



# LETTERS FROM ABROAD

2019

Rotary International District 9800 Youth Exchange Program  
Experiences and Images from our Outbound Youth Exchange Students for 2019

[www.rotaryyouthexchangedistrict9800.com.au](http://www.rotaryyouthexchangedistrict9800.com.au)



## Outbound Students 2019

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DISTRICT 9800 REPRESENTATIVES	
District Governor 2019-2020	Grant Hocking
District Chair Youth Services	Stuart Cardell

## A Message from the District Governor, Grant Hocking



The Rotary International theme for 2019-20 is 'Rotary Connects the World'. This theme most aptly applies to the Youth Exchange program.

Across the world we are better connected today than at any other time in history. Despite this there are still many issues in the world, conflict, poverty, hunger, lack of access to education and clean water. It is clear to some that whilst technology has opened up the potential for broader and quicker communication there is still a place for personal face to face connections. To spend time with people and experience their lives first hand affords a deeper understanding of the everyday

issues affecting their lives. It also forges deeper bonds through shared experiences. Bonds that will last a lifetime.

Rotary Youth Exchange offers a yearlong opportunity to gain this understanding and forge lasting friendships. Students learn a new language, discover another culture and become global citizens. They also become ambassadors for Australia and impart some of our language and culture to those they meet during their Exchange program.

The objective is to provide a unique and effective Rotary supported educational and cultural opportunity, whilst promoting goodwill, peace and understanding. Governance of this program is monitored at many levels within Rotary and students are also supported at every level of the program.

The most common feedback received from YEX students is how the program has changed their lives. Even decades after the Exchange the memories and friendships endure as a lasting legacy of the immense value of the program.

Letters From Abroad affords a valuable insight into the program from the perspective of those immersed in the Exchange. The first hand comments of the participants shines a light on the benefits of the YEX program. There is a definite and palpable change seen in each participant over the period of the Exchange program.

I look forward to witnessing the change in individuals, Rotarians, host families and the world as this wonderful program continues to Connect the World.

**Grant Hocking**  
**District 9800 Governor 2019-2020**

# A Message from the Youth Exchange Chairman



Welcome Friends, to the Tenth 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 2019 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 country's culture, customs and language and while making lifelong friendships with people from across the globe. Our Youth Exchange Students are essentially ambassadors for Rotary, their country and their families.

Long term Youth Exchange is very challenging for young people and requires great courage, commitment and resilience. Our 2019 outbound students have challenged themselves this year, putting themselves way outside their comfort zone and have shown remarkable resilience during what can, at times, be a difficult year. Having said that however, the year on Exchange is always referred to by them as being the "best year of their lives". Youth Exchange is definitely a life changing experience.

A year away from family, home and friends is very challenging, let alone for a young person aged between 15-18 years who may have never been abroad before their Exchange year. Our D9800 outbounds land in a foreign country and they commence their Exchange not knowing anyone nor usually 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 environment to enable our students to quickly immerse themselves in their new country, its customs and culture and to participate in 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 often 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, D9800 Rotex group and 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 and D9800 Rotex. Thank you to Barry Mullen for his 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 and support to the Youth Exchange program and our students. To our sponsor and host clubs and host 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 in 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](http://www.rotaryyouthexchangedistrict9800.com.au)

**"Letters From Abroad"**  
is compiled and published for the  
**Rotary International District 9800 Youth Exchange Program**  
by Barry Mullen

# Bianca Shepherd - Austria

Sponsored by  
The Rotary Club of Glenferrie

It still feels slightly unreal that I have been living in Vienna for almost 10 months now!

My year has been a whirl wind of opportunities, learning, growth, culture and unforgettable experiences.

During my long flight to Austria, I wrote down a list of the things I wanted to achieve in my year abroad; it said:

- Explore Austria
- Make life long friends from all over the world
- Create unforgettable memories
- See as much of Vienna as possible
- Learn German
- Have a relationship with my host family that feels like my own family

Some of these things were challenging to do at first. For instance, I thought living in Austria meant I would just magically be able to speak German. In reality, I have had to put a lot of hours of work in, but the hours pay off when I have those small milestones every day, such as the first time I ordered something in a shop or the first time I had a full conversation. Building a close connection to my host family wasn't instantaneous either. But after spending considerable time with them during the holidays and improving my German, I truly feel as though I am one of the family. I couldn't imagine living with anyone else. As for friends, I had to learn to put myself out there, to go up to people and talk to them. This was intimidating at first, but I now have the most amazing lifelong friends. To make those unforgettable memories I dreamed about, you simply have to say yes to every opportunity that comes your way.

During the year I have tried to not waste a second, as I have discovered one year is



Language camp in Altmunster (top) and view over Vienna with Stephansdom Cathedral and the Holburg in the background

nowhere near long enough to see everything, so you must make every second count.

My first day of school was nerve wracking to say the least, but everyone was super interested in me and excited to talk to me. My first Rotary meeting was 'Language Camp' in Altmunster, a small breathtakingly beautiful town in Upper Austria. The 14 other Exchange Students from Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and Colombia and I spent two weeks in a hotel, with German classes for 5 hours a day. My level of German sky rocketed in just two

weeks. By the end of the two weeks, the other Exchange Students felt like family to me.

I spent the next month exploring Vienna and all its magnificent museums and galleries, the markets and giant Baroque palaces. I went ice-skating in front of the city hall and went hiking through mountains. At the start of March, I was invited to the Elmayer Kranzchen, a very prestigious traditional Viennese Ball at the Hofburg (the Imperial Palace). I got to wear an elegant ball gown and experience some traditional old customs.

In the middle of March, I left school for a week to go on Ski Week. All the Exchange Students in Austria and I stayed in a hotel for one week and went to ski lessons every morning and then had free ski time in the afternoon. I had no idea how to ski before that week, but it was so much fun and by the end, I was skiing down red and black slopes. Skiing is a big part of Austrian culture and now that I know how to ski, I can go skiing with my host family at Christmas time.

The day after I arrived back from ski week, I flew to England with my school class. We stayed for a week with host families in Brighton. During the day, we had English classes at a school and in the afternoons, we did touristy things around the city. On the last day, we toured the sights of London. I felt so lucky to get the chance to go and afterwards I felt so much closer to my class.

During April, we had one week of Easter holidays. I went on a four-day trip to Salzburg with my Host sister, one of her friends and another Exchange Student from America. It was then that I started to really appreciate how beautiful Austria is. We were taking a walk when we stumbled along a house that looked familiar and after staring at it for a little while we figured out it was the real house from The Sound of Music. It was like all my musical dreams had come true.

My birthday was a very special day, which I spent with my host family. We had a big breakfast in the morning, my favourite Austrian dish for lunch and then went to the Vienna concert house for a concert in the evening.

At the start of May, 60 other Exchange Students and I took off for 18 days travelling



Ski week in Schladming (top) and our first stop on the Austria tour with my Host Family

around Europe. We went to 17 cities in Germany, Belgium, France, Monaco and Italy. We didn't always have the best weather, but it was an amazing experience, which I will never forget. I climbed the Eifel tower in pouring rain; I stood at the top of the Vatican; I ate waffles in Belgium and a ridiculous amount of pasta in Italy.

Around June it began to get warm again, so we were able to do lots more after school and on the weekends, like going to the river for a swim or taking a train to another city for a day trip. At the end of June, we had our last weekend with the Oldies at Matsee, near Salzburg. We stayed on a big property, all in a house together and went swimming in the

beautiful lake, while enjoying each other's company. On the last night we had a gala dinner, where we all wore our dirndls and lederhosen (traditional Austrian dress) and our Rotary Blazers.

The summer holidays were a whirlwind of travelling and fun. At the start of July, my host sister returned from her Exchange in Tasmania. At the end of July, we spent a few days in the countryside enjoying the sun.

At the start of July, I was lucky enough to be taken to Croatia for a week by my host family. We spent one night in Zagreb exploring, and then drove down the coast to a small town where we had a big house right on the water with our own private beach. We spent the whole week eating amazing food, lying in the sun and reading books; swimming in the Mediterranean, water skiing and going on boat rides on my host dad's boat.

After an amazing week of relaxing, we set off again for a trip around Austria. Our first stop was Schladming, an amazing mountain range where we did breathtaking hikes, climbed glaciers and went go-karting. In Tirol, we visited a silver mine, ate cake and drank coffee in some very old towns, and had tours of old medieval castles. We visited Swarovski and saw their amazing crystal art installations in Innsbruck. Innsbruck was a beautiful city surrounded by mountains and filled with small alleys and colourful houses. We drove further south to Sud-Tyrol in Italy where we saw Otzi the ice-man and did a terrific hike around the Drei Zinnen. Our last stop was Klagenfurt, before we made the long drive back to Vienna.

The Newbies arrived in August, so I had the pleasure of showing them around Vienna, all the must-dos, all the ins and outs of the public transport and all the handy tips and tricks I have picked up over the past 8 months. We then got to meet the whole newbie group at the start of September. We all got together in



Dachstein: a glacier in Central Austria (top) and with my Host Family at Dachstein



southern Austria, went hiking through the mountains and attended a gala dinner. At the start of October on our next Rotary weekend, we stayed in Vienna and explored our capital city. It was cool to show all my friends around my city.

At the end of September, I attended a trip with my school to Poland. We stayed in Krakow and got to see Auschwitz, the Jewish quarter, Oskar Schindler's factory and the city of Krakow. The city is beautiful and unique. It was astonishing to hear what the city was like not too long ago. Auschwitz was confronting. It was very difficult place to visit but it was also necessary. As one of the quotes on the wall said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it".

For the last three months of Exchange there is still a lot planned. I have joined a dance class to learn Austrian Ballroom dancing with my host sister. We are going on another Rotary trip to Berlin, Dresden and Prague and then we have the autumn holidays which I'm spending in Vienna with my host sister. At the end of that, we are going to Budapest for a couple of days. Then before I know it, it will be December and I'll be going to Christmas Markets in Salzburg and Vienna and going skiing with my host family, then seeing the Vienna New Year's Eve Fireworks, then saying goodbye to my best friends, my family and the life I have gotten to know this year.

There is a mountain near my house and from the top; there is a view over all of Vienna. I walked up there on one of my first days of Exchange with my host mum. Looking over a world I didn't know, there was a year of possibilities ahead of me. I went back to the same mountain not long ago and I was able to reflect on how much has happened in the last year, not only all the people I have met, places I have been and all the amazing things I have seen, but how much I have learnt about the world and about myself. When I look across



The Three Zinnen (top) and 'The Sound of Music' pavilion in Salzburg

the view of Vienna now, it feels like home, like Vienna is my city and that I belong here. I am thankful every day I took the jump and decided to come on Exchange. When I applied, I didn't really think about why I wanted to come on Exchange and throw myself into such an uncomfortable position, but I don't regret it for a moment. I believe getting on the plane home is going to be 1000 times harder than saying goodbye to my life at the start of this year.

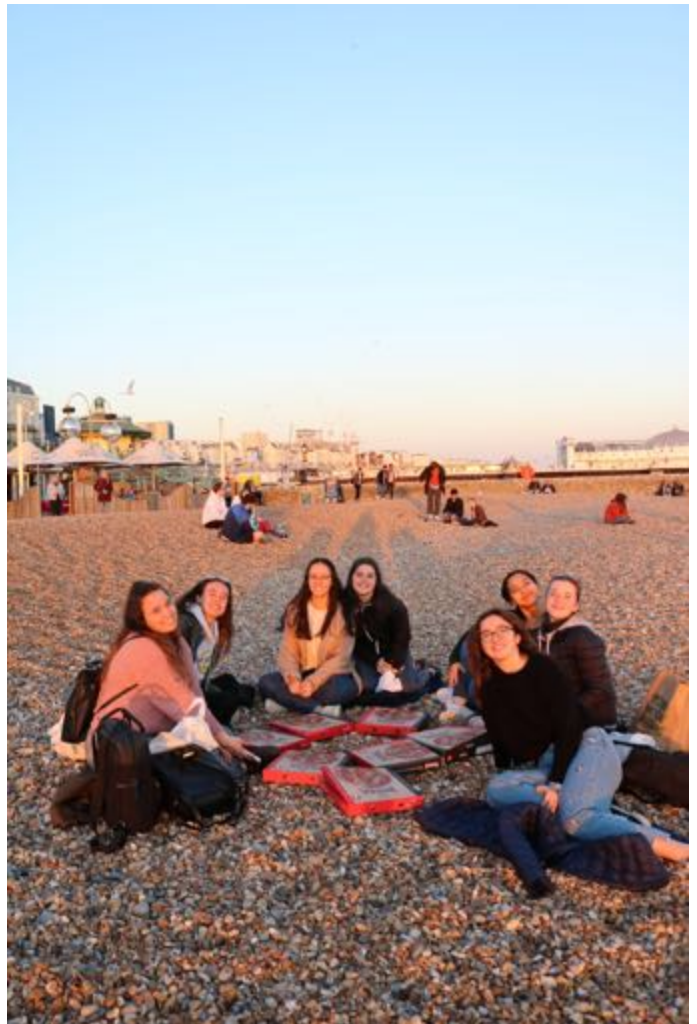
Exchange is like a dream come true. You get transported to another world for a year, then you wake up one day and everything is the same again.

I strongly encourage anyone thinking about going on Exchange to go for it 100 percent and don't look back.



Clockwise from top left: The Ball in the Hofburg (Imperial Palace);  
the mountain range in Voralberg;  
my Host Family and our family friends in Trogir, Croatia;  
our house in Croatia;  
Kings Lake in Bayern, Germany

Clockwise from top right:  
Pizza on the beach in Brighton, England:  
at an Austrian Festival in our Dirndles and  
Leaderhosen:  
our school trip in Krakow:  
the 'oldies' during hiking weekend:  
my class outside Buckingham Palace:



# Hamish Nicoll - France

Sponsored by  
The Rotary Club of Gisborne

Salut! My name is Hamish and for the past 10 months I have been living in Northern France.

I am living in a small town called Lorgies, which is about a one hour drive from Lille. It's quite a small town with a population of 500 people and only one main road in and out of the town.

A lot of the locals and the people I meet through Rotary always ask me why I chose to come to live here in Northern France (the coldest part of France!), why not Paris or Marseille, and what's my Exchange been like. I tell them with the Rotary Youth Exchange Programme, I get to choose the country and after that where I will be living is a surprise. I honestly think that's the best bit before going on Exchange: waiting to find out where you will be living was the most exciting part for me before I left for France. I find it hard to imagine living in another part of France or if I went to a different country as I have made new friends, new experiences and all these amazing memories I don't think I could have gone anywhere else for my Exchange.

Being an Exchange Student from Australia is different to being a student from North/South America and Asia, as those students arrive in August and leave in June, whereas students from Australia begin and end their Exchange in January so it is a full 12 months of Exchange for us. This means we meet two different groups of Exchange Students with just a little amount of time to get to know them. That being said, they become our family. I have made so many memories and experiences with them. By the time arrived for the first group to leave and the summer holidays had passed, the new students had arrived and I got to share my experiences and memories as well as create new ones.

During my Exchange I have stayed with three families who all welcomed me into their homes



First weekend with all the students who arrived in January (top) and Enjoying lunch in Paris with my first Host Family

and I was very lucky to have such great host families. My first and last host family I stayed with for a total of five months each and my second host family was just for two months. With each family came a different lifestyle, different experiences and different memories.

I had three older sisters in my first host family. They didn't speak much English, except for the youngest daughter who is now on Exchange in Melbourne. At first it was hard to communicate with my family because my French wasn't good but I slowly learnt more and more with the help of my host sister who would speak English to me and I would speak French back to her; we would help each other correct the mistakes we

made. Every Sunday evening, we would always have dinner with the extended family and it was really nice as I felt more at home and more accepted into the family. My first host family also took me away with them on family holidays, skiing in the French alps for one week and to the South of France for three weeks in the summer holidays.

In my second host family I lived with my host parents and one older host sister who I was already friends with at my French school. This also made moving into my second host family quite easy. My host father and sister could speak a little bit of English but my host mother grew up in Canada so she spoke fluent English. I remember the first week in their house she'd only speak English to me and she was so happy because it was the first time she was able to have an everyday conversation in English. I did have to ask her to start speaking French as that was what I was here to learn. I think with my second host family and having someone speak fluent English helped me with my French. It's where I began to become more confident in speaking French because I had the help of my host mother who could explain how to correctly say the sentence. Even though I only spent two months with my second family, I really enjoyed it as it felt like home and I still see my host sister most days at school; I really have made a friend for life.

My third and final host family includes my host parents, one younger host sister, an older host sister and an older host brother who are all roughly my age. Changing to this family was quite easy as well because they are cousins with my second host family and I had already met them a couple of times before I changed houses. I spend a lot of time with my host dad and younger sister and older brother. As my host dad works from home, he drives me and



First weekend with the newbies in my District (top): my Rotary club puts on an event for the 25th April in remembrance of all the Australians who fought in France in World War 1

the children to school every day. They are also mad football fans, so every home match for our local club we are always at the ground cheering them on. They are a very easy-going family who like to joke a lot. Every night around the dinner table is an enjoyable time as everyone is smiling, laughing and telling jokes. Their easy-going nature and love of sport suits my personality and has made this stay feel very relaxed and comfortable.

Rotary in Europe is very active as an organisation. I meet up with my host club a couple of times a month and even joined Interact through my host club. Also, District

1520, the Rotary District I am living in, is pretty active and we meet up every month for a weekend and do something together as a District. One of my favourite events was where everyone cooked a dish from their country for host families, the students who are about to leave on Exchange and Rotary members. Some of the other events included a trip to Disneyland Paris for which we had to fundraise by selling raffle tickets and our bus trip to Barcelona for one week. We also had a Eurotour bus trip where we spent 20 days travelling around Europe to countries such as Germany, Italy, Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland. Those were the best 20 days of my Exchange as I got to spend it with some of my best friends travelling and sightseeing some of Europe's most famous landmarks and wonderful foods.

School is a lot different here in France. It starts at 7.50am and finishes at 5.15pm. I was put in a class with a couple of students who had done Exchanges to English-speaking countries so they helped me out the first couple of days. I have become good friends with one of them and now we only speak French. Once I started to find friends the most difficult thing for me was trying to stay awake in class because I didn't understand what was going on. When I slowly got into the routine of school I would take notes in class even if I didn't understand what being said, and when I got asked to do test in class I would always try my best even if I knew I wasn't going to pass. Now that I can understand, read and write in French, I am expected to do the same work as everyone else and pass the test even though for me it won't count towards my schooling back in Australia. I didn't like school at first but as my French improved and I have been able to keep up with my class school became more enjoyable.

I have found French an extremely hard language to learn and to be fluent in French in just one year is very difficult. I have learnt enough to understand what someone is saying and to speak it reasonably well but I look back on how much my French has improved. It's amazing, as I came here speaking hardly any French and am now able to have a conversation, understand what's going in the news or to have a debate about politics with my host families. J'ai encore beaucoup à apprendre!

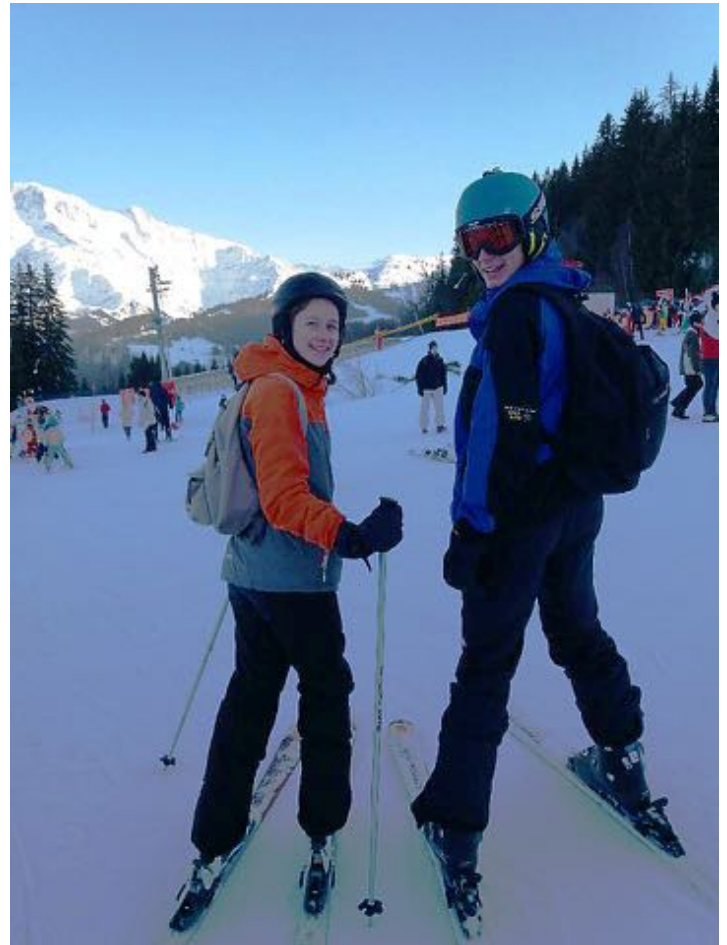
I would finally like to thank Rotary for this amazing opportunity, in particular Rotary District 9800 and my sponsor club, the Rotary Club of Gisborne for giving me this amazing opportunity and experience that I will remember for the rest of my life. France will always hold a special place in my heart.





Previous page - with my oldies while visiting a castle in Prague and with my friends before a school dance.

Day trip to Paris with my first host family visiting the Eiffel Tower (left); my first time skiing with my host sister Clemence and all the students who I had an amazing time with on Eurotour.



# Grace Dinham - Sweden

Sponsored by The Rotary Club of  
West Footscray

My Exchange started with uncertainty, I wasn't sure if I was ready for such a big change in my life. I was uncertain about myself and about my decision. I left 40 degree Melbourne in Exchange for minus15 degree Stockholm, Sweden, where it was colder and darker than I could have ever imagined. I came to Sweden hoping to snowboard and experience a different way of life and culture. What I've experienced in the last nine months has been everything I could have imagined and more. I've snowboarded in four different areas. I've volunteered at a second hand store, I've joined an environmentalist group, I'm studying photography, I'm picking mushrooms every weekend, I'm going to football games and learning how to ski jump. I've learned a new language and truly feel at home in Sweden. Those things may seem small, but they mean the world to me now. I've built myself a life I genuinely love and feel happy in. I've made genuine friends and become a part of a new family that I feel apart of.



I didn't believe what I was really doing until a few weeks into my Exchange. I kept on thinking that it was too good to be true and that I would be leaving soon. Though now it really almost has come to an end. I remember being in awe at everything as we drove from the airport. The snow, the signs, the supermarkets, the buses, the trains, the fashion, the buildings, the language and the food. Before I arrived in Sweden, I knew very little Swedish and it was strange to hear it all the time because, unlike Spanish, French and German very few people speak Swedish. So it was strange to hear, though it felt like I wasn't learning anything in the first few months. Around May/June, everything just came; it was just like everything suddenly clicked in my head. I could understand and speak relatively well. I now like reading books which I tried to read at the start of the year and



Top: My Host Family and me  
The view from my house in January

watching TV shows I watched at the start of the year and seeing how much I can understand compared to then and now.





Top: The Exchange Student group in Kiruna in front of the Ice Hotel  
School Strike, with Greta Thunberg in Stockholm

School is extremely different to Australian school which is very interesting though at times frustrating. It is such an amazing experience to be able to participate and understand a whole other school system. I'm used to waking up at 8:20am and being at school by 8:40, though now it takes me an hour on bus and train to get to school. Swedish school is very relaxed and based on the student's ability to find information for themselves. My school schedule ranges from different starting and ending times. Sometimes I have breaks for an hour in-between classes. We are given food at school - it's not always good, but it's better than having to bring food! At the school I'm going to now, I'm in the aesthetic photography course. It's extremely interesting as I am learning things I can use even at home. It's very practical based so I have a camera and access to a studio and photoshop. In the winter, I go to school in the dark and come home in the dark; sometimes we only have four hours of light a day. Though in summer, it was a complete contrast to the winter. During June and July the sun almost never went down and it was around 30 degrees for a few weeks. It almost felt like home. In a place up north called Umeå the sun only went down around 10:30pm and came up around 2am but it never really got dark. Midsommer is the biggest Swedish tradition and is celebrated on the longest day of the year. We danced around a Midsommars pole with flower crowns and ate lots of candy and fermented fish. It was so so beautiful and one of my favourite days apart from the fermented fish, which is rather hard to eat.

During the past nine months I have seen so much of Sweden. I've been to 13 different cities around Sweden, including the farthest north and south you can go in Sweden. The culture, architecture and lifestyle change surprisingly much depending on the area in Sweden. Seeing so many different parts and cultures of Sweden has really opened up my knowledge about the country and life here. How it was in the medieval times, how people

live in the freezing winter and how the indigenous people use the land. My favourite place that I've been so far has been the Rotary Sweden Kiruna trip. Kiruna is the northernmost city in Sweden where they are currently in the process of moving the city 3.2 km east to make way for the mines. Which is very interesting, though we didn't go there for just that. We went for 5 days with 25 other Exchange Students from around Sweden. We saw reindeer, went to the Ice Hotel, saw the northern lights, dog sledged, rode snow mobiles, ice fished and sledged as well as learning about Sami culture and Kiruna the town.

Rotary has provided me with so many opportunities this year to experience Swedish culture. I truly could never thank them enough for providing me with the door that has, virtually, opened the rest of my life. This year I've learnt so many things, not just about Sweden but about myself, my boundaries and strengths, my interests and values. I am self dependent now and can and must do things for myself. I've been super lucky to have so many lovely Exchange Students as well in Stockholm whom I meet often.

One of my favourite things about being on Exchange and probably the most simple, is the ability just to live and exist in a totally different and unfamiliar place. Being able to appreciate the nature here, the supermarkets, the way people sit on the bus, the way the buildings look and public transport. I often overlook the small things but I find that the small things are what make Sweden, Sweden. Though these nine months have provided me with so much happiness, joy, fulfilment, there of course have been some hard times, I cannot lie. Its always hard being away from your familiar family and friends; it was hard not knowing what's going on most of the time as everything is in Swedish and it's hard being somewhere where at times you may feel alone. But I think that's a part of the process; to feel all these positive emotions of **course you need hard times to make you appreciate** the good ones. Because it is hard to be an

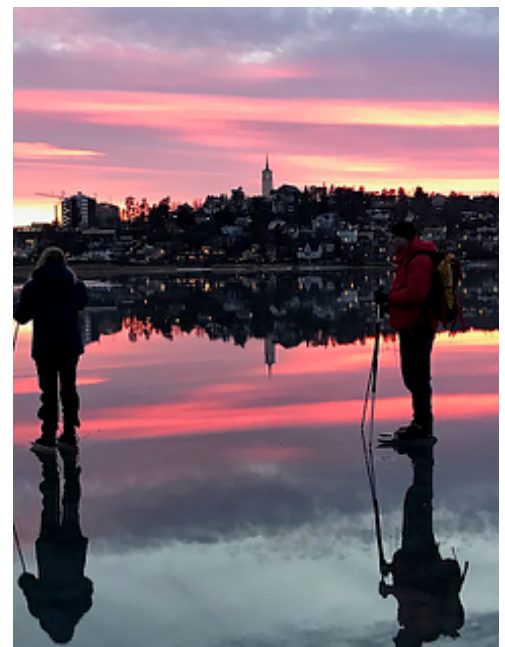


My host siblings and I in front of the midsommars pole  
My two best Swedish friends and me (below)



Exchange Student, it is hard to still be figuring things about yourself and be in a whole new environment at the same time. But the stupendous memories I have now, totally and utterly outweigh everything else. After nine months of living in Sweden, this dark, freezing place, learning about life and culture here, I can say that I am 100% confident and certain that going on Rotary Youth Exchange has been the best decision I have and maybe, will ever make.

**Hej då, puss och kram** - Grace



Clockwise from above: My first host sister and I in summer; My friends and I at the opening of the second hand store where i was a volunteer; My beautiful school in Odenplan, Stockholm; The mountains in Hemaven in Winter; Me in Järvsö; My second host dad and sister ice skating on the frozen lake outside our house

# Sabine Jarman - Spain

Sponsored by The Rotary Club of  
Footscray

¡Hola! I am Sabine and I have had the incredible privilege to spend these last nine months of my life in Barcelona, Spain. I wouldn't of dreamt two years ago I would one day have the courage to travel and live on the other side of the globe. I've been to so many unbelievable places, experienced culture and tradition that is just not possible in Australia or through a holiday, meeting some of my new closest friends from all across the globe and being part of five very welcoming and exciting families.

I arrived in Barcelona airport on the 27th of January a week later than the rest of the outbounds of D9800. Travelling from 45 degree Australia to 5 degree Spain I realised my first mistake, I did not pack anything close to warm enough, although that was a perfect excuse for a shopping trip, the first of many.

During my Exchange I have had five host families. I consider myself to be very lucky to have experienced such different cultures of Spain. I have been able to live with and take part in the customs of Catalonia, Sevilla, Zaragoza, Logroño and inter city Barcelona. My most memorable families were my third and fifth ones; although I was only with my third from Zaragoza for 3 weeks they made such a tremendous effort to take me to see what felt like the whole of Aragon. Everyday we went as a family to do some form of an activity from museums to us all dancing at 6am. I already can't wait to return and see them. My fifth was my favourite for similar reasons even though I'm now back in school we always do something together each week - lots of fine restaurants, beautiful museums and days just lying on the beach.

During the summer holidays my District was extremely thoughtful and sent me on a 5 week vacation to Zaragoza. Zaragoza is a city of Aragon located between Barcelona and Madrid. This was by far the best part of my Exchange as I was hosted by two incredible



My third family and I in front of La Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar (top) and my fifth host family

families that took me on amazing trips to small historical villages, beautiful vineyards and I met great friends along the way. To experience this completely different part of Spain every single day was beyond what I imagined for my Exchange.

My highlight of living in Zaragoza was being taken to this small town with zero inhabitants; water every three days and no cell service. I loved this town as I felt like I had travelled back in time; we spent the days going on walks, playing parchis and having lunch and dinner with the whole town - it was a real nice disconnect. I was lucky enough to have arrived



two days before the town's big fiesta. Once a year they hold a big fiesta for a 100 people and these parties last from 10pm at night till 10am in the morning with little or no breaks from dancing. They also have lots of games and activities during the day but my favourite was the partying.

School in Barcelona has been a difficult element of my Exchange as all schools in Catalunya are taught in Catalan. During my first school I found it difficult to really connect with my peers as talking to me in Spanish is not like speaking in English or French. I still managed to meet my best friend of my entire Exchange. Because of the language barrier I couldn't participate in normal catalan classes so I was placed in aula d'acollida, a class for people from outside of Catalonia. In this class I learnt to speak a little bit of Catalan and learnt about Catalan culture. I loved this class because learning of the culture usually consisted of us eating traditional Catalan food and casual conversations. As ironic as it is I ended up practicing quite a bit of Spanish with the other foreign students, as I couldn't revert to English. I moved to a new school for the new school year; I am currently loving it so much. Nearly all of the student's first language is Spanish so I have made so many more friends and can participate in a few of my classes.



Typical tapas of Aragon (top)  
My Science class

One of the biggest struggles I dealt with during my Exchange was learning Spanish. Trying to understand even a word my host mother said on my first day was impossible. My first host family's first language is Catalan and so was everyone else's in my first school. But when I moved to my third host family's house I instantly connected with them. I felt so much more confident using my Spanish and asking for help with certain words and phrases. After the three short weeks in that family my Spanish improved rapidly. If I could give a future Exchange Student any advice it would be to find people you really like and feel comfortable with and start speaking your host language.

Rotary has offered me five trips this year to places all around Spain and Europe, I went on all these trips. We went on a week long hike along El Camino de Santiago, to the sunny beaches of Malaga, a twenty one day long trip



around Europe, the orientation camp for the new inbounds of my District and a sightseeing trip around Pamplona. I'm extremely grateful to have the opportunity to have had these trips; without them I would have missed out on meeting the other incredible Exchange Students living around Spain. We hiked along the final 110km of El Camino de Santiago. It was very painful and by the end everyone had

their feet covered in blisters but it was unbelievably beautiful, historic and peaceful ... well as peaceful as it can be with 50 Exchange Students. Euro tour was definitely one of my biggest highlights. In 21 days we visited 11 different countries. One of the days we ate breakfast, lunch and dinner all in completely different countries. My top two cities were Prague and Budapest. Prague was my favourite I absolutely adore European buildings so Prague was beyond beautiful. In Budapest we went to one of the oldest still operational thermal baths in Europe and it was a very nice rest in the middle of our tour. Later that night we went



Clockwise from above left: Catalunya Independence day  
New Inbounds of D2202  
The Exchange Students of Barcelona



to watch a traditional Hungarian dance and eat the best apple strudel of my life.

The best part of my Exchange no matter how corny, was meeting and making friends with so many kind, different and diverse people. They helped me through my downs and made my ups even higher. I'm forever thankful for the adventures and journeys we went on together.

My final thanks is to Rotary for giving me the opportunity to live abroad in the beautiful city of Barcelona, for independence, for helping me grow and for the best year of my life.



Clockwise from above left:

Sagrada Família

Photo of me and two other Australians  
in Prague

Armillas

Finishing El Camino de Santiago

# Amanda Ortiz - Finland

Sponsored by The Rotary Club of  
Glen Eira

Moi, mä oon Amanda, for the past 9 months I've been living the best year of my life in Lempäälä, a small town in Finland. My year has been very eventful and has given me so many opportunities and amazing experiences, friends and families that I'll never forget! Never in a million years would I have thought that I would have this amazing opportunity! Before I came here, I never really knew anything about Finland, or Finnish culture, but now that I've been here, I've fallen in love with the people, the sceneries, the traditions, the weather, food, the culture, just everything! So, let me give you a bit of a perspective on my Exchange....

My year started with thermo shock instead of culture shock, arriving in Helsinki Finland with a snowstorm and -26 degrees coming from a heat wave in Australia. My first week here was my language/Finnish camp at Karkku, where we learnt as much Finnish as possible, and did various Finnish things, for example avanto (swimming in a frozen lake where they cut out a hole in the ice), sauna, went to a little wooden hut in the middle of the woods and cooked makkara (Finnish sausage), salmon and pancakes on a campfire. There I got the chance to meet 13 other Australians from all over Australia and one girl from New Caledonia where we created a strong family bond in less than a week. We also got the chance to do a bit of skiing, play football in the snow and visit Tampere, a city nearby where we had our first interaction with Finns who didn't know we were Exchange Students. We also got to practice the things we learnt when buying food, clothes etc. and see a bit of what Finnish cities looked like, and got the taste of what our lives were going to be for the next few months with our new independence. We also saw the challenges we would face such as getting lost and not knowing what others were saying. Then on the Saturday we all went to start our new lives with our first host families and our new homes,



First day in Karkku -26C (above)  
My second host family

All my host families have been very different, but all had a very big impact on my life here teaching me Finnish ways and taking me to places and to do things to make my





Clockwise from above - My third host family  
Newbies  
With my first host family in Sweden

experience here truly unforgettable. They taught me Finnish traditions and took me to do some of the things on my bucket list; they took me to Estonia, Sweden, museums, ice skating on a real lake, to see the northern lights, reindeers and moose, took me skiing and showed me lots of the famous cities in Finland like Helsinki and Turku. They also took me to my first hockey game, taught me to knit, bake typical Finnish foods such as pulla, cinnamon rolls, and Karjalanpiirakka. In summer we spent most of our time at our summer cottage going to sauna, swimming in the lake in front of the cottage, rode on our boat around the lake, sometimes from my small town all the way to Tampere, made BBQs and burgers, went to Yyteri beach with my host sisters on the other side of Finland as it was the only real beach

here in Finland. There I got to swim in the east sea and across the water was Sweden! I had an amazing time with all of my host families so far and I can't wait to create more amazing memories till the end of my Exchange.

Rotary has also allowed me to go on amazing and fun trips such as the Russian tour, Euro tour, and all the inbound camps! During the Russian tour I got the chance to drive all the way to St. Petersburg on a bus with around 60 other inbounds from all over the world and stay there and explore the beautiful city for a week. From just that week I made so many lifelong friends that are now my family who I love so much! On Euro tour, we went to 8 different countries on a bus with around 87 kids from all over the world. The trip was 2 and

half weeks long; we went from Helsinki Finland by boat to Tallinn Estonia and from there took a bus through Riga Latvia, Kaunas Lithuania, Warsaw Poland, Krakow Poland, Budapest Hungary, Slovakia, Vienna Austria, Prague Czech Republic and München Germany. We then took a plane back to Finland. We spent one to three nights in each city and had tours around all the cities as well as free time to explore the cities on our own which was so much fun as every day we got the chance to see a new country/place, experience new culture, try their foods and learn more about the history of each of those places! Exchange Students become a big family so fast and now I have a place I can go to in so many different countries. It was our last time with our oldies which made it a very emotional goodbye, but the trip was unforgettable! But now I am looking forward to the rest of the year as I will soon go on a skiing trip with Rotary to Lapland with my amazing newbies that I've already bonded with and love them so much and hopefully have a white Christmas and be part of more Finnish traditions

Finns are very different from Australians and, at first, it was hard to get close to them as they are very introverted and shy, but I was able to take them out of their comfort zone and now I have lots of Finnish friends that I love and will always hold a place in my heart for them. As I am very energetic and loud at first Finns would find me weird or crazy, but most of them have come to love me for that because lots of them are like that but hide it from everyone unless they are with their close friends. My friends have become a lot like me as well as they now have an Aussie accent and I have a bit of a Finnish one. I was lucky to have two other amazing Exchange Students in my school when I first arrived and they helped me settle in and I became friends with their Finnish friends; our group of friends connected instantly and it was sad when they left and I didn't have a lot of classes with my Finnish friends but I got the chance to make more friends.



My best friends (top)  
Boat ride at my host family's summer house at midnight  
as the sun started setting  
The Northern Lights

My days were pretty much go to school, after school either hang around the music room with my friends or go out with them, go to someone's house or go home and play with my little host siblings. My first little host sister



Wanhat (above)  
Estonia

loved horses, so every day she would sit me down with her to watch a movie with horses in Finnish, At first our communication consisted of hand gestures and handy dandy google translate or host mum translate.

Here I got to experience firsthand the best school system in the world and I definitely can say it is the best. Schools are free for everyone, are way less stressful and less mentally draining. They have free food and no school uniforms and during your final exams in year 12 you are allowed to split them so you can focus more and not be so stressed taking them. The teachers are friends with the students and you call them by their first names, they can give you a ride to school and they have your number to text. Unlike Australian schools, teachers are more worried if you are sick than with your attendance and they have lots of fun and funny school traditions. For example, Wanhat ( years 11s dance in front of the school wearing ball gowns) and ABI show (year 12s have a show making jokes about students and teachers, all wearing costumes and the they go on decorated trucks and throw candy for the students at their school and other schools for little kids). Schools here are also very modern, the school gives students computers, we use computers to take notes to use less paper, and the tests/exams are also on the computer. Their classrooms are amazing - for example, the music room even has a recording studio!

I also learnt how Finns are very environmentally friendly and cautious compared to the rest of the world as they have so many forests and lakes and love nature. After living here you start to appreciate nature more and you see what everyone around the world could change to make a better planet.

When I first meet Finns and they find out I'm from Australia they ask me "why Finland?" and I always respond with "why not? - it's different!" Finns look down upon their country and I've had the ability to change the Finnish views of their country by showing them how beautiful and great things are here and how much better life is here than in other countries. The funniest

thing is when they find out that I can speak quite a bit of Finnish. Finns automatically assume that Exchange Students can't learn their language as it's one of the hardest languages in the world and I love proving them that it's not impossible! The language was definitely one of the hardest parts of my Exchange as its not similar to any other languages I know, and everyone here would speak English to me, well my first time looking at a text in Finnish I literally thought it was gibberish, but now I can happily say that it is not gibberish and I can understand quite a bit, although I can sometimes forget simple words. I guess that's normal when learning a new language; hopefully I can become even better at it during my last few months here.

Living here I've learnt and grown a lot and I would never change this experience and I'm so glad I came to Finland because my Exchange couldn't have been more perfect. I went on Exchange to experience something new and different and Finland was definitely very different.



Clockwise from top - Russian tour  
abi show  
Karkku  
Eurotour Poland  
Eurotour Lithuania



# Lara Maratos - Germany

Sponsored by The Rotary Club of  
Prahran

Throughout my now 9 months in Germany I feel like I've had the experiences of a lifetime, but in such a short period of time and it's flown by too fast to comprehend. It's hard to look back on everything I've learnt and experienced this year as it feels like just yesterday I was hurrying off to the airport to say my goodbyes, stressing about if I had packed everything I needed for an entire year away from home. Thinking back to the days leading up to my departure and it all feels so small in comparison to what I've been through these past months. I remember hoping and praying that I would be heading somewhere near Berlin because it's always been my dream to visit. I was then of course placed in the very south of Germany, in a beautiful Schwäbisch city called Tübingen.

This turned out to be the best thing that has ever happened to me, I found my second home. I still don't know how, but I'm now living in the most gorgeous city that has really stolen my heart. Being in the south of Germany I feel so lucky to be surrounded by such a rich culture, which to my dismay does also include a strong German dialect. Arriving in the midst of a European winter which I had never experienced, I was completely taken back by how freezing it was when stepping off the plane. Nevertheless I grew to love the German winter, especially when it started to snow. I remember when I first witnessed it snowing on my first day of school while my host brother and I were walking to the bus stop, before the sun had even risen. I was astonished at the thin layer of snow covering the ground, which my 15 year old host brother found amusing and laughed at the girl who had never seen it snow before.

I spent my first few days in Germany exploring my new city. With no language skills whatsoever I walked around taking in as much as I could before school started. I loved how everyone I met was so friendly and it just made

me so excited to continue exploring. Walking around by myself for these first few days also helped me settle in, and by the time school started I was ready so meet and talk to as many people as I could. I made an effort to always have a smile on my face and introduce myself when others were too scared to come up to me. I was the only Exchange Student in my school, and I feel so lucky to have made the friends I have now. I feel like my transition went pretty smoothly and I didn't have many issues at all. Throughout my time here I haven't had too much homesickness at all, which I'm glad for, and I feel like I've had a pretty smooth sailing Exchange so far. No matter how much people tell you about what your Exchange will be like, everyone always has a completely different experience.

I think one of the best things that's happened to me all year was meeting all my Exchange Student friends who come from all over the world. It was so interesting to talk to everyone and I can now say that I have friends in countries all over the world. I not only became friends with Rotary Exchange Students, but also from many other Exchange organisations. I think I've really thrived from being able to meet and talk to so many people, from many



Hamburg - Rotary International Meeting - presenting the Hungarian Flag

cultures and backgrounds, throughout my time here. The opportunities that are available to you as an Exchange Student are astounding. I feel so lucky and so well travelled now. I have had a taste of so many European countries and cities and I feel like I really know Germany and the culture now. It has really become my second home.

The second weekend I was here, I met up with a group of Exchange Students for the first time and little did I know that these crazy people from all over the world were going to become my best friends. I loved the idea that we were all

from different places and backgrounds, but somehow come together and bond over the life changing experience of our German Exchange. Arriving in the smallest District in Germany, I had only 9 'oldies' and I was their one and only 'newbie' arriving in January. We all became so close because we were such a small District. In April, we all embarked on the 3 weeks Europe Tour that was perhaps the best time of my life. Every District in Germany has different major trips, but we were lucky enough to join 2 other Districts and travel around Europe on a bus with 67 Exchange Students in total. Throughout this time we visited 10 countries and more than 18 cities! It was honestly the most amazing tour of my life and as someone who had never been to Europe, everything took my breath away.



Oktoberfest in Stuttgart  
Tubingen, by the river



It's funny how the places you look forward to the most, aren't necessarily your favourite destinations in the end. I remember looking forward to Paris and France the most before the tour, and it wasn't until after we visited Budapest that I realised Budapest was my absolute favourite European city. I think it just ends up depending on the people you're with and the memories you make. We saw so many amazing places throughout the tour and I think another of my highlights would have to be in Barcelona. It was roughly the middle of the tour so all the Exchange Students

were super close and we were having the time of our lives. We were staying in cabins by the beach for a few nights and I was in a room with some of my best friends. After a busy day of exploring the city, we sat out all together on the beach, watching the stars until it was time to go to bed. With the 3 weeks being jam packed with so many activities and things planned, it was so nice to just sit together and talk. I remember it felt so surreal in that moment because you think about where you are and what it took to get to that moment. Sometimes I'll be doing the simplest of things like sitting on a train or walking home from school and in a moment I will just think about how lucky I am and how much I want to stay there. Sometimes the days and weeks go so fast you don't have time to stop and appreciate them, so that's something that I've tried to do a

lot this year. Sometimes it can be hard, when you're thinking about home and longing for something which is on the other side of the world. However that's one of the struggles which comes with Exchange and you learn to just enjoy where you are, because it is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity.

When the time came for all of my oldies to leave in July, I truly didn't know what the rest of my Exchange would be like. For almost a month I was the only Exchange Student in the District and although it sounds like not the most ideal situation, it was for me a blessing in disguise. I became super close with my German school friends, and because of this my German improved considerably. This period turned out to be full of new and exciting things, it almost felt like an entirely new Exchange. I had moved host families for the first time, changed schools and moved to another smaller town. All of this in combination to being the only Exchange Student in the District at that time, felt weird. I started speaking only German from that point and I felt really settled in.

Thinking back, I'm glad I went to two schools because they were completely different and I have more of a rounded view of what German school is actually like. School here is completely different than back home, I usually start school at 7:30 and finish at different times depending on the day. It was a bit scary starting subjects that I hadn't done for a while, like physics and chemistry which are compulsory here. I've learned so much here even though I might not understand everything in my classes. I have just enjoyed having a large variety of subjects and being able to do a bit of everything, whereas in Australia I only do subjects which I've chosen.

One thing I was absolutely blown away by was the number of bikes in the cities and just in general. I love how so many people ride their bikes throughout the whole year (even when it snows), and it's so safe. I remember going to the train station for the first time and seeing



Eurotour - Paris

the endless rows of bikes, it's the small things which you remember. I think in my city Tübingen there is particularly an abundance of bikes and lots of people with an eco-friendly mindset because it is a very 'Green', University city. I felt right at home and I feel like I have learnt so much which I can now implement into my Australian life.

My first meal in Germany was the traditional 'Schwäbisch Spätzle' and 'Linsen' (Lentils), which I immediately fell in love with. I know that I'll miss the delicious food which comes from my region here, but at least I've learnt how to cook the staples! Spätzle, Maultaschen, Kartoffeln Salat, and the many, many cake varieties including the famous Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte (Black Forest Cake). The food here is such a huge part of the German culture and I've enjoyed every moment cooking and baking with my host families. I've not only been able to taste traditional foods in Germany, but

also all around Europe thanks to our Europe Tour.

I had the chance this year to go skiing, for the first time! I stayed a week with my host family in the Austrian Alps. I had a Ski course, which was absolutely necessary, and after only 2 days I felt at ease and could just have fun. Being honest it was so tiring so I don't think I could do it for longer than a week without a break. Waking up early to miss the long lines, and skiing for the whole day before going home and crashing. I remember being so exhausted after a day and going to bed as early as I could. Nonetheless, I had the most magnificent time and saw some stunning scenery.

Travelling has been so simple here because everything is just so close together, and it's relatively cheap to travel by bus. I've been to places all around Germany with my host family, Exchange Students and Rotary. Some of my favourites being Munich, Hamburg, Nuremburg and soon to be Berlin! I think it's wonderful to be exposed to completely different landscapes which you can't see in Australia and have the chance to visit some of the most beautiful places, in my opinion. I was lucky enough to travel to Italy and France with my host family and hike for 6 days over the southern French Alps, finally ending with a week long beach holiday on The French Riviera (Côte d'Azur). Not going to lie, it was the hardest hike I've finished but in the end it was so rewarding, finishing on the shores of Monaco's beaches. In the middle of summer, it was just perfect. I even had an amazing time despite my hiking boots breaking on the first day!

Another place that I fell in love with was Freiburg in Southwest Germany with a vibrant University atmosphere. I realised that travelling within Germany to different cities were never going to stop amazing me. The German culture is one which I'm always fascinated by. The long-standing traditions, particularly in Germany's south were definitely something to get used to but made my Exchange so much

more interesting and fun. Going to Oktoberfest, the countless Flea Markets, and Fasching of course. There's always a new and exciting festival or market to look forward to. What I'm now awaiting are the Christmas markets in the winter snow which was one of the things on the top of my bucket list.

I have made some friends who I will undeniably be connected with for my entire life. Some in Australia who I'll see more often and others on different continents who I might see in a while; but I know that the bonds we've created are so strong that when we do see each other it will be like no time has passed. I think that's one of the most valuable things I've gotten out of this whole year - the friendships. On top of that, I feel like I have the confidence to go anywhere, meet anyone and be more openly myself. Not to mention being able to speak a new language which, before my Exchange, I knew very little of. Knowing the language and being able to communicate properly makes the biggest difference on your Exchange in my opinion. One thing I regret is not doing more to learn German before I arrived here.

Something I can now look forward to is travelling all over the world and visiting my Exchange friends. I already have plans to catch up with certain German friends and for people to visit me in Australia too. The spider-web of friendships we've made will last a lifetime and I know that for sure.

Eurotour - Paris

near the Arc de Triomphe

and The Louevre

(following page)



