



## Emily

### From Burlington North to France

*"I thought they only did it because they hadn't seen each other in so long"*

Bisous tout le monde!

The time to write my first beaver tale came up all too quickly while my new life in France occupies my mind.

I left Canada on August 25th from the Pearson Airport to arrive in Paris the morning of the 26th, then flew to Brest, which is closer to my city. Leaving definitely did not feel real; no matter how much you try and prepare yourself, you can't really grasp what is to come until it does. Especially because I had never been away from my family, taken a long flight, or been out of the country. All I knew is that no matter what happens, I wasn't getting back on a plane til 11 months later.

My first week here, I saw the ocean for the first time. My host family has an apartment in Port Louis where you can see the ocean from the window. They took me to a huge beach about 30 minutes south of there, called Quiberon. Driving in, all you see is trees, dead grass, and a bunch of scary looking buildings from World War II. After walking for a little while, and going over a little hill, all that I could see was the ocean and a beach that seemed to go on forever. It was the beginning of September, so it was still warm but the water was icy. Being a Canadian, I decided I could suck it up and go right in. I started to edge in slowly; you have to walk forever to get to deep water. Once I was up to my waist, my host dad pulled me right under the water! It was sunny and bright, I swam in the ocean on a beautiful beach, it was a great feeling.

Now for some details about the area I live in. My first host family lives in Rostrenen. It is a town of about 3000 people. It used to be much livelier but most people have moved away from centre Bretagne into the bigger cities on the coast. About half of the shops are empty; lots of broken windows and uninhabited homes. However, there are still lots of little shops, even a few clothing stores, and most importantly - the bakeries, mmm. My host family lives on top of their photography store. I live right around the corner from

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the school which is really convenient. In my first few weeks I went on walks with my host sister through the town. She showed me the trails in the forest beside the school, and while we were walking, she picked berries off the bushes and just ate them! Apparently it's okay to eat any berries off the trees here. I also went into the chapel, which is very old. It's nothing too fancy because it's a small city, but still, lots of statues and intense paintings inside. Even little villages with 30 people have a chapel. No one goes anymore, but it used to be that everyone in town went together. The city consists of only a few bendy streets, and once you leave the town you see hills, lots and lots of cows, horses, and sheep, until you enter another village with a few homes and shops.

School is very different and involves long days, from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. I am in Terminal L, a class of 6 students, which is like grade 12 with a focus on Languages. There are two other classes, Term S, for sciences and math, and Term ES, for economics and sciences. My classes are Spanish, History, Geography, Sport, Literature, English, Advanced English, and a history course that is in English. Each class is an hour long, except for history which goes another half an hour into lunch break. School is also much more strict: we are not allowed to leave school property, we can never have gum or even a water bottle in class, and there is absolutely no talking in class. Even if you smile, they interrogate you and ask you why, and what could possibly be amusing you. Every teacher has the same method here, they sit down and speak at you for a solid hour while every student takes notes. All, yes all, of the students are super-organized. Every student has their pencil case which they set on their desk at the beginning of class, they always use different colour pens, underline everything with a ruler, and cut and paste the papers we are given into their notebooks. This would make you think they all must get top marks, but in fact the grading system here is also very different. They are usually marked out of 20, and having anything around 10 is wonderful to them. Despite how gloomy this may seem, the friends I have made at school now make school the most enjoyable place I can be here. At first I was very intimidated by my class mates. I came to school my first day and everyone stared at me. I was put in Terminal, which never happens with foreigners. I was excited because my host brother who is currently in Brazil had all his school friends add me on Facebook before I arrived. I expected some sort of welcome but they just stared at me. My second day though, they called me over into their group, which consists of over half the Terminals, and I have been close with them ever since. They told me now that yes, they were staring at me, and they wanted to see what I was like before they let me into their group. May seem a tad cold hearted, but my friends are really lovely. I didn't feel very comfortable around them at first, they do everything on their own - they don't wait for others after class or to go to the bathroom, they don't smile at each other in the halls, and they get frustrated very easily. It may seem like silly things, but these things made me feel lonely even when I was around them. It took me a little while to realize just how much my friends cared about me. If I was feeling down one day, they all seemed to avoid me, or come over and just give me a pat on the back, which didn't help me much. It wasn't until I became very ill with Mononucleosis that I realized how much my friends cared for me. It started at the end of

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September like an average cold, a missed a bit of school and my friends got really worried. I came back for a few days and they were thrilled to see me, as I was them. After my first month I was able to enjoy myself around them. Unfortunately once October came around I started to get more and more ill. I went to the doctor multiple times, got many different medications and nothing worked. I'm not sure how many weeks it was until I finally got a blood test telling me I had Mono and the most I could do was wait it out. I couldn't go to school for over a month. The days dragged by, I missed my friends and my host father wouldn't let them come visit. I tried to go back to school so many times, but every time I had to go back home after an hour or so because I could hardly make it up the stairs or I was almost passing out in class. That long period where I was ill was very challenging. I was home sick, I needed to involve myself in the culture and the new people around me, but even taking a few steps wore me out. The most I could do was lay in my bed and hope to get better soon. Around mid-November I started feeling better and was able to go back to school, though I had to take things slow. Going back I was completely lost in my classes, a lot had happened since I had been gone, but I slowly got back into the routine. I can't say enough how having good friends here made all the difference. They show me they care about me, and I can laugh and be myself with them.

My ability to speak French before I arrived made it a lot easier to communicate. I could understand almost everything; just my vocabulary was still limited. Understanding my friends was a completely different story. Thankfully it didn't take me long to understand all their slang words and keep up with what they were talking about. It's also kind of funny the way there are sounds that are not words, but have a specific meaning. One sound in particular is only used in France and it took me a while to understand, it's some sort of exhaling sound that means "what ever". Then it is also very common for people to breath heavily in while they say "oui". I actually thought my host mother had a respiratory problem before I realized everyone did that. I don't really remember the French I spoke before I arrived here, or the accent I had, but no one has to speak slowly to me, I very rarely have to ask what a word means, and my mind is in full out French mode. I was no star in French class, so I know there must be improvement even if it's less obvious than if I had no idea how to speak the language before.

I gave my Rotary presentation two weeks after I arrived. I wasn't expecting it so soon, and thankfully all I had to do was translate a few words for the presentation I did in Canada. Apparently the Rotarians weren't expecting much, they have never had a student before who was able to speak French. On my second slide, when I properly pronounced the population of Canada, I got a standing ovation. I stumbled over a few words, but everyone was extremely impressed. My counselor is the District Chairman, he told me he chose for me to come to his club because he was very impressed by me. I am his little helper in organizing events, and translating for the other students when we are all together.

Our first big rotary weekend was at Mt St Michel at the start of October. There were about 200 students from various districts in France. Mt St Michel is an island with a huge castle on it. It is surrounded by quick sand when the tide is out. We went for a 3 hour long walk on the sand. It was nice to walk out and see the island, though three hours of walking in muddy sand was a little excessive, we all thought we were going somewhere till two hours in the guide just said, oh okay, turn around now! During our walk, we got to places where the quick sand was a little, well, quicker. We sunk into our knees then had our friends pull us out. It resulted in some pretty funny videos, especially one of me, where attempting to get out, made me sink deeper. The day after our walk we went to visit the castle. It's like a little village, with winding streets and little shops, then the castle on top. We did a tour, and as most things do in France, there were lots of fancy statues and paintings and rock walls etc. To get to the top we had to go up hundreds of never ending steps. I really don't know how I did it considering I had mono, though this was before my confirmed diagnosis. However, once we got back to where we were staying, I was dead, and had to sit out while everyone else danced the night away. It was great to spend a few days with all the other students, and to speak our own languages. Exchange students always know how to have fun together.

I feel like since I am in France, I can't leave out a few key aspects: cheese, wine, croissants, and bisous. Cheese is in fact very important here, and there is lots of it at lunch and dinner. I have grown a real taste for it, my favourite is Camembert. And yes of course, I eat my cheese with a baguette. Wine is drunk by most families; however my host family doesn't like it so I don't have it often. At Rotary though, they are sure to give me a few glasses! Bordeaux is my favourite. I don't have croissants often [though I wish I did] - they are so good here! And croissants are hardly the start. Pastries here are easy to find, even in Rostrenen there are 4 different shops full of bread, croissants, cakes, and much more. Sometimes when we have a spare period, I go over with my friends to get a yummy snack. The last thing I need to tell you about is bisous. As I am sure you know, French people kiss each other on the cheek. I knew this, but I did not realize how often it happened, and with how many people. Especially on my first day of school, I felt so awkward when all the boys I didn't even know came up to me and expected me to kiss them on the cheek. It takes a full 5 minutes out of the morning to give everyone bisous. I thought on my first day they only did it because they hadn't seen each other in so long, but no, it's like that every morning. You don't have to know someone to give them bisous, you just have to have one person know another person for every single person to bisous each other! It's mainly out of politeness, but it took me a while to get used to it. I didn't want to do it and make the other person feel as awkward as I did, nor did I want to be rude and not do it. Though now it's normal to me, I can foresee that being a big reverse-culture shock when I get home.

My first three months in France challenged me in ways I never would have imagined. But I am happy to report that I have overcome these challenges. I know that the rest of

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my exchange is sure to present more, though I also know that the best times are yet to come. So, this is where I leave you. I hope all is well back home with each and every one of you.

Gros bisous encore a vous tous, à la prochaine.

*Emily*

France