



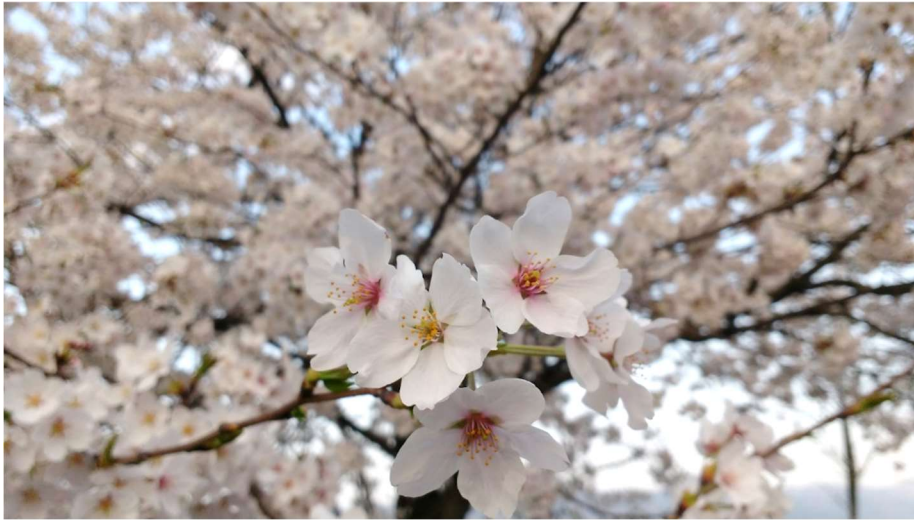
Emma
from
Burlington and
Burlington Lakeshore
to
Japan

“A Year in a Minute”

Year after year one consistent piece of advice that exchange students give to each other is to enjoy it, because it'll always go by too fast. Low and behold we're reaching the end of the year and all that most of us want is a little more time to delay the encroaching departure date. In actuality, the year itself doesn't go any faster here or there. The only things that change are us, and our lives. Back home as the year goes by we're always looking to the next vacation, getting through the school year, exams, work and the like, never really noticing how the time flies by because we want it to. This year however, nothing's 'routine' and our version of normal is flipped on its head. I've started to pay attention to every moment, everyday, every journey and I've wrapped myself in the wonder of a life I am experiencing for the first time. It's no longer an option to simply coast by looking towards fleeting moments and vacation while making my way through the routine. Now instead of flowing along with life, not paying much mind to the passage of time, I've been made both hyper-aware and oblivious to everything I usually keep in the back of my mind.

With that introspection out of the way, I'll move on to actually telling you about the highlights of my past few months and some of the crazy stories that come along with it.

Around the end of March and early April this year I was lucky enough to be here in Japan to see Cherry Blossoms for the first time. They only bloom for around a week every year, but during that blink in time you get the privilege of seeing hundreds of thousands of trees everywhere bloom.



For just that short while, they come out of hiding everywhere you look, only to fall in a beautiful snowfall of petals and just like that the blooms are gone just as fast as they came. While some might find it unfortunate that

their beauty is fleeting, I think it just makes it all the more special and magical every year, and it's one of the things Japan is known for.

Now that the summer months are just on the horizon and the weather is starting to warm up, the festivals are starting to ramp up as well. It reminds me quite well of my first few weeks in Japan when it felt like there was a new festival to go to every couple days! Starting slowly with the cherry blossom festivals around Kanazawa and a few small events from the Japan trip, to walking to my Japanese lessons or biking home and finding myself surrounded by food stands for a million and one different reasons. Besides the purpose of the festivals — music, ceramics, flowers, holidays, or exhibits — my favorite part of going to them is by far... the food. Kakigori, yakisoba, karaage, taiyaki, okonomiyaki, etc. (some of which you're hard pressed to find anywhere else) just make me enjoy the wonderful festivals all the more.

One of the best times I've had here in the past few months was on the Japan trip back in March — which happened to coincide with cherry blossom season! With cherry blossom season sweeping through Japan from south to north, I got to enjoy it in Hiroshima, Osaka, and my home town in Ishikawa. Anyways, the Japan trip took place during spring break in late March after the school year ended when the exchange students in my district all traveled together around Hiroshima and Osaka for 4 days. The first place we went to was Miyajima, also known as Deer Island. That's right, upon this beautiful culturally significant island over 1000 deer peacefully coexist with humans. In addition to the deer, the most prominent landmark on this island is the beautiful Itsukushima shrine made part-way out to sea, one that you can walk all the way up to at low tide. The reason for this somewhat unusual symbiosis is that Miyajima deer are considered sacred in the Shinto religion. Due to this, the deer can be found all over the island, and are really quite friendly!

One of the other places we visited later on in the trip was the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima. At the museum we got the opportunity to learn about nuclear weapons and their impact from the perspective of the country and people that suffered their consequences.



They displayed many artifacts from the time such as tattered school uniforms of some of the children caught in the blast and examples of the waves of destruction caused by the shear heat. There were also holographic displays, survivor accounts, and monuments and information about the measures made towards peace and insuring this never happens again. One of these monuments is the Children's Peace Monument made to commemorate Sadako Sasaki and the thousands of other child victims of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. If you don't know this monument, it depicts Sadako Sasaki at the top holding a wire crane above her head and a boy and girl at the sides. Surrounding the bottom of this Statue a few feet away are pieces of art made from thousands of different cranes from all around the world in support of a world without nuclear weapons.

Other locations we visited on this trip included Osaka Castle, USJ (Universal Studios Japan), and many other places, but on this topic I shall leave you with a small tidbit: I have now added a reptile cafe to my animal cafe quest, joining the cat, owl, hedgehog, and several other cafes I've visited in Ishikawa.

On a more prosaic topic, I've moved a few times since my last report and have been lucky enough to have lived in a wide variety of homes and neighborhoods both in the town of my host Rotary club and those around it. One of my last host families lived in Kanazawa, right next to a small mountain! The proximity combined with my tendency to explore and wander meant that this didn't stay as only a 'nice view' for very long. While at that host family I spent many of my weekends hiking up and exploring off trail for many hours accompanied solely by the distant sounds of the road and my ukulele. I found many interesting spots in that neighborhood, but my favorite spot has to be an area a little bit out of the way towards the top of the mountain that I discovered on my first day. It opens up from the thick foliage to a small open rocky seat slightly separated from the trees that falls away to a sheer drop with a clear view over the entire forest below and far in the distance the burning sun and city poking up beyond the trees. It was breathtaking, and while I love all the more structured activities, I've found that I also legitimately enjoy the simple moments of peace and adventure found from exploring and playing ukulele with a beautiful view.

Finally onto a bit of an... *interesting* story about the first time I went to a very traditional Japanese tea ceremony a few months back. It was early spring and a Rotarian had invited me to observe a longer than normal (several hours) tea ceremony with his tea ceremony teacher and several others. It was a very formal type of setting with everyone wearing business attire or Kimonos inside of a very classic Japanese home. Several hours passed normally and then at one point the teacher stepped out of the room to collect some more supplies. All was calm as everyone was sitting silently and only gentle candle light illuminated the room. One of these such candle lights came from an unused dark kettle, hanging on top of an iron rod with a small fire in the spout and long white bands trailing down to the tatami mats behind. Then, just as calmly, the fire from the front of the kettle jumped and slowly spread down the white bands towards the floor. Needless to say the calm didn't last. It was at this point that I had the unique experience of seeing several normally composed women wearing kimonos jump out of their seated position and run over to smother the fire while screaming to the previously unaware teacher in the next room. This was unusual experience to say the least, and definitely one I will not be forgetting anytime soon.

All these things and more have happened in just the last few months. I've been in Japan for almost nine months now — that's crazy! Before coming on this exchange the longest I'd been out of the country was a couple weeks, and I'd never been without seeing my family for much more than a week. Now time doesn't feel long or short anymore it just kind of *is*. When I first got here two months felt like a lifetime, and now it's terrifyingly short. Even weirder yet is to know this entire life that I've created and everything I've experienced that has contributed so much to who I am today is all just a small part of my life, no matter how monumental it feels right now. Regardless, I'll keep living in the little moments and remembering everything I can, because every moment only ever happens once. To end this last BeaverTale I need to say one final thank you. To everyone who's helped me, cheered me on and encouraged me through my nerves, and worked so incredibly hard to give me this extraordinary year, thank you!

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