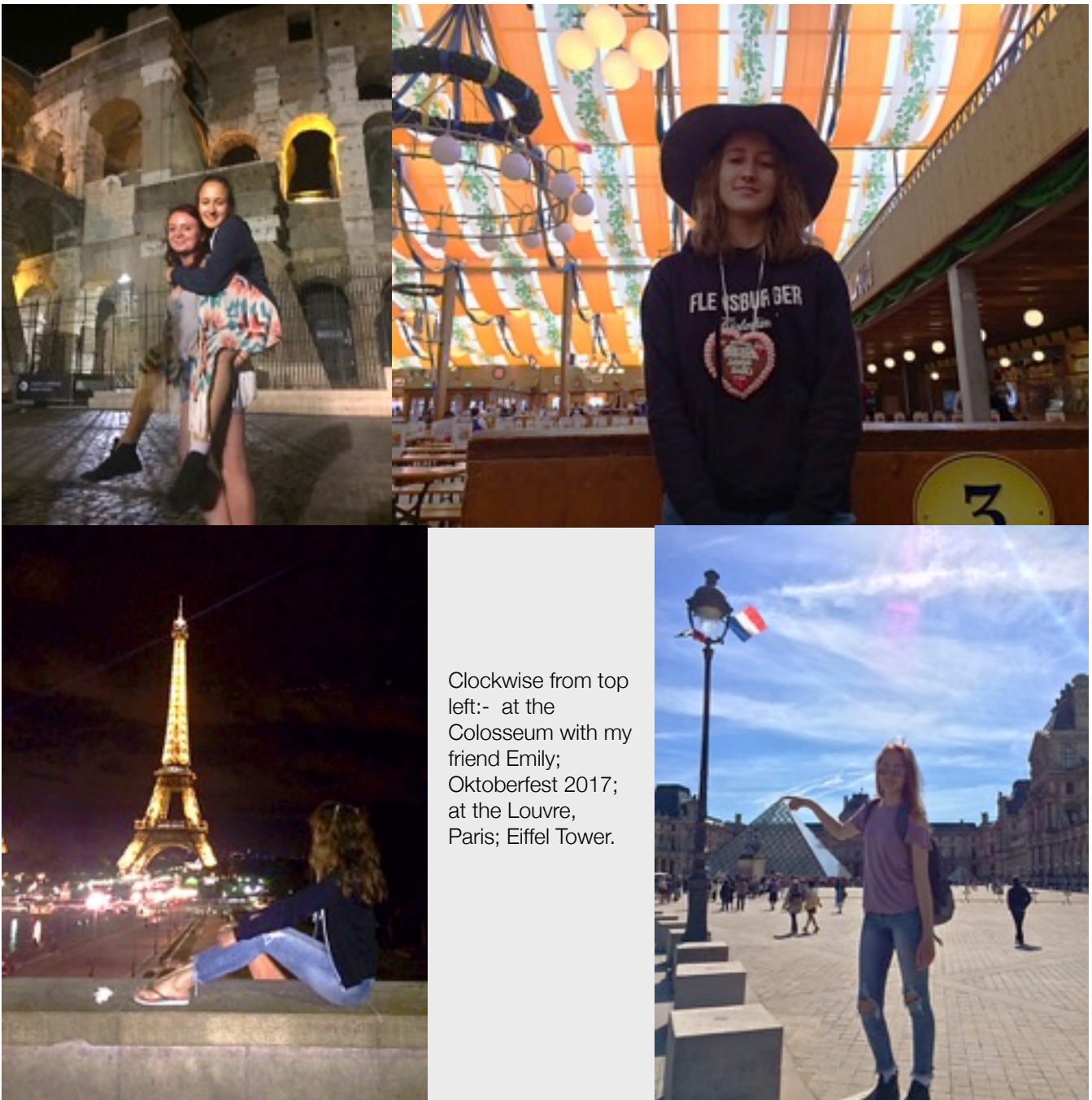


many chances to travel, so make the most of every travel opportunity while you can!

One of the hardest parts of my Exchange year though was learning the language. German for me was really difficult and I struggled a lot in the beginning. I mostly spoke English with everyone, which definitely did not help. But after a lot of practice speaking and listening, I can finally say I can speak German! That is probably the most satisfying feeling, and one of the best parts of this year, which makes all the struggling worth it. But you do really have to apply yourself to the language and culture, which takes time. But it all pays off in the end!

An Exchange year will also have downsides. You will struggle with the language, miss home, feel sad,

angry and stressed, but it's so important in these times to remember how amazing an experience your Exchange is. I definitely felt these things during my year abroad (sometimes all at once), but I would always think about how lucky I was to be there. Whenever I felt homesick or sad, it always comforted me to think about all of the amazing times I had in my year. My year abroad was by far the best year of my life and now that it's almost over I can't even imagine starting over again in Australia. I have made friends for life, have a second family, learnt a new language, yet the hardest part of this whole year will be going back. This year has changed me. I am now a more confident and comfortable person and I have lived the best year possible! And I am so happy I can say that Germany is my new home, and will always have a special place in my heart, no matter how far away I am.



Clockwise from top left:- at the Colosseum with my friend Emily; Oktoberfest 2017; at the Louvre, Paris; Eiffel Tower.

MADISON (MADDI) COLLIS Austria

Sponsor Club - RC of Flemington

Servus! My name is Maddi and for the past 9 months I've had the privilege to have lived in the beautiful city of Vienna, Austria.

I have had a hard time thinking about what to write in my Letter From Abroad because so much has happened this year and I don't know where to start. I'll try my best to give you an idea of how my Exchange year has gone and why you should choose to live abroad for twelve months.

I arrived in Austria on January 15th during one of the coldest winters Austria had experienced in 30 years. It was so cold that the Danube River had frozen over and I later tried ice skating on it with my first host family. Five months before my arrival I knew nothing about this small but thriving European country. I didn't even know that Austria existed but after reading an info packed booklet filled with beautiful pictures of mountains and lakes at the first RYE preparation camp I took an interest in Austria and decided to list it as my top country preference. After nine months of living in Vienna and seeing my fair share of both modern and mountainous Austria I've learned to embrace and love this country's culture.

Through living in Vienna I've been exposed to the culture of daily espresso's, the tasty and traditional afternoon coffee and cake, house shoes, shops being closed on Sundays, one of the best public transport systems in the world and some of the grumpiest passengers I've ever encountered (it's an Austrian thing). I've also learned a bit about Mozart, indulged a bit too much in the Viennese Manner

and Milka, Austria's equivalent to Cadbury and of course I've been to the Opera and visited countless museums.

The first month of my Exchange passed in a blur filled with new sights, tastes and experiences. The feeling that this place would be my home for the twelve months didn't really hit me until around my second month.

I'm currently approaching my nine month mark here in Austria and with my departure date looming ahead I've been doing some reflecting on my achievements and experiences. Overall this year so far has been great in many different ways. I've learned a lot about myself, about a new culture and surprisingly I managed to learn some German too, which is something I thought I would never achieve. I've met so many new people and I've made some great friends. I've also visited a few different countries in Europe and travelled around Austria as well. However, this year has been a rollercoaster and there have been many up and down's. I've had misunderstandings with host families, I struggled to make Austrian friends during my first six months and this left me feeling quite lonely and there have been times where I've felt homesick and rather than talking about my feelings I've resorted to eating a packet of Tim Tams while watching Netflix instead.

On a positive note some of the great experiences I've had have happened on the Rotary organised trips and weekends. At the beginning of the year myself and the twenty other Inbounds in Austria spent two weeks together at a language camp

Ski week in
Schladming



situated across from a beautiful lake, which is a popular swimming spot in the summer. In March we met up once again for a ski week in a place called Schladming, a former mining town and while we were there we also met the Australian team taking part in the Special Olympics World Winter Games. Later on in May around seventy students got together for the highly anticipated Eurotour and we spent three weeks travelling by bus to France, Italy, Monaco and Croatia. We've also been hiking in the mountains of Styria, seen the last of the autumn flowers at Schoenbrunn Palace in Vienna and later in December we'll be meeting again in Salzburg for our final get together.

Besides the Rotary organised events I've also enjoyed normal things such as hanging out with my host families, getting pizza with the girls in my

Italian class, watching The Simpsons in German and walking up a couple of hundred stairs to reach the top of the St Stephan's Cathedral in the centre of Vienna.

All of these experiences, both the good and the bad, have helped me grow into a much more confident, independent, capable and open-minded person. I'm very proud of how I've stepped out of my comfort zone (even when I didn't want to) and tried new things.

My Exchange year hasn't always been perfect but it really has been one of the best years of my life. I'm very grateful for having had the opportunity to take part in such a wonderful program and I'm also very thankful for the support that I received to help get me to Austria.



Clockwise from top left:- View from Language Camp; genuine gelato in Rome on Eurotour; Hiking weekend; frozen Danube River the day after arriving in Vienna.

Madison Davies Spain

Sponsor Club - RC of Bacchus Marsh

Hola Soy Madi! Nine months ago you would have found me at the checkout of your local Woolies, now you can find me in the city center of Madrid, Spain and making the most of everyday, speaking Spanish and most of all living. I am a big believer in your life isn't supposed to be in one place and whilst your young is the perfect time! Last January my 15-year-old self left to embark on the craziest emotional rollercoaster that would last a year. I remember thinking before I left "a whole year?" Now I am thinking at 9 months in "Just a year"

Spain is a beautiful country filled with the most amazing culture, food and people, which I have called home for the last 9 months. It is a country which has given me endless opportunities to grow and expand my knowledge. I truly believe I have learnt so much more about the world we are all living in, from the other Exchange Students as well as the Spanish people who all have extremely diverse opinions.

I have been so lucky to have been living in the center of Madrid for my entire Exchange so far; Madrid is an amazing city, which has transport to every single corner and curve of the community. Madrid has an endless life, which runs to the early hours of the morning there is always something on or somewhere to go. When you are on Spanish time and eating at 10pm and the hottest part of the day is at 5 o'clock the constant life of the city is running at all hours. It's one of the things I love most about Spain - you feel so safe and welcome always.

I feel that the whole concept of an Exchange can get mistaken as a 'trip'. Warning, this is a major trigger word for every Exchange Student because if it was a trip you wouldn't be sitting through 7 hours of school or being emotionally drained some days from living abroad. But those 7 hours of school in the long run for me personally have helped so much with my Spanish. Living 17,300km away from your loved ones teaches you how to rely on yourself, which I see to be a very important value.

I have certainly had my fair share of bad times but they are always weighed out by the good. My host Mum just takes one look at me and knows I'm upset; next thing you know we are having a coffee and a chat. Just shows how amazing it is to build such a bond. We started out as complete strangers and now we have a Mother and Daughter love which is so special and such a highlight of Exchange creating relationships like this.

Every single day is your day. Whenever I have felt sad I just think there is always tomorrow but not every single one of my tomorrows will be in Spain. I am so glad I decided to go on Exchange from the people you meet to the things you eat, every little thing makes life so wonderful. You constantly put yourself out of your comfort zone from ordering a coffee in your new foreign language to hating the taste of seafood in my case to becoming a lover of calamari. These little things really add up.

I will never be able to truly express to Spain the love I have for this beautiful country. I was able to spend a

Spain Day,
the 12th
of
October



month beside the Mediterranean sea. I just floated for two hours one day because I felt so happy and content spending my days eating trays of paella and every night trying a new ice cream flavour; could a summer get any better? Keep in mind this was right after spending 20 days travelling around Europe with your biggest supporters throughout your whole Exchange - the other Exchange Students! Summer felt like a dream. I could not believe that all these things were happening!

To be enriched in another culture and taken in by complete strangers whom you now consider family is the greatest gift there is. Walking through the streets

and being asked for directions is the best feeling; well I also guess in my neighborhood I am the only white freckled redhead who wears glasses so I am not hard to spot or people to realize that I am “that Australian girl”. Elevator rides are always fun as there are only 7 stories in my building so I always get the double check then the “ahhhh your that Australian girl”

I will forever be grateful to Rotary and Spain for absolutely everything they have allowed me to do and become this year. Thank you. Here’s to making the best of the next 3 months of trying more new things and making the most of the short time I have left.



Top left: view from my host home;

Top right: Plaza Mayor, Madrid

Left: Eiffel Tower, Paris



Left: standing at the “end of the world” at km 0 of the ‘Camino De Santiago’

Bottom left: Streets in Toledo, Spain

Bottom right: Spanish Hams



MATTHEW ARCHON

Brazil

Sponsor Club - RC of Bacchus Marsh

Exchange for some just starts off as an excuse to get away for a year but for me and many others it was the start of my new life.

My name is Matthew Archon, I'm 17 years old and I'm currently living in a city called Campos dos Goytacazes which is about 400km from Rio de Janeiro. I'm in a city of about half a million, which is a step up from my home town of just twenty thousand.

Brazil is a nation endless in beauty, nature and full of loving, caring and affectionate people. I can't go anywhere without having to have a hug or a kiss and that is one thing I love about Brazil. One thing I also love is that there hasn't been a day colder than 22 degrees in my city.

Our District Governor, Neville John, had told us that "The difference between a good and great opportunity is what you do with it". That advice has made a real impact on the way I have conducted myself on my Exchange. I have been given countless opportunities to make this year truly great. One of these examples is the Amazon Expedition. Just like all the Exchange Students who have done it before,

it is really the highlight of my Exchange. I was sailing through the Amazon River and Rio Negro with about 50 other Exchange Students from around the world. We visited native communities and tribes, we swam at waterfalls only lit by the moonlight and we slept in hammocks for 8 nights. Apart from the obvious beauty, this will be one of the many things from my Exchange that I will never forget.

I will never forget the sunsets, I will never forget the peace that the Amazon offered and, of course, I will never forget the friends I made and the moments we shared. About a month after the Amazon trip, the friends I made there and I all met up to stay in Brasilia for a week to catch up and cement the friendships we all made.

I have also done a lot of travelling to see the best of what this nation has to offer. I've seen countless beauties with my host families, my friends and alone. And later on in November, I will be doing a 20 day tour of the northeast of Brazil.

Exchange is also one of the greatest educational experiences that there is to have that isn't offered in

A stunning sunset on the Amazon shared with other friends on this trip



a traditional classroom environment. Probably the greatest lesson learned is learning a new language. I have to say, there's nothing better having real conversations with people in their native language. I am proud to say how far I have come along with the language. I started this year with 4 words of Portuguese. Never in my life was I so frustrated because I no longer could be the true chatterbox I am. Because no one around me spoke much English, so essentially for my first month, my interaction with the outside world consisted of "Hi", "I want to eat" "I will sleep".

But aside from learning a language I can say that I have definitely learned more than I would have learned whilst being with my family and friends in Australia. We learn from making mistakes, we learn from trying new things. I have also learned first hand what my parents have been trying to tell me for the longest time. Principally two things "Matt, the world is a very harsh and cruel place" and "Matt, be the change you want to see in the world". I have definitely applied this here. I've seen a lot of poverty, I've seen a lot of corruption, but I have also seen and been the smile or laugh that helps people get through their day. I can also confidently say that I've also learned more about myself and what it means to be a human being.

As great as some of these experiences may be, my Exchange has not been all just blue skies. You will fight with people you love, you will lose some of your best friends, you will be frustrated that nothing is working, you will feel homesick; sometimes you will just get into your bed and cry. But aside from that, the highs of my Exchange make up for every sad moment ten fold. And no matter how bad things got or no matter how hard this year may have been, to be an Exchange Student has been the best decision of my life so far.

I'd say the greatest part of my Exchange, apart from the life changing people, beautiful locations is that I finally became my true self. This will come along for anyone who does an Exchange because there's no longer pressure from you or anyone to be a certain person. Someone who knows that they're capable of doing anything that they want in this world. When I applied, I was lost. There was a lot of uncertainty in my life in regards to my career, schooling and personality in general. After being here for 9 months, all of that has changed. I'm no longer uncertain about my future, because i'm no longer lost. I guess you could say that I have found myself. And I will say to anyone who is presented with the opportunity to do something such as an Exchange, to take advantage of it and make the most of it.

Christ the Redeemer





Top - visiting friends in Brasilia who I met during the Amazon trip; above left - meeting a sloth for the first time in the Amazon and volunteering at a school of extreme poverty, meeting and relating to real human beings.

ALEXANDRA (ALLY) LEGGATT

Finland

Sponsor Club - RC of BRIGHTON

Rotary Exchange is incredible. It's great, fantastic, wonderful, full of all the good things you could imagine. When I think back on my year, all I can think about is all of these amazing things that I've done. All the incredible people I've met, all of them full of this kindness that made my Exchange so great. I know, that in ten years time, they will be the only things I remember, the things I will look back on with fondness. But, even with all these good things, I do need to let you know of something very important. No matter what, no matter how good it seems to be, there will always be hard times. It's inevitable. They are different for every person, but they will happen. These low points hit at the most random of times and they don't ever make sense. I'm not going to lie, they are difficult and there are times when you feel you have no one to lean on. But, the most important thing to remember is that it will pass. It will get better. It will be okay. All you need is to learn what to do when they happen.

For me, the lowest point hit when I moved into my third host family. I had grown particularly close with my second host family and leaving them was very difficult. The move into my third family was uncomfortable. I really didn't feel at home and all I wanted to do was move back to my second host family. At the same time I was also dealing with difficulties with friendships and overall it was just a very difficult time. But like I told you before, it passed. Sure, it took a long time and it worried me

how long I felt so low, but it eventually moved on and I was left feeling better. Everyone feels these low points differently, but I found that there are quite a few ways to make it easier. I know they won't work on everyone, so I will just tell you the one that made me feel best. Just talk. To your friends. To your family. To those in Rotary who are there to help. The more you reach out the more you will realise how much you are not alone. Maybe a friend is going through a similar thing to you, maybe your family have the perfect advice, maybe a Rotary representative knows just the thing to say. The point is you will never know until you reach out, until you put yourself out there and just honestly ask for help. It seems hard, but with all the good things it does, you'll wonder why you didn't do it quicker. Low points happen, but it doesn't mean they have to stay for long.

In the end, Exchange is about having fun. It's about learning a new culture and experiencing as many new things as you can. It's about making lifelong friendships that you will remember for the rest of your life. When I think back to all these incredible people and the memories I've made, I just feel absolutely blown away. Just to know that all these incredible things will be part of my life forever just fills me with warmth and happiness. One of my favourite memories to think back to was a night I spent with my friends on the beach. It was the middle of the Finnish summer and the sun didn't go



One of my favourite pictures taken in Finland. Nature is just stunning in Finland.

down. We had made a bonfire and spent the entire night just chatting, enjoying each other's company. Though it may not sound like much, it is one of the happiest times in my Exchange. There was no rush, no stress, all we were was happy, content to just be with one another. This memory reminds me that even when things get bad, there will always be good things to look forward to.

Even though Exchange is going to get hard, it doesn't mean it will always be like that. The bad times will always pass, things will always get better. There are always so many good things, and that is just wonderful to remember. So just get out there. Have fun! Enjoy this fantastic experience and let the memories mould your life from then on!



Clockwise from top:- Me and two of my closest school friends; the last goodbye to one of my closest friends; my school friends and I during an Art night in Oulu (it was around 10 pm and still sunny)

Rebecca Boyer Norway

Sponsor Club - RC of Laverton Point Cook

Going on Exchange is the very definition of jumping off into the deep end; the walk from the car into the terminal is like climbing up the stairs of a diving board. Your legs feel heavy and your feet are cold, but the excitement triumphs the fear so you continue. Once you reach the security gates and you cross the line as you look back at your family for the last time you have jumped, taken that leap into your new life.

The feelings you experience are intense, the excitement of the thrill but the fear is there eating at your stomach as you go against what humans know; which is abandoning the familiar because our comfort zone is there to stop us from reckless actions, like jumping off high objects such as a diving board. But there is a reason we leap; it tests our limits and makes us grow as we truly do not know we can achieve until we are pushed beyond our comfort zones.

This year has well and truly pushed me out of my comfort zone and I have grown so much from that. The thing about Exchange is that it looks perfect from your posts on Facebook or Instagram, but the thing about Exchange is that it is not perfect. You will have your ups and downs, the long days where you feel so alone and small. Although these days will pale in comparison with most days where you feel on top of the world, but every hard day you make it through you grow more as you push past what you thought you could handle; as Exchange will show you how strong you really are. To me that has what made it so special,

is that the experience and people have pushed me outside of what I was confident doing. Opening my mind and heart to the unknown.

For the last 9 months I have lived 16,000 km outside my comfort zone in the beautiful country of Norway, in the tiny town of Årnes which is situated 40 minutes from Oslo and just over an hour from Sweden. While I have lived here I have attended Hvam videregående skole where I was placed in the agriculture programme, which has been an interesting time to say the least. So instead of just having your average classes, I have taken classes in theory of agriculture in Norway and the environment. Along with the theory every Friday for the first 5 months I worked in a different animal shed; anything from milking cows or tending pigs, chickens, horses or sheep. Now this may sound fun and it was, but it was often incredibly difficult. As from 8:30 to 3:30 we work feeding the animals and cleaning which mainly consisted of scraping excrement off the floor. Now as cute as the animals may have been it was slightly disgusting coming home every Friday smelling of poo and being absolutely so tired. But nothing was worse than being on milking duty where we had to be at the dairy at 5:30 in the morning - those days were the killer. But as much as the hard work was beyond harder than I thought, it was special. Those times were so unique and precious to my Exchange. What a better way to make friends than bond over our hatred for being bitten by pigs or being

The
Aussie
girls



sprayed by cow faeces. But besides from the hard work I was placed in the most fantastic class - we were a very small class of 14 people. They have been the most welcoming, kind people to me and some of them I now call some of my closest friends. In all honesty I was very blessed to be placed in this class because I fit in perfectly with them, so school for me has been one of the highlights of my Exchange by far. I absolutely adore my friends and cannot believe I have been lucky enough to become friends for life with them. As well as 'farm duties', we have been camping in the forest multiple times which have been great experiences and so special spending time with some of my favourite people. So cosy sitting by a fire cooking sausages, something so simple yet I will remember forever.

As part of Rotary in Norway, we have 4 camps throughout the year that are always fantastic. The first being the introduction camp in the mountains of central Norway, in possibly one of the most beautiful places in the world. As Norway only has 30 Exchange Students in the entire country there are only 7 Australians and 1 New Zealander so our intro camp was such a cosy affair, where during the day we learnt

or at least tried to learn Norwegian and at night spend time bonding. Then once our camp ended we headed straight into another camp with our oldies which is a ski camp on another mountain. Just a week of skiing in the day and sauna and playing in the snow at night. It was so much fun being with the other Exchangers just staying in little cabins in the perfect winter wonderland and skiing was incredible fun and a sport I think I mastered (not to boast).

But of course the highlight of the camps was a tour of Norway - a 10 day trip around the west coast of Norway and possibly one of the best experiences in my life. All 30 of the Exchange family on a bus for 10 days waking up at 6 so we could pack as much into our days. We went white water rafting, canoeing watching the sunset over the fjords and swimming in a glacial lake. It was such an amazing trip to travel around and see more of the country that I have been lucky enough to spend the last 9 months in. But of course the highlight was spending those last precious moments with our oldies as they started to return home 2 days after the trip. Those good byes were some of the most painful of my life, not knowing when you will see



Top left: my closest friends on one of the last days of my Norway tour;

Top right: my Exchange family

Left: with my best Exchange friend Zac at the castle in Oslo

someone again who has had such a big influence on your life is so incredibly difficult. The tears you shed when saying good bye are for both for the sadness of being separated as well as the happy memories you know you will have forever.

For me Exchange has been the most incredible experience of my life and I have achieved more than I thought possible when I boarded that plane 9 months ago. I think one of the biggest things in my Exchange has been the change in myself. I do not even think of the person who left Australia as being who I am anymore. Exchange has taught me more about myself than anything and that is a powerful thing for any young person, to be fully confident in who they are. I now put 100% love and joy into everything I do, I don't sweat on the small things as I now know that if I ask there is always a way to solve anything. This is the biggest lesson that I have learnt. That you determine

what happens around you as attitude and what vibe you give will determine everything. Going back to Australia will be sad to leave Exchangers, my host family who I love so dearly and of course my beloved class; but the hardest thing for me will be to mourn leaving who I am now here in this moment. Who I am now on Exchange is a better person then the one that I left and I just hope that I carry that with me when I return - and I think I will. But I will never be able to fully thank everyone who has made my year so wonderful and I hope from everything I have gained that in some way I have given something back to everyone who I have become close too. A saying I have carried with me that has helped me through Exchange and is one of the only reasons I had the courage to get on that plane, is how I will finish my letter.

“Don't be afraid to try and soar, your wings already exist. All you need to do is fly.”



The landscape in Nesbyn - Winter Camp



Top; My favourite place in Norway - Henningsvaer

Centre: me in Oslo

Bottom: Suset in Bergen

SIENNA WITHINGTON

France

Sponsor Club - RC of Albert Park

"It's not a year in the life, it's a life in a year".

I didn't understand this quote before but since coming on Exchange I feel like this relates to me in so many ways. When I sat down to write this I looked at the date and realised it's been 9 months since I had packed a bag and was boarding a plane to go on an adventure of a lifetime. First things first - it's not a gap year! It's an opportunity to discover a new culture, learn a language and find your inner self. I have adjusted so much to the French lifestyle that being without it seems nearly impossible.

School has been one of the hardest things on Exchange, the long hours (8.00am starts and finishing at 5.30pm) to walking into the school bathrooms my first day and confused as to why there were no toilet seats. I admire the French students for their amazing work ethic. Some of them attending Saturday classes! Schooling in France is completely different to in Australia. It's very academic based with no creative subjects available. I was put into a class who I have become so close to and feel like I have a place and not the outsider Exchange Student. With teachers thinking I was a French student who spoke amazing English, until I told them I was

actually an Exchange Student. At first it took me a long time to adjust to the idea of not having to pack a lunch for school and I would eat a 3 course lunch in the canteen. As well as every morning walking into my school and doing the "bisous" (kisses on the cheek) to all my friends. Learning a new way of life and getting lost going to school many times, but somehow finding indescribable buildings.

Sometimes it feels too surreal[I am 18 years old, living over 16,000km away from my parents for 1 year, I travelled around Europe and am fluent in another language. I have had more feelings on this Exchange than ever before. Meeting people this year has been easy but saying goodbye has so far been one of the hardest things to do because they helped shape who I am today. Being strangers to me before and now planning the next time I will see them. But I can now say I have family all around the world and that soon enough I hope to travel around more and open my eyes to different cultures. Exchange has been one of the most challenging things. But the most incredible thing too. Sometimes I would question why people do this. How could someone pack up and leave their normal life behind. But then



Wearing berets at La Rochelle with the District Governor and Rotarians (D1520)

I remember I have gained a lifetime of memories. I wouldn't have it any other way now.

I could try and write every highlight and experience of Exchange but I can't even put it into words. I was fortunate to go on a Euro tour trip and travelled around for 10 days through 6 countries, passing through 3 countries in one day. Every second day was a new language. I saw the most beautiful sites and streets in the world and met amazing people along the way, who taught me so much. I also went on a London trip with my District, where we spent 4 days roaming the streets of London, seeing

Buckingham palace, standing next to Big Ben. These unforgettable trips will always mean so much to me but more so Exchange and being able to live this experience.

All through this experience I have to thank my host families. I have had 4 families here in France. In Australia I have 1 mum, 1 dad, 4 brothers and 1 sister but I can now say I'm lucky enough to have 5 mums, 5 dads, 12 brothers and 4 sisters and a place to call home in France. Firstly I thought it would be really hard to move host families but in reality I have seen different lifestyles and cultures in each family.



Above left;
Palace of Versailles with my host Mum

Above right: my host sister and also my best friend

Below; at a castle in Paris with my host brother and sister



My host sister became my best friend and we were always together. Not only have I been able to be a part of the family but I did so many things like weekends in Paris, trips to Rome. They have taught me the French cuisine. Honestly, to be living with families who supported me through everything and helped guide me around my second home France, means everything to me and to be given a home I can come to with open arms.

Being in France and experiencing this culture is the one culture I live by now. The French love their food! While in France I have never said no to any of the foods. I tried snails and surprisingly I love them. (it's not a normal thing to eat here in France) and to be honest we love our cheese here. Most of the time dinner is either an entree, main and then a small dessert or a main, dessert and then cheese. I would love to tell you how many croissants I have eaten but while working it out I realised it's a number that shouldn't be said! I know that no matter how much I could attempt to make the foods in Australia it just won't be the same and that's another reason that I should stay here. I still have 3 months and we haven't quite reached the end of this journey so making the most of these months is important to me.

I will never forget the first time I saw the Eiffel Tower - that was the moment I realised why I was here and while enjoying one of the many delicious croissants I was in complete shock and blown away. To have seen photos for years and years and there I was standing and staring at this beautiful sight. That's the moment I fell in love with this country for the first time. I will be taking advantage of every opportunity given. I really can't thank Rotary enough for this opportunity I was given this year. Being able to bring different countries together as one. They helped make my dream into a reality and for so many others. Now to think I have to pack my life (and my French biscuits) up into a suitcase in 3 months - it will be the hardest thing I have had to do.

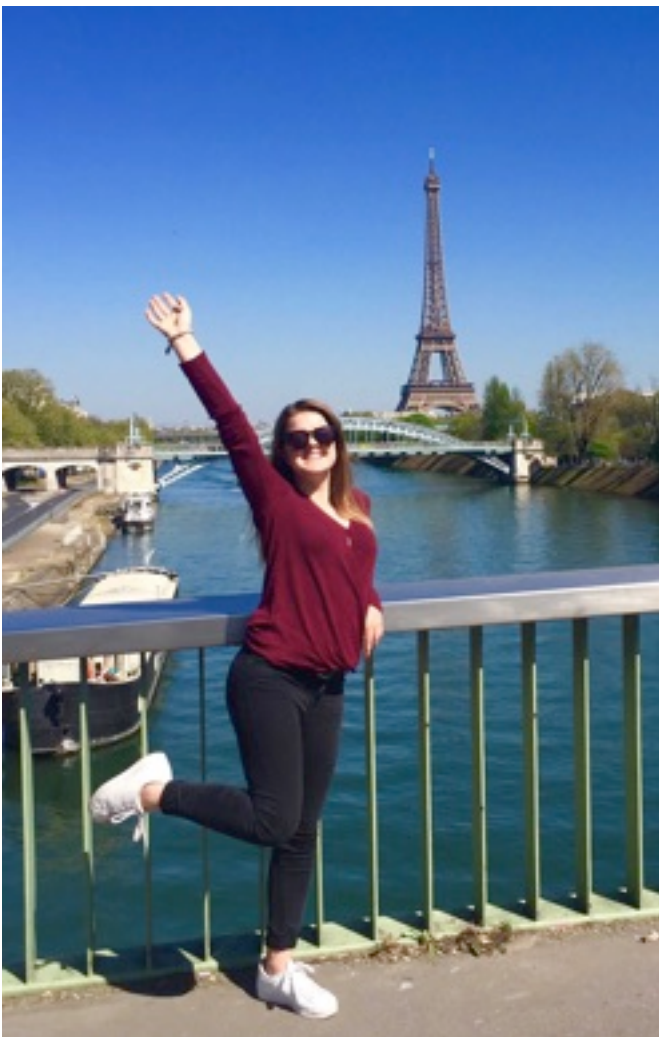
"Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get."

Life on Exchange..... you really don't know what every day of your life is going to be like until you live it. It may be a great experience that day or it could be the worst day but you won't know until you live it, thankfully my experience has been a box full of good chocolates and memories!

Vive la France!



My beautiful town, Lillie



Clockwise from top left; The beautiful Eiffel Tower

Most amazing pastries in Lillie

Walked along the mud at Mont St Michel

Oldies of District 1520

Euro Tour in Prague

