



Colleen

From Burlington Lakeshore to Australia

“....it swooped down and pecked me on the head”

G'day Mate!

At the last wave to my family and friends at the airport on July 6th, I knew right then that my adventure was starting. After a long 26 hour flight, and many, *many* tears later, I was picked up by my first host family and counselors and taken back to the place that I was going to be calling home for the next ten weeks. By the time that I got back to my new home I was extremely exhausted and didn't want to do anything but go to bed, mind you it was only 11am and I knew that I had a day of events ahead of me.

The city that I am staying in is beautiful Geelong, in the southernmost state Victoria in Australia. Although nothing like I thought it would be, I was curious and fascinated by the city that I was going to be calling home for a year. The downtown area was beautiful, right on Corio Bay, and hour from Melbourne and 20 minutes from the surf coast, I was in my own oasis. The main difference that there was to home was that every house is fenced off, there are fences in all of the yards blocking out the beautiful homes that lay behind them. Most of the houses are either modern or old Victorian style and I love them. The trees are different, the cars are different, the side of the street you drive on is different, the accents are different, everything different and I couldn't be happier.

Before I start on everything that I have done up to this point, I would just like to add that Australia has been in a drought for the past 10 years, this year the drought has been broken and I can honestly say that there was not one day in the first three months that it did not rain. Also, it has been the coldest that it has been in over 18 years. Needless to say the rain surprised me and the cold wasn't the best but that has become something that makes my trip to Australia unique, I was here when everything came back to life and the fields were rows and rows of healthy green crop. The land is back to its beautiful state and I have been one of the lucky people to witness it at its unbelievable beauty.

Over the first few days there were a bunch of things that needed to be done so I could start school. I had to get my uniform-which was an experience in itself, choose my classes and buy

November 2010

my books all in time to start school four days after my arrival. Getting through jetlag was easy but getting through homesickness was not as easy as I expected but I made sure that I didn't let either of them get in my way of having the best exchange possible.

After school started, I quickly made friends and started learning where all my classes were. Not long after, I was able to find all my classes and knew where to meet my new found friends for recess and lunch. I was very happy in my new surroundings and excited for everything that was going to come my way.

By far my favorite thing to do on weekends in the first couple months was to go to the AFL games. The Aussie rules football is so different from American football and I absolutely love it. Not a game would go by where I wasn't cheering "GO CATS!" In total, I went to about seven games in the final leg of the season and although the Geelong Cats did not win them all, they surely were a team to beat. Attending the match against their rivals, to see who was going to the final games, was something that I'll never forget. The crowds were like nothing I had ever experience before, they cheered for their own teams and booed the opposing sides, it was so much fun. To my disappointment we lost the game but next season I am eager to wear my blue and white and cheer again for the team I've learned to love.

As the weeks passed at school I found myself loving it more and more, my teachers were great and the school work was not too hard. One of the school days the whole school got together and we participated in a sports day where each of the school houses would go against each other in "friendly" sport and compete against different relay and field events. My house was in first place for the whole day until the last hour where we were unfortunately finished in third. Many of the weekends that I stayed with my first host family were full of things to do. We took drives to different places on the coast where I was in awe of the ocean. I would just forget the world and look out the window of the car smiling at the miles and miles of ocean that I could see. My favorite place so far that I have been is to a coastal town called Barwon Heads. It used to be more of a cottage area but becoming more of a full time residential area but still with that small town feel. I love that I can walk into the main road and walk down looking into the shops window and getting a "g'day" from all the people you walk past which left me without a worry in the world. The views from the town are also spectacular, you can look down the beach at many of the other coastal towns, and while the sun is setting is becomes a place that easily takes your breath away.

The incredible wildlife here is also something to be seen, I still get excited when driving down the road and seeing a kangaroo or koala crossing sign, it is something I don't think I'll ever get used to. Speaking of which, I have had the opportunity to see both, some wild and some in sanctuaries. After hearing that there were whale spotted in one of the towns close to me, of course I was anxious to go there but never thought that I would actually get to see one of the beautiful creatures. Lucky for me, we picked the perfect day to go and look out in Torquay's Bells beach. There it was, floating through the ocean with multiple dolphins beside it and less than 400 meters from countless surfers. Still in amazement from seeing the whale I was even more speechless after noticing the multiple kangaroos that were dispersed in the golf course we were driving past. With the wild animals in check I was extremely happy to go out to the sanctuaries and see more wildlife. Petting koalas, wallabies, snakes and so many other animals was the highlight of the first ten weeks in my beautiful new country.

November 2010

Out of all the remarkable wildlife there is one animal in Australia that I have learnt to despise. Not only is it the mascot to the footy team who beat us out of the championship, but it is the bird who scared the day-lights out of me. This bird is called a magpie and it is the one thing in the world that I am terrified of the most. Even though it is unlikely that you will be swooped by this bird, now when I see it I make sure to stay far away, even if it means crossing the road. It was right around the time of Canada's thanksgiving (they don't celebrate it here) and I decided because I was in Barwon Heads, my favorite place, and it was a nice day out I would go for a ride on my bike. As I was about to leave I was told that I must wear my helmet as it is a law here, so I thought to myself, "well why not, I don't know anyone here, who cares if I look dorky," so I hesitated but did end up wearing my helmet. As I was riding along a path which is along the beach strip I noticed a quite large shadow behind me, I turned to see and there it was chasing after me. I tried to peddle faster thinking that the magpie bird might leave me alone but no, it swooped down and pecked me on the head-thankfully my helmet saved me from getting hurt. The worst part was that I was alone, I peddled that bike as fast I could, and I don't think that I have ever gone so fast in my life and finally escaped the wrath of the bird.

As the first term came to a close at school so did my time with my first host family. Moving into my next family was a bitter sweet moment, I was happy to be going on to a new family but sad that it was already time for me to move, the first ten weeks flew by and I didn't even notice. My new family didn't live too far away from my first and my school so it was easy to make the transition; the hardest part was actually physically moving all my things. Over the first two weeks I was off of school and my host parents grandchildren were staying at the house so I got know them fairly well.

While staying with this family I was invited by another Rotarian to fly to Tasmania, the island at the bottom of Australia, and stay for a week with him and his wife. During that week I saw things that I never thought I would see in my life time, in one day I was at the top of the mountain watching 40 year old people have a snow ball fight and then walking barefoot along the beach. I got to see the exceptional architecture around the main cities, Hobart and Launceston as well as go down to the most southern part you can drive to in all of Australia. My favorite part would have to be when we went to Bruny Island , we went on a boat cruise and I sat at the front of the bus with a big red jacket and awaited the tour that laid ahead of me. The first rocks that I saw I was absolutely enveloped by their size. The sites that I saw after that was things that I cannot explain in words, their magnitude were incredible leaving me speechless. After seeing many cliff faces I was astonished how immaculate they were, they were things that I have never, and probably will never see again. I was also able to see seals and penguins. The experience was something that I thought was so unbelievable, the untouched nature made me feel emotional, it was powerful and made me feel so irrelevant to the world. Being held in Geelong was the International Road Bike Race, where I and my host mom went to every area to watch the riders. I wore my Canada shirt and waved my Canadian flag as the Canadian riders went by, never had I been so proud to be Canadian. Amongst a crowd of green and gold Australian I stuck out like a sore thumb but someone managed to find another Canadian family and together we cheered on our country. And although Canada didn't win any significant metals the spirit that I had matched the Aussies who were doing quite well in the racing.

November 2010

As time passed I got closer and closer to my host family making them feel as though I really was a part of their family which I really liked. Living in someone else house has proved to be something that you have to get used to but something that is so rewarding, teaching you so many things about yourself that you wouldn't have known living in your own family environment. Once it was time for me to leave this family I was very saddened, I loved them so much but was happy that I was getting to live with yet another amazing family and I knew that I would be experiencing even more new and exciting things.

Currently I am with my third family who have had 15 exchange students previous to me and when I moved in they gave me the award of having the most stuff! I don't think that this is an award that I should be too happy, especially about considering it means I'll have one heck of a time trying to get it all home. I'll be moving into my fourth in two weeks, where I'll be spending Christmas and New Year's. Even though the time is flying by I am still am happy and excited for everything that is going around me. I have finished my year 11 exams and now am finally a year (grade) 12! Summer vacation starts in a week and a half and I am so excited considering I have not had more than two weeks off of school since summer 2009. I have made some amazing friends that I know I will stay in contact with for a long time and I am finally getting to know a bit more of the Aussie lingo-which is basically shortening every word and adding an "ie" to the end- that goes on around me. I've gotten used to their funny accents and they're outgoing personalities and even been told that I am getting an accent!!!

This past (nearly) five months have been truly unforgettable. There are moments where I have to pinch myself to realize that yes, my dream of coming to Australia has come true that I still have so much more ahead of me to experience and learn. Rotary has become my life, I go to two meetings a week (one with my host club and one with my host dads club) and never have a dull moment mingling with the Rotarians. It is because of these people that my wildest dream is now coming true and there will never be a time where I stop thanking them for allowing me the time of my life.

See ya!

Colleen

Australia