



Rachel

from Mississauga
to
Thailand

"Go For It"

Three Words in Blue

"Go for it!!". Three words written in blue pen on the bottom of a paper that had just sealed the destination of my home for the next year of my life. Little did I know that the simple piece of advice would help the seemingly impossible task of recapping my experience as an exchange student so far.

Fast forward through the five months after reading said paper and seeing the eight red letters spelling "Thailand", it was August seventh, and I was at the airport ready to fly to the land of a thousand smiles. The weeks before my departure date were a blur, and before I knew it I was in what strangely felt like an ordinary family car ride; except we were headed to the airport and the trunk was filled with luggage. Surprising myself, and most definitely my parents, an easy, yet meaningful goodbye was said before I turned and headed through customs. With my red blazer on and uncontrollable smile to match it's beam, I boarded the plane, ready to commence my exchange.



After traveling for just over twenty-two hours, the haze of jet-lag was beginning to creep up on me as I finally arrived. Walking out of the baggage claim area to look for a familiar Rotary sign, I was met by a sea of unfamiliar faces and sounds.

Now, I am no healthcare professional, but I would say being greeted by a group of Rotarians and a host family jumping up and down with a banner, mixed with unhesitant embraces and words of welcome, is the best temporary cure for any and all hints of fatigue. It was in that first magical exchange of hellos that I knew my year would be nothing like I had imagined - it would be infinitely better.



My first few weeks in Thailand were a whirlwind of traveling to different cities, and absorbing as much as I possibly could of what was once a foreign setting. Despite the common communication of smiling and laughter, the language barrier left me not knowing what to expect but constantly pleasantly surprised - this was my first encounter and opportunity to embrace the beautiful “สบาย สบาย” (Sabai Sabai: a common phrase that literally translates into ‘relaxed’ or ‘comfortable’, but is used amongst Thai people as an expression similar to ‘no worries’ or ‘everything is good’) mentality.

Having finally settled, I began to get to know my new home and family. I live about four hours northeast of Bangkok in the large city of Nakhon Ratchasima - commonly referred to as Korat. My home is located about twenty minutes outside of the downtown core in an area call Cho Ho. Here, I live with my lovely host parents and younger host brother at a soccer/fitness facility and cafe that they own, called ProKick. The staff here, as well as the friends of my host family that regularly visit and help out, in addition to the soccer team that lives at ProKick too, have become what feels like my extended family.

Located in the heart of the city, I attend a school that is much larger, and different than the high school I attended in Canada. Going to a vocational college allows me to take classes such as Thai Cooking, Muay Thai, and of course Thai Language. Despite its intimidating size, the natural friendliness and easy-going nature of the students has allowed me and the other exchange student from Taiwan, to make many friends who have been able to help show us around and are forever patient with our Thai.

With thirty one inbound students in district 3340, here in Thailand, representing ten countries including Canada, I am joined by three other inbound students in my city. Through various activities and events the Rotarians here have organized for us, we've been given the opportunity to get to know one another and bond. On the off chance that 31 people get along so well (I really shouldn't be too surprised as we share a great common interest), I consider them to be another family I have here in Thailand. We support, relate and learn from one another, and of course laugh along the way!

Within the span of thirteen weeks I have experienced and learned more than I could have ever imagined. From spending the most incredible of birthdays here, to trips to breath-taking temples and ruins, finding hidden waterfalls, watching a race car event, road trips with the soccer team, or having my dinner interrupted by a baby elephant passing by on the street, I can never be quite sure what each day awaits. I've been able to adjust to the point where wearing pants or long sleeves in 36 degree weather is now very comfortable for me, and anything under 26 degrees feels cool. Simple, causal, but most importantly slow conversations in Thai are attainable, and if I'm lucky a joke or two. With Thailand's never ending list of innovative and unique dishes, as well as street vendors, I have tried something new almost everyday, and my thankfulness for being able to eat spicy food has only grown. Despite these normalities, I am constantly in awe of the rich history and culture of this country. Having had the honour to participate in a Buddhist funeral that was unlike any ceremony I had ever attended before, or going to the Royal Palace with my family, wearing traditional garments, to pay respect to the late King of Thailand, as the only foreigner in the winding line of people, are moments that left me with an indescribable feeling of gratitude.

The experiences I have had so far have all come from a "Go for it!!" approach. Whether it is the love and support from my new family and friends here in Thailand or at home in Canada, the encouragement from the other exchange students I have met here or know in other parts of the world, or simply reminding myself where I am and how incredible this opportunity is, there is no other real option other than to go for it. I have never learned so much, been challenged so greatly or felt as much joy and bliss than I have in the past three months. Knowing this is only the beginning leaves me ecstatic for the adventures to come!

All of what I have had the opportunity to do and experience would not have been my reality without District 7080, District 3340, or the Rotary club of Mississauga - ขอขอบคุณ (thank you so much)! And to past District Chair, Rajeev Wijesinghe, thank you for writing those three words and inspiring the theme of my first BeaverTale!

As a formal way to say goodbye in Thailand, สวัสดีค่ะ (sawadika: goodbye)!

ไยบัว (Thai name: meaning Lotus)

Rachel