



Colleen

From Burlington Lakeshore to Australia

"I was going to remember for the rest of my life"

It has now been seven months since I arrived in Australia and it feels like home. Since the last time I wrote there has been so much going on that it is hard for to pick out only a few of the event that I have taken part in. The whole experience has been so incredible that if I could, I would talk everyone I know into doing an exchange.

My year in Australia started out amazing and as the time started to fly by I didn't think that it could start to go by faster let alone get any better, but Rotary is right when they say, "you think the first half is fast until you get to the second half." That statement, which I brushed off, is 100% accurate and now that I have realized that I am making sure to take every opportunity that comes my way and making them in to the best experiences. With that said it is going to be hard for me to narrow down what I have done just to fit into my beaver tale and not let you in on every little detail- though sometimes, those are the best!

The start of summer meant for me eight weeks off of school, sunshine, surfing and lounging on the beach, or so I thought. Unfortunately for me this summer was one of the wettest on record and I rarely made it to the beach and only had a few opportunities to surf. That being said, the rain and poor weather did not take away one bit for my unforgettable exchange, in fact I believe that it made it unique because, as I mentioned before, everything is green and vibrant. The days that I did get to the beach the weather was so hot, unbearable for some but not for me. I was loving the heat and the sun, and even the few sunburns that I got. I knew that those days were going to be some of the ones I remember so clear, the waves crashing on the shore, the ocean roaring around me and the shrieks of the little swimmers in enjoyment.

Surfing was something that I had obviously wanted to do since I found out that I was going to Australia, it was something that had to be done at least one time in the surfing capital. I went down to the beach one morning with my host dad and his brother-in-law and was taught- on a real surf board, which is apparently harder to learn on- how to

catch a wave and I even stood on a few of them. I was so proud of what I had accomplished and I knew that it was something that I was going to remember for the rest of my life. Now don't get me wrong, it was difficult, there were times where I was up for a fraction of a second and then face planted into the ocean then having to give a "thumbs up" just so that everyone knew I was still keen to keep trying. After only an hour and a half I was exhausted and ready to call it quits for the day. That morning was amazing, something so original to Australian lifestyle and I loved being a part of that.

The house that I lived in over the summer was amazing, I had my first host siblings, I was a five minute walk into the main city and a 15 minute walk from the swimming beach, not to mention my house overlooked the bay. Because the weather was not always beach weather I was able to walk into town most days and check it out which may not have been so good for my bank card but I sure loved it! Coming home to my family was great too, I always managed to laugh with my host sister Alex and had a great time with the extended family as well at many family lunches and dinners.

Having Christmas and New Years in warm weather was something so foreign to be and I was determined to wear shorts no matter the weather. Christmas morning was a little different from the one that I have at home, here there was just the immediate family- my host mum, dad, sister and brother and we opened all our gifts together. The family started to arrive later in the day and I was happily greeting them in my Santa hat and shorts. As they all arrived we ate way too much food, laughed a lot, opened more gifts and had a great time sitting outside- something I have never done on Christmas before.

As the holiday season was coming to an end, I spent New Year's Eve with a friend from school on a beach with their family and friends. New Year's Eve day was the hottest day that I had experienced since I had been there, it was over 40 degrees outside and almost too hot to even go out. However I was not going to pass up the chance to go and watch my fried surf on New Year's because I knew there would be a very limited chance I would ever do that again in my life. As night fell it started to become chilly, then cold then ridiculously freezing. During the day I had a dress on and sweating then as soon as it got dark I was in jeans, a cardigan and a coat- this just proving the crazy weather of Australia. We did the countdown to 12 o'clock and yelled "Happy New Year's!" as fireworks went off over our heads to welcome in the New Year.

As the summer was drawing to a close I knew school was around the corner but I still had one more big event before I headed back to classes. The week before school began there was a nine day trip for all the exchange students in my district where we started at one end of the district and went from club to club to the other end. It is easy for me to say that this was the high light of my trip so far, not because necessarily of what we did but just because of the time that we spent with the exchange students. We did everything that you can imagine from climbing a volcano to surfing to shooting at a gun range to kayaking with seals and so much more. We were so fortunate that the weather

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held out for us and I was even able to get a bit of a tan- which is a feat for me. Over the nine days the exchange students and I all got really close and we all feel so comfortable with each other that everything we do we find funny in some way. Being one of two who only speak English it is quite funny listening to the pronunciation of some of the words that the others try to say but I am sure that I sound just as silly when I say things like "eu te amo" meaning "I love you" in Portuguese. Overall spending that nine days together was full of laughter, smiles and excitement and I know that we all had the best time and now that we are so close it is going to be so much harder to say goodbye to them. It is so strange, even though we have not spent too much time together we all share a special bond where we know we can call tell each other anything and not be judged at all. There was a bond that week that will likely never be broken and out of everyone that I have met, they mean the world to me.

After only a few days of not seeing the exchange students I was in withdrawal and with Australia day only days away I knew that it was the perfect opportunity for us to get back together. All the students who could make it into Melbourne joined us for a day of walking around looking at all the festivities, watching a well put on parade and enjoying fireworks like I had never seen them before. We each dressed up in Australia Day wear and marched the streets in pride of the country that we had been living in for the past several months and looked around in amazement at all the people who too, looked so happy to be living in the amazing country they were in.

In the next few weeks I have so much to look forward to, my mum is coming out from Canada and we are going to travel and I get to show her everything that I have accomplished over here, my houses and all my beautiful families. As well, I have school and seeing all my friends again and finally my safari trip. With all this going on I know that the next 5 months are going to fly by and soon enough I will be back on the plane to go home. I know that this year will be something that I cherish for the rest of my life and I know that without a doubt in my mind I would never replace a single memory from here, the good ones or the bad ones. Each struggle has made me stronger and each smile has made my heart bigger. There is no telling how much this has really changed or impacted me but I have fallen in love, in love with the country known as Australia.

See ya mate!

Colleen

Australia