



Madelyn

from Tillsonburg
to
Thailand

“สวัสดีค่ะ, *Hello!!*”

I've been in Thailand for just over three months and I am still amazed at what my life has become this year. Every time I look around, I get a glimpse of a new and intriguing culture. As Dorothy once said, “Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Tillsonburg anymore.” (She was from Tillsonburg, right?). After traveling for close to 24 hours I have to agree, I am *definitely* not in Tillsonburg anymore. The town I'm staying in while I'm here is not much different at first glance, only about 500 more people here than in Tillsonburg, with a similar lack of city culture. But, if you look a tiny bit further, a beautiful cultural vibrance washes over you, like sun in the stifling heat.

It's approaching winter here now and I've been told that the temperature is supposed to drop to a shockingly cold 15°C. A welcome change from the 35° it is right now. I've somehow managed to navigate through the turbulent weather of rainy season with the help of The Mighty Umbrella and a healthy dose of indoors. I am excited at the prospect of being outside without the threat of hot, humid rain pouring down at any moment, although it hasn't stopped us much so far. Praise The Umbrella!!

My first week in Thailand was pretty busy. The combination of settling into my new home and getting everything ready for school the next week didn't leave much time to do lots of sightseeing. Thankfully, my host dad and sister decided that before I started school I would at least see one temple. That weekend, they took me to one of the more famous temples in the area and taught me how to pray to Buddha. The temple was amazing, a giant gold Buddha statue and a snake statue so big it could have been a monster. I was glad to get the chance to play tourist a bit before starting school the next day.

Starting school was hard for me. I didn't know any Thai, and I was supposed to be sitting in classes where I had no clue if I'd even be able to understand what was happening. I chose to be placed in Mattayom 5, the equivalent of Grade 11 back in Canada, hoping that with easier courses it would be easier for me to learn some Thai. I definitely misjudged. Thai is one of the hardest and most confusing languages I have ever had the opportunity to hear. The same word can mean up to five different things depending on the tone of voice you say it in. The sad fact is, I can still barely hold basic conversations with people. Unfortunately, this means that most of the time people don't understand me either, and it's not very often I have in depth conversations with people.

The Saturday after school started, I got to visit what roughly translates to "walking street". I've been a few times since and I enjoy it every time I go. They close off most of the main street to have vendors everywhere selling all different kinds of Thai food, clothing, and ... well, everything. There's also one part of the street where they have rows and rows of women doing traditional Thai dancing. One of the coolest things I've done so far is learn how to do a Thai dance. It wasn't traditional Thai dancing, but I learned a special dance for the closing number of my school's celebration for the retiring teachers. It was thrilling to be able to perform something so different from the dancing back home and I thoroughly enjoyed learning it. (Link to dance:

<https://www.facebook.com/santipong.j/videos/1822368797817637/>)

As the holidays approached, I was able to talk to my host mom and have her buy me some ingredients to make pie for Thanksgiving. I made a pumpkin pie and an apple pie. Unfortunately, the Thai people who tried it weren't big fans of the pumpkin pie. The apple pie, however, was a big hit and I'll consider making some again when it comes time for Christmas. I don't think they eat a lot of pie here, but cake seems to be something that is fairly common. My birthday, which happened to fall during RYLA, was celebrated after RYLA with a beautiful 16-pound cake and some friends that I have made while I've been here.

RYLA, or Rotary Youth Leadership Awards, were held in Trat, Thailand. We listened to speakers talk about something, leadership stuff probably, but since I don't understand much Thai, for all I know they could have been figuring out the best way to kill The Wicked Witch of the West and her weirdly creepy flying monkeys. (I guess I should really work on my Thai.) We also discussed what democracy means, planted trees, cleared garbage off the beach, and prepared skits on issues like peer pressure and bullying. Overall, it was a great learning experience and I was glad to have been given the opportunity to go.

I also had the first of my three Rotary trips this past week. I spent four days climbing up, down, and around Phu Kradueng National Park - a.k.a. a *really* big mountain. My fellow inbound students and I put our determination and stamina to the test on this painful, yet amazing trip into the mountains, hiking a total of 62km in the four days we were there.

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Hiking up on the first day was, by far, the hardest part of the trip with some parts of the mountain so steep you had to use stairs (bamboo ladders) to get up. The second day was no pushover, we hiked to many of the different and beautiful waterfalls tucked away in the mountain side. The third day was, hands down, the longest. We were woken up at 4:00 am to hike and see the sunrise over one of the mountain cliffs, and then proceeded to have breakfast before hiking another 18km. We hiked until well after sunset visiting a few of the cliffs that overlooked the city below and stopping at the last one to watch the sun go down. Phu Kradueng was full of wonder at every turn and I had an amazing time with all my friends. Despite our exhaustion, on the fourth day, we were all a bit disappointed to head back down the mountain and part ways with each other and all the stunningly beautiful views.

And that brings us to now. Me, typing my story. Hoping that reading this will bring you a fraction of the joy this experience has brought me so far. And so, I bid you goodbye, good night, and I hope, wherever you are, you're enjoying life as much as I have been these last few months.

ลงนาม, *Signing Off,*

มาดี, *Maddy*