



# Claire

from Mississauga West  
to  
Switzerland

## “Lebenslust- learning the Swiss zest for life!”

It is so surreal to be writing this right now. I remember always dreaming about being on exchange, and here I am, already three months in! Every exchange student says it, but it feels like I have been here in Switzerland for a very long time and the blink of an eye all at once. And it has been everything I’ve dreamed of and more.

The time up to my departure date was a blur and I didn’t have much time to stop and think, so when that fateful day finally crept up on me, I was taken by surprise by how hard it was to say goodbye to my family at the airport. I was a crying, bundle of nerves- in other words, a complete mess. The bad weather made me wait for longer than I expected to board my plane, but it is in that moment in time that I was sent a guardian angel! I was walking to get a drink when a girl tapped on my shoulder and asked if I was a Rotary Youth Exchange student (as I was wearing my blazer) – she introduced herself as a Rebound from Switzerland to Taiwan. She was so friendly and kind and we talked and talked and my nerves were gone and all that was left was excitement. The universe works in mysterious ways- we were on the same flight and happened to have seats right next to each other! The flight to Switzerland was my first flight ever, and as we took off, the rain and clouds cleared up to reveal a beautiful sunset- a beautiful omen for the beginning of my adventure! I could barely sleep on the plane because my heart just felt so full!

I arrived in Zürich with no problems, and my friend helped guide me through the airport. When we finally arrived at the arrivals gate, she gave me a hug and wished me good luck before we parted ways and before I would meet my host family for the first time. As soon as I walked out, I was greeted with a big hug from my host sister. The energy and excitement was palpable, and I knew immediately that I would feel at home. It definitely is a scary experience to be meeting these strangers from halfway around the world that you are going to call family- but what a beautiful thing that these complete strangers have opened their arms and their hearts to you! I think that is one of the most beautiful aspects of Rotary Youth Exchange- the fact that it is run completely on passion and generosity. I try to not forget everyday how lucky I am to be having this opportunity!

Within these first three months, I have had so many incredible experiences- I am constantly stepping out of my comfort zone and learning and growing and I have been loving every minute of it. One of the biggest lessons that exchange has taught me so far is how to be courageous. I didn't realize how comfortable I was at home until I had to step out of my comfort zone here, but once I did, I found out how rewarding it is. It doesn't mean that I am no longer scared, but I have learned to not worry, give everything my best effort, and just make the best possible experience out of everything. Whether that scary thing is giving my first Rotary speech in a foreign language, getting lost on my bike on my way home, or trying to make friends in school- no matter how it goes, I come out feeling like I can take on anything!

I live in a charming little town by the name of Aarau. It's a small town, but it feels very big because they have everything you need located in a downtown area, and it is constantly bustling with people. The small town also hosts some cool events, like small concerts on the street and open air farmers' markets. I love the old streets with cobblestone roads and beautiful little shops and houses- it feels like I'm in a fairy tale!

However, the best part of my exchange so far has definitely been all of the lovely people I've gotten to meet. My host family is very warm and welcoming, and treat me like family, including me in all family events and activities. I have been lucky enough to get to see and experience so many new things with them- including going to Zermatt, Geneva, Basel, and Bern! It has been especially fun with two host sisters close to me in age! I am actually going to be switching host families very soon and I now cannot imagine leaving this family.

In school we stay as one class, rather than having different classmates for each subject. As a result, the class is really like a small family, and they immediately took me in and welcomed me. I thought it would definitely be a challenge making friends in school, especially with the language barrier, but I am surprised and lucky to say that it was very easy! Even if we can't always communicate exactly what we want to say, we always end up in a fit of giggles! One of my favourite experiences so far has been my class camp. In Switzerland, it is customary for classes to take a week out of the school holidays to spend time together for a week, doing different activities. For ours, we went to a beautiful small village (named Oberwil) in the mountains to volunteer with Swiss farmers. The work was tiring, but I had an amazing experience bonding with my classmates and the Swiss farmers- it truly is one of the most heartwarming, unforgettable experiences I've had so far.

And of course, I can't forget to mention the Rotarians and other exchange students! Everyone in my Rotary club is extremely friendly, and they have already invited me to see new things, or just come over for a meal. And meeting all of the other exchange students (from *all* of Switzerland) during our first welcome weekend was so much fun- everyone was all smiles and there was just so much good energy! Whenever we get to see each other, it truly is a treat.

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Another thing that exchange has taught me is to be grateful for all of the little blessings that come my way. Because my time is limited, I've learned to be more attentive to all of the small things that make my day and really appreciate them. Whether it's my host mom surprising me with a cup of tea, a beautiful view after a long hike, remembering a word in German, or all the hugs we give and receive as exchange students, exchange has taught me to savour every sweet moment!

I am so thankful for all of the sweet memories I've made so far and look forward to many more to come.

As they would say here in Switzerland,

Merci vielmals Rotary!

*Claire*