



Kirsten

From Kitchener-Waterloo to New Zealand

"Her tenacity and zest for life were truly inspirational for me"

Kia Ora Tatou, he roa te wā kua kitea!

It's official, people have stopped asking me how long I've been in New Zealand and have started asking me the number of days until I fly home. As time is of the essence I have been packing my schedule full of things I want to do before I go home. I barely have a spare moment, but I have been going by the principle that I can sleep when I get back to Canada!

Just after I wrote my last Beaver Tale I traveled to Surfer's Paradise, Australia with my third host family. They have a beautiful apartment right at the beach; close to the exciting downtown area. Australia was an awesome place to visit; highlights of my trip included petting kangaroos (then eating kangaroo later that day!) visiting all the theme parks, swimming in the surf and learning about Aboriginal culture. Before I came to NZ, I could not have picked an Aussie accent from a Kiwi one. Now, being so used to the softer tones of the Kiwi accent, the twangy Australia "How ya going?" hurt my ears!

Upon returning to school, I had to work hard to catch up with the training I'd missed for my Dragon Boating team. They had been practicing hard and it paid off. We placed 3rd in the co-ed division of the North Island Championships!

Before I knew it, it was time to move to my fourth and final host family, just before the school holidays. I hadn't thought much about it, until one of the other RIYE (Rotary Inbound Youth Exchange Student) pointed out that the next time I'd pack up my suitcases; it would be to go home! That realization crushed me. But thankfully she was

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wrong! In my crazy year of opportunities, I, along with the other RIYEs in my district, were invited to our district conference in Tahiti!

We spent just over a week in Papeete, Tahiti, hosted by Rotarian families. My district is truly unique in that it includes Pacific Islands. We did a presentation on Youth Exchange at the conference, but most of our time was spent exploring the island. Tahiti is beautiful, the food was fantastic and it was awesome to be able to speak some French again! We swam out where the Billabong Surf Championships are held, went snorkeling, visited a fruit juice factory and learned some traditional Tahitian dancing!

Over the school holidays, I also did a bit more traveling around the country. I went up to Cape Reinga, the most north point of NZ, with the RIYEs. Back in November, we visited the most southern point of the South Island; so now I can say I really have seen NZ from top to bottom! I also had the opportunity to tramp the Tongariro Crossing, which was absolutely spectacular.

I have been very involved with my Rotary Club and district lately. I have participated in a fundraising corporate fishing competition and dinners with NZ Masterchef, as well as volunteering for a sports day for local school children. But by far the most rewarding has been the Rotary 'Challenge Camp'.

The camp was for all the RIYEs in my district and our neighboring district, as well as kiwi teenagers with disabilities. We were paired off and asked to help them through many physically and mentally challenging activities. The camp was designed to help them improve self-confidence and let them try new things, but to be honest, I think the RIYEs took the most away from the week. My buddy, Susan, who is blind, abseiled, rock climbed and got a bull's eye in archery (I was only able to hit the outer rings). Her disability never held her back, her tenacity and zest for life were truly inspirational for me.

This past weekend I went to Rotorua with my host parents; Rotorua is known for its Maori history and the funky sulphur smell that hangs around the entire city! It really does smell awful! Amongst many other awesome activities I got to try over the weekend the best, by far, was the NZ invented Zorb. Zorbing is basically rolling down a hill in a giant hamster ball filled with water. It sounds ridiculous and it is, but it was also so much fun!

I know this sounds ridiculous to say after just describing all the trips and vacations I've been on lately, but this year has been more than a glorified holiday. It has helped me, encouraged me and sometimes forced me to grow and change as a person.

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Before my exchange I didn't push myself to try new things, and wouldn't attempt things that made me feel uncomfortable. My exchange has taught me that when you're trying new things and feeling uncomfortable, that's when you're learning and growing as a person. Before I came to NZ I thought I had the world sussed, I felt mature and that nothing would surprise me. But the biggest thing I've learned from this year is how much I still have to learn, about myself and about the world.

My Rotary Exchange year has really changed my life and changed me. I can't thank District 7080 and 9920, the Rotary Club of Kitchener and the Rotary Club of Pakuranga enough for making this year possible. I'll never forget the experiences I've had or the people I've met here!

Ka kite, see you soon!

Kirsten

New Zealand