



Isa
From
Burlington Lakeshore
To
Japan

**“As I sit here writing this in my room an ocean away from
the one I once knew, I’m reminded of all the countless
blessings I’ve received.”**

A whole 171 days ago, I set out on a journey that would change the course of my life, one that I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to venture on. This exchange I’ve spent the past five and a half months on what has already been one of most amazing, life-changing experiences of my life—but no thanks to me. It’s been thanks to all the support and love I’ve received from my family and friends, my sponsor and host clubs and districts that I can be living life in a place so foreign to my every concept of culture and society. They have all done more for me than I could ever have dreamed and I am forever grateful. I hope, through reading this BeaverTale, you can see why I’m so overcome with gratitude.

Language

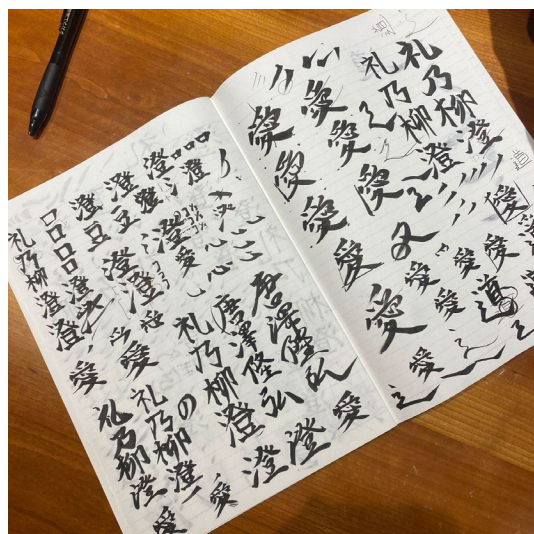
Jumping right in with easily my favourite part of exchange, the language, to date, my complete fascination with the Japanese language still has yet to meet its end. Since the time I wrote my last BeaverTale, my Japanese has progressed a ton and the farther I go, the farther I want to go. I now feel extremely comfortable in everyday conversations and have very little trouble communicating at least the general idea of whatever I may want to say. My

understanding of what those around me are saying isn't entirely there yet, but it has vastly improved, with the biggest improvement being my understanding of the local dialect.

In Japan, since the way people speak Japanese can change so much between one prefecture and another, I've found learning the dialect local to my area to be a key part of integrating into life here. Thus, I've been trying my hardest to pick it up and continue to do so, doing all I can without a comprehensive textbook telling me what to do.

Connections

As one would expect, with the improvement of my language skills, the connections I've made here in Japan have improved likewise. Now being able to make conversation much better than before, it's led to plenty more good times and laughs with my friends; memories, which I will certainly cherish forever. Additionally, it's also led to more connection with my classmates and now, at this point in my exchange, I can say with confidence that I truly feel like a part of my class, not just that one foreign exchange student. Boy, what an amazing feeling. All in all, not only am I strengthening the friendships I've already built, but I'm still finding myself making new friends, all of whom I'm certain will stick with me far after my exchange comes to an end.



As for my host family, I actually very recently moved back in with my first host family, saying goodbye to my second after four amazing months together. As bitter as that was, since I only had one month with my first host family at the start of my exchange, it was very sweet to be able to have more time with them—and this time thankfully actually understanding what they're saying for the most part.

In the time I had with my second host family, we got super close and their place truly became a home away from home for me. Only a week into my (second) time with my first host family and I already think very fondly of the memories I made with my second host family, as if a far-off dream. I know that connection will be one I hold with me forevermore.

Culture

Everyday, after school ends, almost every student goes off to their respective club activity, and I do the same. However, I've found my club activities diversifying recently. For those of you who read my previous BeaverTale, you'll know that I've been a part of my school's Light Music (Band) Club from day one, for which I head to the music room to practice drums most days.

However, since I wrote that BeaverTale, I also joined my school's 書道/shodou (Japanese calligraphy) club, which meets most Mondays and Fridays to, well, do calligraphy. While, with only two members including myself, it's not the most lively of clubs, I've come to quite enjoy doing Japanese calligraphy, having slowly started to pick up the techniques over the couple months I've been doing it.

On top of that, I've also begun learning how to play 三味線 /Shamisen, a three-stringed Japanese guitar played with a ばち/bachi, which is a rather unique guitar pick used only for Shamisen (give it a Google if you've got time). I'm very grateful for both those opportunities to engage in Japanese culture and learn more about the arts in Japan, an interest I had ever since I started learning more about the country and its culture.



On the topic of culture, and with the holidays being a huge part of many cultures around the world, I want to be sure to get into that in this BeaverTale. Holy cow, were the holidays here in Japan crazy different from those I'm familiar with in Canada. In fact, they aren't even just different, they're basically all flipped around, with Christmas being a fairly laid-back and New



Year's being the whole shabang. To put this into perspective, Christmas was so not a thing for me this year that, not only did I have school on Christmas Eve, but my host family was also working on Christmas Day (though thankfully I had the day off school). That said, I still did celebrate Christmas to some extent, but it was much more similar to my typical New Year's celebrations, with it consisting of celebrating mainly on the eve and partying with friends more so than family.

While that was fun and great, the real meat of the holidays here in Japan is お正月/Oshougatsu, what we know in Canada as New Year's—and what a blast it was. Where the New Year's celebrations in Canada typically end at midnight (at least they do for me), they're only just getting started when the clocks strike midnight in Japan. In fact, not long after midnight arrived for me, I was off with my host family to 初詣/Hatsumoude. For those of you unfamiliar with the practice of 初詣/Hatsumoude (which,

given that I'm writing this report in English, is likely most of you reading this), to explain it simply, the word would literally translate to something like "first visit," implying that the visit is to a shrine or temple, as well as commonly being understood as the first visit *of a new year*. With its origins dating back over a millennium, it's a practice steeped in much tradition—most of which I learned about around 1am day of (if that's not just the exchange life in a nutshell, I don't know what is).

Once my host family and I had arrived at the temple, we picked out our respective prayers for the coming year from the pieces of wood that had all the different options inscribed on them. After we wrote our names on said pieces of wood, we gave them to the temple monks to be burned, which they did while reciting a chant as the assembly of people sat on the temple floor. With that being the bulk of my 初詣/Hatsumoude experience, my host family and I called it in for the night and headed back home.



The morning came and I woke up ready for my host dad's extended family to be showing up in a couple hours, sitting around the table and eating lunch together once everyone arrived. As we ate lunch, I learned as many names as I could and got my host dad to explain to me who was whose partner, sibling and kid, surprisingly following along pretty well. Later on, after most folks had headed home, me, my host family and my host dad's sister's family all went to karaoke together, where we all had an absolute ball and the お正月/Oshougatsu celebrations came to a close. However, the fun didn't end there as, the following day, my host cousin, with whom I had gone to karaoke the day before, took me skiing, something that had been on my exchange bucket list for a long, long while. Although the weather wasn't the best, I had an absolute blast with him, and I really hope I can get the chance to ski again before spring comes.

Shifting to another key part of any culture, the food, those who read my last BeaverTale may recall that I had set a goal of eating 100 Japanese dishes before my exchange ended. Well, currently sitting at a whopping 115 dishes eaten to date, I have far surpassed that goal and am now aiming for 150 dishes before I head back to Canada! Out of the 35 some-odd dishes I've eaten since my November BeaverTale, the most notable ones have been gohei-mochi, pufferfish, narazuke, and karinto-manju.

Highlights

At the start of January, right before my winter break ended, I went with two other inbound exchange students in my host district to Ghibli Park and had a blast. Ghibli Park, in short, is basically just a golf-course-sized plot of land with a handful of areas that have been transformed into life-size recreations of places in various Ghibli movies. For anyone who has no idea what I mean by Ghibli, Studio Ghibli is a very famous Japanese animation studio whose popularity has spread around the world, with movies such as *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away* being known internationally. For the folks who have seen a Ghibli movie or two, I'm sure you can get a sense



for just how awesome a park like that would be—and boy was it awesome. In case it couldn't get cooler, though—and no pun intended—but there also just so happened to be an ice rink basically right smack dab in the middle of the park. Thus, being Canadian after all, I simply couldn't pass up such a precious and scarce opportunity, so I convinced my exchange student friends to go skating with me. Despite having to do so in rather dull skates, boy did it feel good to get on the ice again after so long.

Later on in the month, my birthday rolled around and, to be so honest, I was not expecting to have much of anything happening that day, as every adult or teenager whose birthday I had been around for hadn't really been celebrated like they would've been in Canada, lacking both presents and a proper party. However, the morning of, before I headed off to my Saturday Japanese lessons, my second host mom informed me that my first host family would be coming over that evening and to have a party together. And let me tell you, it was a party (there were even presents!). For the most part, I just played with my two little host nephews from my first host family, but overall it was just such an amazing time hanging out with both my host families who I had gotten so close with, a memory I will hold dear to me for years to come.



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With all that said, what a fantastic past five and a half months this has been. As I sit here writing this in my room an ocean away from the one I once knew, I'm reminded of all the countless blessings I've received. Thank you so much again to all those involved in Rotary in my sponsor club and district, as well as my host club and district; it's because of all of you that this life-changing experience has been made possible for students like me. Thank you to my friends and family in both Canada and Japan; you all have done more for me than you know, supporting me through this amazing adventure. I'll keep working hard to make the most of this opportunity you've all given me!

心から感謝しています/kokoro kara kansha-shiteimasu (From the bottom of my heart, thank you)
気を付けてね〜！/ki wo tsukete ne! (Take care!)

礼乃柳澄 愛咲
アイザ・レイノルズ

Isa Reynolds

P.S. If you're interested in following along with my exchange in real time, please feel free to follow my exchange Instagram account at @isas_rye_adventures!