



# Gabriela

## From Milton to Denmark

*"The house was nothing like I had ever seen before"*

Goddag alle ! It has been three months now since arriving in the little land called Denmark. Although it already feels like I have been here for so long. I know this amazing experience is just beginning and it's about to get even better than it already has been. Still, I always ask myself, "Am I really here?" It all still feels like a dream that sooner or later I will have to wake up from.

I left Toronto on a very nice warm day and said goodbye for now to my best friends and my family. Already being in the airport, I had began to question, "Am I really doing this? Am I about to go live a year away from home in a place I know nothing about completely on my own?" I finally got on the plane, and was on my way. Never had I been so uncomfortable in my life. I think during the 8 hour flight I slept maybe 20 minutes. This only made me want to arrive in Denmark that much more and that much faster. I arrived at the Copenhagen Airport ready to make my change and get on my next plane to the Aalborg Airport. I got on my plane and again, I was on my way. One foot off the plane and I felt everything changing. My emotions were all over the place, as I was scared yet excited, and sad yet also happy. But then I saw two girls looking around, looking for something or someone. It seemed they had recognized me from my pictures I had sent them. My two first host sisters had been looking for me. I felt all my emotions drain leaving only the feeling of relief. Shortly after picking up my bags with the help of my two host sisters, I got to meet the rest of my host families and counselor.

Thirty minutes after leaving the airport we had arrive at my first house. The first thought in my mind after arriving was "What is this? Is this even a house? Do I really live in the middle of nowhere?" The house was nothing like I had ever seen before. It looked very old especially because it still has the original roof made from straw. What impressed me the most was to learn that my house is older than Canada, as it is around

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256 years old. My family had actually just finished renovating the entire house inside so it looks very modern and nothing like it would have 200 years ago.

I live in a town consisting of around 4,000 people. Sounds small? Well it probably doesn't sound as small as it actually is. I have come to realize in these past months that a lot of towns here in the northern part of Denmark and outside of the cities are only places meant for people to live in and not much else. Well of course there are also places for going to school and grocery shopping. My town is called Dronninglund, very small town just up north of Aalborg, the fourth biggest city in Denmark. My host family consists of my host mom, my host dad, my 20 year old host brother and my 18 year old host sister. I feel extremely fortunate to be placed with such a wonderful family who allow me to feel right at home and give me a strong sense of being part of the family. From the moment of my arrival, they have done nothing but help me get settled in. By the second week in Denmark I had already seen and been to many tourist places. My family had taken a whole week off to show me around all over the place. We went to an old World War II boat, to castles and even chalk mines. Soon after, I got the opportunity to meet more members of the family and family friends who made me feel very welcome as well. Being with such a wonderful family, it didn't take long for me to feel comfortable with the family and all the family friends. I've only been living with my first host family three months, but it feels like so much longer.

My school is also situated in Dronninglund about 4.5 km away from my house, which in other words means I am riding my bike to school and back home. Some people might say 4.5 km is nothing, but for someone who is not used to riding the bike for so long and so many times, it becomes a very stressful task. In Dronninglund Gymnasium, I am part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year in the 2A class. I'm very lucky to say I feel I have integrated into the class very well and have made some pretty good friends. My classmates also help me improve my Danish every day. The Danish school system is very different than the Canadian school system. Like Canada, they have elementary, which is known as the 'skole' and they have high school known as the 'gymnasium'. Skole begins in grade 0 to grade 9, though you might choose to attend grade 10 as an extra year. Once you have graduated from skole you go to the gymnasium. Gymnasium consists of three years; first year, second year and third year. The way the gymnasium works is also different than the average Canadian high school. In the first year of gymnasium you must choose what you want your specialty to be, meaning whether you want all your courses to focus more on math, or sciences or languages, etc. Depending on what you choose you will be placed in a class. You may choose to switch out of the class if you no longer think it is right for you. In the gymnasium you stay with the same class throughout the three years and have all your different courses with them, except for language class because not every student chooses to learn the same language. In a way I like the system because I get to bond with my class mates and get to know them better, but also it makes it harder to meet more students from the rest of the school. Thankfully, even with this

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obstacle, I have been able to make many good friends from not only different classes in the second year but also from the first year and the third year.

Only a month in Denmark and I had experienced one of the best weeks of my life; IntroCamp. IntroCamp was a full week with lots of learning, lots of coffee, lots of food, and lots of fun. This introcamp was a Rotary event where all the exchange students who arrived in Denmark in the summer were able to get to know each other and learn the language together. Spending a full seven days with 136 other exchange students from all over the world did nothing but allow us to build strong bonds with many of them. I'm very lucky to say I hadn't only made strong relationships with many of them, I had also found my family away from home. Although I have my group of best friends which includes seven of us girls from Argentina, Brazil, USA, Ecuador, Venezuela, and me from Canada and also my best friend from Ecuador, I have also found myself being part of an exchange student family. I will never forget this week full of excitement, new adventures, learning, and forming friendships that will always be very special to me.

After the IntroCamp I had found myself knowing a bit more Danish. The Danish language is so different from English, and I had never heard it before arriving in Denmark. Not knowing the language definitely makes things difficult sometimes but I'm very fortunate to have come to a country where around 90% of the people are able to speak English. I had been told that in Denmark many people know English, but even with that I was still very surprised to see just how many people really do speak English and how well they speak it. Everyone speaking English does make it a bit more difficult to learn the language because it is always so much easier to communicate in your own language especially since you know everyone will understand you, so there really isn't much of a push to learn the language. Even with that, I am very proud to say that I'm learning the language and can now communicate in Danish and understand it. I remember the feeling I got the first time I started understanding full sentences and was able to make sentences myself, it was like no other. It just feels so cool to be able to understand a completely different language especially when it's a language I would have never thought I would learn. The process I have made in these short months makes me wonder how far I will be nine months from now.

In Denmark I belong to the Rotary Club of Dronninglund. The club meets are every Monday. The really cool thing about my club is that they like to have a lot of guests and speakers as well as going to different places to have the meetings. Normally our meetings take place in the Dronninglund hotel, but since arriving I have also attended meetings in Aalborg Airport and an old art school. My club is made out of mostly middle aged adults both male and female all who have made me feel very welcome. A typical meeting starts after having greeted everyone. It is very important to remember to say hello to every member once arriving. Once the president has rung the bell, we all stand up and sing a song out of a book full of songs. We sit back down and the president says the schedule for the evening. Soon after, dinner arrives. We pass the

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dinner around the table as everyone has the same meal. Once finished, the second round comes around. Finally once having finished the second course, the coffee and tea are served. While drinking the tea and coffee the speaker comes up and presents what they have prepared. Questions are asked and answered and the president gets up to thank them. The president then says the schedule for the next meeting and rings the bell to inform the meeting is now finished. We say hej-hej (bye-bye) or vi ses (see you) to everyone and go back home.

One of the things I must not forget to mention is the food. Oh the Danish food! Danish food has to be one of the biggest things that impacted me. It is very different than anything I had tried before and they are very traditional. The kartofler (potatoes) are one of the things that you will have with mostly every traditional Danish meal. Also, many meals include a lot of pork. One of my favourite dishes has to be the Frikadelle. That is fried balls of pork, sounds delicious, eh? For every meal it is a custom to repeat the course twice. If it is a formal meal, they will also serve wine with the course and if not, it will most likely be served with water. Very important to mention is the famous Rugbrød, the rye bread. The Danish very much like their rugbrød. The rugbrød is very commonly used as the base for the food to be piled on top. Once they have the food on top, they of course eat it with a knife and a fork. Very important thing to remember, always use both the fork and the knife for every meal!

I have only been in Denmark three months now and although they have flown by, they have been the best three months. I have met so many new people; some who I see being friends with for a very long time. I have experienced so many new things, and have become part of the Danish community. This is only the beginning, and I can't wait for the rest!

Knus og farvel for nu!

*Gabriela*

Denmark