



Desiree

From Bolton to New Zealand

Kia Ora Bro!

Kia Ora Bro means 'Greetings...my friend...or brother!'

Well, here we are, 3 months in and it still feels like yesterday that this timid, tired, overwhelmed and jetlagged out of her mind girl arrived in the place she can already say has truly become her home. I was greeted by my first host family and the youth exchange chair and that's where it began! Well, at least after I went to get into my host families car and was aptly asked "So, you're driving we see?" Yes. I fell victim to the wrong side of the road shock.

Then after about a 45-minute ride home squinting in the dark, I was shown a few different landmarks and an abundance of dairy's (the equivalent of convenience stores, but far more convenient) I finally arrived in Pukekohe. This is a township about 30 minutes outside of Auckland, kind of what like Brampton is to Downtown Toronto, but smaller. Pukekohe is highly known for its contribution to the farming industries in the general Auckland area. Everything is so close and easy to get around! So it didn't take me long to learn my way around the town.

But thankfully, my first host mom (or as a kiwi would spell it; Mum) is a teacher at Pukekohe High School so that really helped me get introduced to the school and my teachers and then to the great group of friends I have now, which

is expanding everyday. Especially seeing that the assumptions made about Canadians are that we somehow know or are related to Justin Bieber, so that made for an abundance of people with interest in me. The looks on peoples face are priceless when I introduce myself as a Canadian. Anyway, the number one difference about schools in New Zealand is not only the fact that the grading system is completely different (way harder in fact), they wear uniforms, and that the schools aren't just one big multi-story building....there are heaps of different little buildings!

So you could imagine little ol' me with my bag in tote, and a map in hand with a confused look on my face. Although, this may be a cause for ridicule from my peers, some were awfully nice enough to spot me in the crowd and show me to my next class. **Phew!** One of the things I was actually really looking forward to about school was wearing a uniform. Reason being that I would then really get the uniform and kiwi school experience, and I would not have to worry about what I'm wearing each day! Again, phew! But seeing that I did arrive in the middle of the school year, I got away without the uniform. Which did act as an advantage in the end since it helped me stand out more. Although the look on my face when finding out that I had no need to wear it a day before school started was clearly something looking like; "Oh dear! What am I going to wear tomorrow?"

The comment I get a lot about coming to New Zealand is that it must be a lot easier to adjust seeing that English is the first language. NOPE. Kiwi slang is a whole other world in itself. Having quite the experience with the saying 'Sweet as' on the first day of school while walking past a group of boys mid-conversation, who I thought said 'Sweet...behind' (they're pronunciation sounds like they mean a bum), I knew it would be quite the new feat. With words like 'mean' as in 'cool' or 'fresh', 'skuxx' meaning stud or cool guy, 'chook' for chicken, 'togs' for swimming suit/shorts and the list goes on and on. Now, I even catch myself saying 'sweet as' so I can't imagine what I'll be sounding like when I go home next year!

But, like home there is an automatic bond that grows between all the exchange students of the district. Within the first week of me being here we all hung out and got to know each other a little bit. It really helped having that extra support system around you. Especially for me, seeing that my first few months have not been easy I will admit. Homesickness, is honestly a feeling that one cannot describe or cure. No matter what, at the end of the day when you're finally relaxed, you start to think back to when you didn't constantly have to be on your toes, and your family. So having other exchange students there to assure

me that everything was going to be alright, and that I wasn't the only one feeling that way was definitely a help.

Our bonding really began when we all visited a Marae. This is where the Maori people of New Zealand still gather to discuss issues and pray together. We all got to learn a bunch of different songs, and the boys (the whole 3 burly men they are) got to learn and perform a haka, which is a Maori war dance that soldiers would use to challenge their enemy! They definitely tried their best! And at the end of the weekend we got to all perform a Powhiri, which is how the people on the Marae welcome newcomers and guests onto the Marae. It was a really great experience!

On top of the relationships that grow between all the exchange students, you also become quite close to your first host family. I moved to my second family mid-October, and as exciting as that was it was still shadowed by a tinge of sadness seeing that I knew I was leaving the first people who were so warm and welcoming to me. I did have a lot of good times with them, and during my stay we would escape to their bach (their beach house) in Maturangi on the Coromandel which is basically a peninsula filled with little beach towns. It's really beautiful out there, and I was fortunate that all four of my host families have bach's. This summer is extra awesome.

But amazingly enough, I have the honour of being in New Zealand while it hosts the Rugby World Cup! Rugby is like what hockey is to Canada. They eat, sleep, and breathe it! Even the schedule for the school year was slightly altered for students! The games were being held all throughout the country at its largest stadiums, and I can proudly say that in the whole tournament I only missed about 1 or 2 games. I have absolutely fallen in love with the sport, although actually understanding all the rules is a different story. I did not get to attend a live game (tickets were expensive as!), you could still feel the atmosphere of the crowd rise and fall as the players scored a try or...tried to. I did go into Auckland and hung about in the fan zone, called "The Cloud" (after Aoetoroa, the land of the long white cloud, New Zealand's second name) for the opening game. And in the end of the tournament, after a 24 year wait since their last win....THE ALL BLACKS (the New Zealand Rugby Team) WON THE WORLD CUP. It was so amazing! I watched the game with a group of Kiwi's and even they were saying that from my reactions and yells at the game it made them think I was somehow a New Zealander in my past life! Ha Haa! It was such a great thing to be a part of!

November 2011

A part of me still cannot believe this is all actually happening. I feel like a new girl already, but still with so much more to learn. All this would not have been possible without the help of my Rotary club of Bolton/District 7080 family, and the Rotary club of Pukekohe and District 9920—my new even bigger extended family.

E Haere rā, !

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