



# Gabriela

## From Milton to Denmark

*"Not only was I able to be in his presence but I was able to listen to him serve mass"*

Denmark; a Scandinavian country located in north of Europe. A country made up of many different islands, some mayor others minor. A country with a very set culture, with a population of around 5.5 million people and a small land area of only 43 thousand km<sup>2</sup>. Yet the country that has given me the best year of my life. There aren't enough words in the world to begin to explain my amazing year in this country and the gratitude I have to have been given this opportunity. Throughout this year, I have lived with 3 different families all whom are very different from one another. Experienced and got integrated into the Danish culture. Tasted all different kinds of Danish dishes, some from which I very much like to others where I wouldn't order if I were in a restaurant. This year has gone by way to fast and it doesn't seem to be going by any slower.

It was a year and a half ago that I first applied to become an exchange student through Rotary (October, 2009). I remember as I was filling out my application that I really wasn't fully aware of what I was getting myself into until I met the other exchange students and started to know more about the exchange life. Of course, hearing about it is completely different than experiencing it yourself. Now, I find myself writing my third and final Beaver Tale with so much to tell about my experience as an Exchange Student.

My year here has been full of doing things I never thought I would do and seeing things I only dreamed of seeing. The biggest thing that was just a complete dream come true was my Studietur with my classmates to Rome. This trip was unbelievable. As I was walking down the streets, standing next to buildings and monuments which I have only ever seen on TV or movies, I really couldn't believe just how lucky I have gotten. To be quite honest, my luck didn't stop as I got into Rome, it continued all throughout my trip. Apart from having seen the Coliseum, Pantheon, the Trevi Fountain and so much more, my luck revealed itself the third day in Rome as I experienced an amazing thing. Wednesday, March 30<sup>th</sup> was the day my class had arranged to go into Vatican City. This was already a huge thing for me since I come from a very Catholic family and I'm Catholic myself, but I never imagined that I would get the chance to be in the presence

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of Pope Benedict XVI. Not only was I able to be in his presence but I was able to listen to him serve mass and join him in prayers. It is definitely an experience that will always remain with me. Of course this trip wasn't only about seeing Rome, but it was an opportunity for me to spend a lot of time with my class mates and get to know them even better. I became very very close to my classmates, more than I was before, and I'm very thankful for that. We got to know one another in a way we never had before and every moment together were moments full of laughter.

The Rome trip was amazing, but the only thing that was a little upsetting was that during my trip, Rotary had arranged for the last G2G of the S10 (summer team 2010) to be the weekend I was away. This G2G was very important because it was the final chance to say goodbye to a lot of the exchange students who do not live close to me in Denmark and whom I'm not able to see before we are all on our way back to our countries. Yet, the good thing is that I have been able to see some of them since then.

It was exactly 6 days before my Studietur that I moved in with my last host family. My third house is a huge house and my family owns around 240 acres of land, meaning you literally have to go by car to get to the other side of their land. There is nothing else I can say but only good things about this family. As soon as I moved in, they made me feel like I was a part of them, as if I had known them for a very long time. They opened themselves up and allowed me to get to know each and every one of them. This family consists of my host parents, my 14 year old host sister, and my 11 year old host brother. That was also a big change for me, going from being the little sister, not only with the other host families but with my family back in Canada, to being the older sister. I must say, I kind of like being the older sister. I have met both my host dad's and my host mom's side of the family, and they all have also made me feel part of the family. We have done a lot of family activities together in such a short time. One very memorable one was going to a little island outside of Nordjylland called Læsø with my host parents and just spending the day together. I feel very fortunate to be with this family, as I feel very comfortable with all of them. I have such a nice relationship with each of them. With my host dad it is never a dull moment as we love to tease each other and joke around all the time. Yet I still love to tell him and my host mom any exciting news I find out. With my host sister, we talk all the time and every time something funny happens we always look at each other and burst out laughing even more but we never really know why and with my little host brother we play games all the time. One time we were crazy enough to play Metador (a Danish version of Monopoly) from 9 p.m. to almost 3 a.m. It's really nice going from a household where it was mostly everyone doing their own thing, to a place where there is always something going on.

After having had almost 6 months of constant cold weather, finally the nice warm weather decided to arrive. It was around the first weeks of April where the sun began to shine and warm up the environment. Since the weather became so nice, I hate being inside the house. I love being outside with my computer or catching the sun or even

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reading a book. Not only that, I love to just take walks around the huge land my family owns, including the forest. No more is it hiding in a restaurant when my friends and I are out, now it is only being outside in a park eating, singing, dancing, laughing and creating new last memories of our exchange.

As I mentioned before, the last Rotary G2G was during my Rome trip meaning I couldn't see many of the exchange students who live either in different islands than me or far in the south to say a final goodbye. Of course, this didn't mean that I wouldn't see them ever again. It actually gave me a push to travel more around Denmark. First, I went down to the south of Jylland (the island where I live) for the first time. Then to the city Aarhus as I often go there and finally to Sjælland (another island) to see Copenhagen for the first time. I went to the south of Jylland during the Vinterferie (Winter Break), as it was a weeklong break. During my stay in the south, I stayed in two different cities one called Vejle and the other Kolding which are a 20 minute train ride apart. Both cities were very nice, but my stay there wouldn't have been the same without the company of those I now call family, the other exchange students. Those whole 4 days in the south were full of dancing, singing and having the most amazing time together.

Now my Copenhagen trip was not too long ago, and it was an amazing little trip. First off, I absolutely loved Copenhagen; it is a great city full of many beautiful things. I arrived in Copenhagen on a Monday at around 1 in the afternoon, met up with a couple friends and got to see a little of the city while we walked to a park where we were going to meet some others. We walked down the main street in CPH full of clothing and food shops. Around 8 at night I got on a train to go to the city where I was staying called Hillerød. I took the train with a friend since he had to take the same train to go to his town. It was very helpful because I had no idea how the train system worked over by CPH since they are different than the ones in Nordjylland. I got off the train and got picked up by my host dad's sister, who which I forgot to mention was whom I was staying with. My host dad's sister and her children were a delight to stay with. Though I only stayed with them for 3 days and 2 nights, I got to know them so well and talked to them about anything. We joked around all the time and I enjoyed every moment of it. I sure wish that I could have stayed with them a bit longer but because of my Euro Tour, I really didn't have any more time to stay there. The second day I was there, I went back to Copenhagen as the kids were in school and the mom at work. This time I got to see a lot more of Copenhagen. My friends and I walked all around so that they could show me the city. In Copenhagen there is a small community called Christiania, which is a community with its own laws and own ways of living. It is a completely different place than the rest of not only CPH but of Denmark. We decided to just walk by Christiania and not go in. Just walking by it we could see the how different it was compared to the outside world; the buildings seemed as if they weren't being taken care of and the roads were only dirt and rocks. It was a very nice experience to at least see the famous Christiania from outside. After that, we went to what is called Amalienborg which is the

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winter home for the royal family. It is an octagonal courtyard with four palaces around it. After we looked around the courtyard, we went to Nyhavn a very famous waterfront where it is lined by many bright colourful houses, restaurants, cafes and bars. It was an amazing feeling being there eating ice cream with my friends and knowing that a simple thing such as that can bring me so much joy. At around 6 it was the time for me to say goodbye to everyone there since on Wednesday I would be catching my train early in the morning to return back home. It was a very sad moment just thinking that I really may not be able to see them again until years from now when we hopefully all reunite. Even though it was very hard to say goodbye, it was an amazing time being with them for at least one last time.

Although I have little time left in Denmark, travelling around doesn't stop yet. Soon I will be packing once again and going on an 18 day Euro Tour. It has been almost 10 months since arriving that I have been waiting for this day to come. All of us exchange students have talked about it ever since we met- what buses we were on, what size suitcase we will bring, how much pocket money, how much clothes, etc. Now it is time to stop talking about it and finally be on our way. The tour consists of 12 different cities in 7 different countries. We go down to Germany, then Czech Republic, down again to Austria and into Italy, continuing west to France then up to Belgium and Netherlands, once again into Germany and finally back to Denmark. My excitement for this tour is beyond words and I just can't wait.

On Friday, May 13<sup>th</sup>, it was my official last day at Dronninglund Gymnasium since my Euro Tour would be four days later. I walked in the front doors with the cake I had baked the day before for my class and friends, remembering the first time I ever walked in feeling nervous and trying to imagine how my year would be in this school. It is crazy to think that that was the last time I would ever walk in to this school. Walking in, every memory in the school came rushing into mind. Since my last Beaver Tale I had had two more school parties; Fastelavnfest and Forårfest. Fastelavn is a Danish celebration which can be taken back to hundreds of years ago. Before Denmark became a Protestant country, Fastelavn evolved from the way Roman Catholics celebrated the days before Lent. Now, because it is particularly less religious it is more of a Danish Halloween. During Fastelavn there is a very special event called 'slå katten af tønden' which means hit the cat out of the barrel. In the past there used to be a black cat in a wooden barrel and people would beat the barrel as a sign of safety against evil. Now a days, candy and oranges are stuffed into the barrel with a picture of a cat on it. For the party, my friend from the 1<sup>st</sup> year had invited me to get ready at her house along with 4 other girls. We had so much fun putting together our costumes, doing our make-up and eating together. Once we got to the school it was so awesome to see the many different costumes people had thought of. The party was pretty much just dancing all night until I could no longer feel my feet. Just like Fastelavnfest, Forårfest was amazing too. Forår, meaning spring, was the theme of this party so everyone finally got their shorts out and put on their colourful shirts or dresses. I got ready at my friends and then both of us

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headed to one of our other friend's house from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year who had invited us to eat with them and finish getting ready together. Once we got to the party, only did it then hit me that that would be my last Danish school party. This made me want to enjoy every minute of the night just that much more. I tried to dance with all of my friends, those from 1<sup>st</sup> year, from 2<sup>nd</sup> and from 3<sup>rd</sup>. My friends from my class where up on the stage when they called me over to dance with them. The party was soon over so the girls from my class and I huddled together and danced like we have never before. Once the last song came on, I tried to gather all of my friends and danced together with all of them. Some were unfortunately missing because I couldn't find them. As the song was half way over, my host dad called me telling me he was outside. I said goodbye to everyone and walk towards the car. That moment was so hard, but it was nothing compared to saying goodbye to everyone for the last time. As I kept walking carrying the cake, trying to find my class I encountered some of my friends from the other grades. They said hello to me like any other day, and once they saw the cake they remembered that it was my last day and their faces changed completely. I sat the cake down next to a table where most of my classmates were and where my friends from the other grades were as well. As I handed out pieces of cake I asked them to write a little something in the book I have had since the beginning of my exchange. After everyone had finished writing and we had all finished eating, we all had to go back to our classrooms. The final bell rang for everyone to go home and that was my queue to say my final goodbye to everyone. As I hugged my friends, tears began to fall down my face. I wasn't expecting to begin to cry, but I didn't feel too embarrassed since I wasn't the only one with tears down my face. The hardest part was walking from the building to my bus stop remembering what I felt the first time I stepped into the school. Any exchange student in Denmark can say that school wasn't really their favourite part of the exchange but they will say that it was definitely a one of a kind experience where it really allowed you to get to know Danes. Dronninglund Gymnasium didn't do just that but so much more and I will never forget it.

One of the biggest challenges for me was learning the Danish language but it was actually not too long ago that I had finally had my first Danish dream. It was crazy waking up and realizing that my dream had been in a completely different language. Arriving in Denmark, I couldn't even say one word in Danish. Never before had I actually heard anyone speak Danish and I remember quite perfectly how weird it sounded to me the first time I heard my host family speak it. It was a big struggle for me to loosen up and begin to speak it since everyone here speaks such good English and I had gotten so used to speaking it with everyone. All of the sudden, I find myself thinking in Danish and expressing myself with it. I love the moment when people around me have conversations and think that I can't understand it, then all of the sudden I say 'Jeg kan forstå Dansk' and the way their face expression turns into a stage of shock is priceless. Of course, I can't say I'm completely fluent at it, but I have gotten further than I ever expected. I actually thought that I would never get the hang of it because it just seemed so hard but I'm quite proud to how far I have gotten. I do

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consider Danish one of my languages now, and even though it will be hard to find someone to speak Danish with in Canada, I hope to keep speaking it for the rest of my life.

There really is no friendship like the friendships you make during exchange. We went from being strangers, to being exchange students in the same country, to meeting each other at an Intro Camp, to becoming the irreplaceable family we are now. I never imagined becoming so close to people in such a short period of time, especially in a place completely unknown to me. This family I have made here is one I will never forget, they are the reason I got through this exchange. They knew exactly what to say when I was at my lowest and there aren't enough words to thank them because being here with them has become the best year of my life. We were all aware that sooner or later we would have to say goodbye, but it just seems so unfair that we were all brought here from all over the world, created friendships that are stronger than words can describe and then all of the sudden we are all to be separated once again. My best friend this year is from Ecuador, in a different hemisphere than Canada, which doesn't make it easy for us to see each other once we leave Denmark. I'm so used to just going to the train station, buying a ticket and seeing her an hour later (which seemed like forever at the beginning but now it is almost the same as saying 10 minutes). Even with the ones that are further than an hour away, we know we are still in the same country where we can easily catch a train and see each whenever we want but the thought that soon we don't have that possibility is unbearable. The unconditional love we have for each other is the thing that keeps us from saying that this is the last time we all see each other. We always say that further into the future we are all going to visit each other and as much as we all believe that, we are all also aware that it's just not as easy as picking up your train ticket and going. The good thing is that we have all planned a legitimate G2G in Brazil in 2014 for us to see each other again, and knowing us I know we will do anything to get there. So Brazil, see you in 2014.

It was almost 10 months ago that I made my first step into the wonderful little land called Denmark. Now, in about 30 days I will be making my last steps here as a Rotary Exchange Student from Canada. Hours later I will be landing in Pearson Airport being welcomed back by my family and friends and with an incredible excitement I will hug each and every one of them. Yes, I say excitement because it is almost a year since the last time I was able to hug them but the excitement doesn't take away all the many other feelings I have towards leaving. I see all of my newbies still experiencing many firsts and the envy I have towards all of them is astonishing. They still have more than 6 months to be in this wonderful place and create memories they will never forget, just as I have. Yet envy is not the only emotion I carry, in addition to envy there is a lot of sadness. Sad to be leaving the place where I have experienced things I never thought I would have. It is also because of the experiences and the many amazing and wonderful people I have met here that I'm grateful to have been given this opportunity. Exchange is by far the best decision I have ever made. It has made me mature, taught me lessons

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no one could have ever taught me, made me stronger, allowed me to get to know myself and most importantly it change me to the person I only dreamed of being. So in conclusion to my very last Beaver Tale I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone who has allowed me to have this amazing life changing experience; to my family and friends back in Canada for supporting my decision to go on this exchange, to my families and friends from Denmark for welcoming me into their society with open arms, to my exchange student family for going through this experience with me, and a huge thanks to Rotary from Canada and Denmark for allowing me to have the best year of my life.

Med venlig hilsen,

*Gabriela*

**Denmark**