



Emma
from
Burlington and
Burlington Lakeshore
to
Japan

To Call a Place 'HOME'

At the end of everything, everyone has one indisputable fact about themselves, and about their lives. Currently, mine is that I love Japan. From the culture to the food, the people, the atmosphere; there's not a lot that I don't completely and full-heartedly love and enjoy about Japan. Being on exchange teaches you so much, not just about the world around you, but about yourself as a person. It puts you in situations you'd be unlikely to find anywhere else. 'How would I react to this?' 'What would I respond to that?' You find out what your life would be like in an entirely different world, and it helps you grow as a person and expands your perspective monumentally.

One of the great things about being an exchange student is constantly having absolutely no idea what's going on. Especially at the beginning of your exchange when you can barely understand any of the language and have a million people to meet and things to do, you're basically moved in a bunch of opposite directions and just need to hold on for the ride. As I'm progressing through my exchange, I find that while I *am* able to understand more, a lot of this gentle pushing still occurs. After expressing an interest in music and singing to my club several months prior, I was approached in December by a few Rotarians from another club. I learned that not only was I already the lead singer in a Jazz band, but that I was now in charge of deciding the song and music we would be performing in about a month at the large joint New Years meeting.

Rather than the all-out parties that I have always known New Years to be, New Years or お正月 (oshougatsu) in Japan was an absolute turn around. Instead of a party, New Year in Japan is more of a quiet, reflective time to be spent with family and lasts the first few days of January accompanied by the first temple visit of the year and watching the first sunrise. A few days prior to the New Year, my host dad took me along with him to join the neighborhood in making mochi (a traditional Japanese confectionery made from pounded rice) and other things in preparation for the New Year. The New Year has deep religious roots in Japanese culture and I was honoured to spend it in a traditional Japanese fashion this year with the locals in my neighborhood at the temple located right in front of my house. I spent midnight ringing a large bell at the temple 108 times with a number of locals, and was lucky enough to be the one to ring it exactly as the clock struck twelve.

A few weeks prior to New Years, I moved host families for the first time. It was a sad goodbye and I will always treasure the time I spent with my first host family, but, as I've adjusted to my new host family, it's become just as much of a home to me as my first host family and Canada are. *Home* is not just a place you live, nor a title you put on a place for convenience sake. For me, *Home* is a place you can relax and genuinely be unafraid to be yourself, so when I call a place home, when I really feel the truth in the words, it's not something to be taken lightly. My life in Japan is completely different than my life in Canada, and yet in only a few short months I've adjusted entirely and this 'year in the life' has simply become my life. Despite everything I'd been told before exchange, I actually haven't been homesick at all. I've just slowly come to love everything Japan has to offer. Sure, there are things about home that I miss: my dog, ice tea, central heating, but in this entire year, I've never had a moment when I really wished I was back at home. I chose this, and I want to stick with it, through the good and the bad. I honestly can't imagine my life any other way, and really, I don't want to. Adaptation is something I've always been pretty good at, but putting down roots? That's a little different. However, after being in Japan all these months and despite knowing I will have to go back to Canada, I have found a second home in Japan.

Throughout the time that I have spent here, I've been slowly learning the traditions and routines of a new lifestyle, and of a new life. I'm making new friends, learning more of what the world has to offer, and forming connections I never would have considered beforehand. Whether I realized it or not, I've made family over here. The kind of family you get teary-eyed saying goodbye to, and always find reasons to see. I've made the kind of family that I'm not afraid to be myself with.

So far, this year has been, and continues to be, a year of stories, a series of adventures, of surprises—of life! No one warned me when I was about to be interviewed on TV or unexpectedly end up joining a crowd of Japanese men pulling a parade float screaming "WASSHOI WASSHOI!" Life truly is what you make of it, and life is nothing unless you get out there and make something of it. I've been

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incredibly fortunate with the place I started off with in this world, I was born into a good family, lived in good neighborhoods and have been given nothing but opportunities. It's easy to let yourself fall into a routine, it's easy to get a normal job and live an average life, but that's not what I want my life to be. One of the reasons I chose to go on exchange, the reasons I always want to learn more, do more, be more is that I don't want average. I want my life to be so much more. I may not change the world but that doesn't mean I'm ever going to stop working towards what my life 'could' be. I'm going to make sure my life is one worth remembering.

No matter what may happen in the future, whatever my life may bring, I'll know that I've had a year to remember and I've found a second place I can call home.

Once again, I have to take this opportunity to say thank you to Rotary and everyone who has supported me in this. Without them, I would never have been able to embark on this life-changing journey. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping me to discover a second home and family in Japan.

またね!

空恵真 (My name in Kanji, meaning "Sky Blessed by Truth")

Emma