



Rachel

from Mississauga
to
Thailand

“I can’t stop smiling at the sky”

I was sitting on the motorcycle, behind my host parent, heading to the market just as the streets started to clear and the sun started to set. My hair whipping around me and my t-shirt billowing in the wind, the smile plastered on my face didn’t lose its shape during the whole ride - and not for a long while after, in fact. With cars whizzing by, dogs barking, and lines forming at street carts for dinner, I tilted my head up to the orange sky and let the feeling of bliss wash over me. This is exchange.

Since the New Year, my life has completely changed once again. Coming back from traveling to the North of Thailand over the Christmas holidays and experiencing its unique landmarks and traditions, not to mention its simple beauty, the first major Rotary trip for myself and the other students in district 3340 was already over. Spending Christmas in 30 degree weather, passing gifts around a campfire, and singing Christmas carols in a mixture of languages and laughs, it was a celebration like no other. Similarly, spending the New Year in Bangkok, and counting down to 2018 with foreign friends and family in a sea of people wasn’t comparable to any New Year before. After such a whirlwind, I suddenly found myself back home in Korat.

With a new year comes a new start, and this year in particular a new family - or better put ‘host family’. Moving in with my new hosts was a very exciting moment for me, a change I had been long anticipating because it guaranteed new experiences. It was only when I was taking my already overstuffed suitcases to the front door did I realize I would have to learn everything all over again. With the voice of a good friend here from France, saying “you’ve figured it out once before, you can do it again” coming to mind, I opened the door to my new family and life.

Located right in the heart of the city, I live with my host grandma, aunt and cousin in the levels above the office space of the company my family owns. While learning about my new home, I also learned just how optimal our location is. From being able to walk to and from school each day in 10 minutes, to being close to multiple temples,

markets, coffee shops, and the malls, all by foot or by bus, city exploration is my preferred way to spend free time. At home, my time is happily consumed cooking with my host grandma and her friend in the kitchen, shamelessly sounding out and struggling to read my Thai book, for ages 3-7, or going out with one of my family members, on whatever adventure they have planned. In a very short amount of time, I have settled in and am made to feel like family here in my new home. The kindness of my host is natural and their house is full of love - it definitely feels like home. And just like my friend assured me, I have figured it out, and am happily extending my 'Thai family'.

With all the 'figuring out' every student comes to do on exchange, the increase in knowledge and capability after six months beautifully blurs the line of foreigner and local. Speaking the language more effectively, being socially adept, and adopting mannerism from the people around me, the best moments are when I'm asked with a very confused face if I am from Thailand or not. My dark hair and tan skin tone may be a bit misleading, but the uncertainty feels like an honour. And that's just it - being immersed in the community and culture of your host country bring you to the ultimate goal of being a natural part of it. I love sitting on the back of a "motor-cyc", each sense overwhelmed with the authenticity of Thailand, or chatting with market sellers with puzzled faces, and realizing that Thailand has truly become my home.

Within the last six months, I faced many challenges, learned more than I could have ever imagined, and am increasingly grateful for my life here and the people in it. With four months left, I am torn between thinking I don't have enough time left and reminding myself just how substantial the amount of time is to discover and enjoy more of what Thailand has to offer. Regardless, it means I have over 100 days here and the plan is to enjoy each one, one at a time. Because at the end of each day, it's the moments when I'm laughing with and feel loved by my host family, that I celebrate any and everything there is to celebrate with the other exchange students, my school friends take me out for the day, I surprise the kind lady in the market by saying I'm from Canada, or I can't stop smiling at the sky as I am sitting on a back of a 'motor-cyc', that are the fondest. It's the small, magical moments that remind me where I am, how much I've accomplished, and all the magical moments to come, that make an exchange so extraordinary.

Thank you: I would like to thank district 7080 and the Rotary Club of Mississauga for providing me with this once in a lifetime experience. None of my experiences would have been possible without Rotary and all those who dedicate their time to the Rotary Youth Exchange - thank you!

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