



Billy

From Burlington Lakeshore to Japan

"No way has it been half a year already"

家こ帰りたくない

Time flies and it's starting to bug me how little time I have left to be in my parallel universe over here. I'm at the point now where despite my skin, hair and eye colour, I no longer get treated like the foreign kid (probably because I'm with my Japanese friends all the time).

My Japanese is acceptable now, I can no longer play the "I don't speak Japanese therefore I can't go to class" card so the Senseis make me sit in on the classes and monitor my study habits. I am also now expected to attend water polo practices that range from 2-4 hours a day (all males are expected to compete as a part of a sports team). Whilst these sometimes leave me dead tired and wanting to drop dead on the floor before I even eat dinner (fun fact: the literal translation of dinner from Japanese to English is: Night rice), I'm learning very very quickly and am in really good shape and when I'm not dead tired I feel amazing!

When I wrote my last beaver tale I was living with the hilarious Chadani-sans in the village of Kasama, so much has changed in so many ways, new families, new year, new traditions, new Billy.

A few weeks after I wrote my first beaver tale I moved host families. To be honest, changing host families is one of the most difficult things I have had to endure on this exchange (and that's saying something). As if leaving my home country and coming into a completely different society with completely different rules and no friends and no

family wasn't enough, once I finally got to a point where I felt somewhat at home here, it was time to move host families.

To recap a bit, the Chadani's are two 70 something year old traditional Japanese office workers, he owns an insurance company of sorts and she works for the company. This resulted in me having two very wealthy, very busy, but still very kind host parents, I love them like I do my real grandparents. So you can imagine the feeling of having to go from a place where I'm so comfortable to a completely different place of which I know nothing -think of the feeling you get when you wake up in the morning and your bed is really warm and cozy and outside is really cold and you just don't want to move- multiply that feeling by ten, and you'll get an accurate measure of my fear of changing families. My new family (the Wada-sans) are as polar opposite to the Chadani-sans as a Japanese family could be, my Okasan and Otosan (mom and dad) are somewhere in their mid forties, and have four kids. Maki (sister) age 20 is living in Tokyo and I've only met her once, Kenji (brother) age 18 lives at home and goes to school in the city near here, Keiko (sister) age 16 goes to a different high school than me in the city, Maeko (sister) age 9 is well a typical 9 year old girl and can be annoying at times. This combination of family members gave me two new best friends, a housewife mom who would brush my teeth for me if I didn't insist on doing it myself and the classic annoying younger sibling that never gives you a moments peace. Despite my pre moving doubts, I instantly fell into sync with this family, don't get me wrong, there are times when I want to scream at my sister and yell at my brother, but 95% of the time I'm very content and honestly, even when I'm yelling at my sister for breaking my guitar strings I'm still quite satisfied that I am comfortable enough with to yell at and get yelled at by. Markings of a true family? I think so.

My handout on beaver tales suggest I write about a good thing and a bad thing that has happened to me on exchange, and honestly, changing families is the worst thing I can think of and it turned out to be so much better that I could have expected. So I guess that says a lot about how well this program is going for me.

The harder thing to write about is the good thing, not because I haven't experience great things here, only because I simply don't know which of all the awesome thing's that I've been able to do I should write about.

But from a traditional/cultural point of view, I'm going to have to pick the winter holidays. Starting December 21st, the winter break in Japan is meant to give you time to finish all the things that you haven't done in the previous year before then New Year begins. For me, this included, making a snowman (they only use two boulders instead of the north American traditional three, so, much like the people, the snowmen in Japan are shorter than the Canadian snowmen), going skiing 6 times (we live 20 minutes from the mountain, my sister is an all Japan ranked GS skier and there was heaps of snow), eating KFC (for the Christmas feast, I told them that in Canada we eat a bird like chicken

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for Christmas dinner and they did the best they could), playing a live concert for my Japanese school (terrifying but very fun), going to tons of purikura with my friends (Giant photobooths, it's the coolest pastime in Japan), going to tons of Karaoke with my friends (the second coolest pastime in Japan), conducting the honorary sake toast for rotary (a very, very big deal) and so many more little things like taking my family skating for the first time!

All this happened in a rush before New Year's Eve so that I could follow Japanese tradition and enter the New Year with no regrets of things I didn't do.

For New Year's itself, we stayed up and watched the clock in Tokyo countdown to midnight, then my whole family embraced in a giant hug and drifted off to bed. The next morning we awoke for the first journey of the New Year, like every good Japanese family, we all bundled up in our warmest clothes, hopped in the minivan and drove towards Hakusan (direct translation into English is, White Mountain). Unfortunately, we were not the only ones going to the mountain for our New Year's prayers; the roads were at a standstill so we parked our car on the side of the road and walked for an hour and a half to the foot of Hakusan. Upon arriving we entered a temple that was literally crammed to bursting point with people bowed in prayer murmuring their wishes for the upcoming year. Our whole family promptly took off our shoes and without even stopping to stretch our aching feet, we dropped to the ground and started to pray. The prayer sessions lasted for 2 solid hours, by the time it was over, we could barely stand because our legs were asleep. It was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced, and it wasn't even based upon a particular religion, there were thousands of people there in the temple and though they were mostly Buddhists, there were Christians and Agnostics too, and everyone was united in prayer, kneeling on the ground in freezing cold weather in this un-extravagant temple praying for the welfare of their families, friends and Japan in the coming year. It was, simply put, one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.

From the other side of the world, where people really aren't that different.

Billy

Japan

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My Host Family in Japan