



Emily

From Burlington North to

Brazil

I don't feel the slightest bit like a "Gringa" anymore!

As I begin my final Beaver Tale I can't help but be reminded of the days as an outbound dreaming of what it would be like to actually be on exchange in a foreign country writing a Beaver Tale. While it seems like the time since those days have passed before my eyes all too quickly. I am astounded by all the things that have changed and everything I've accomplished. This year has been packed with adventure and with so much that has happened I have few words to describe it!

Since my last Beaver Tale I've moved to my fourth and final host family. I've been here for almost a month and already I feel so at home. This family loves to keep busy. Both my host Mom and Dad work while my younger brother of 8 years is either studying, playing soccer or practising Judo. I too keep busy with school, Rotary, dance and guitar lessons and a lot of time with friends. Somehow we manage to work our schedules to spend time together. Some of the best times we've had have been travelling. This family has taken me on 2 weekend trips. For a weekend in April we went to a city called *São Jose do Rio Preto*. We stayed with family friends and toured through the city. I got to see wild capybaras (the world's largest rodent) by the river as well as a visit to the zoo. The best part of Brazilian zoos is that only the 'foreign' animals (animals like moose or deer) are caged. I couldn't believe my eyes as I walked with monkeys all around. In May we made another trip for six hours to *Campo Grande* the capital of *Mato Grosso do Sul*. *Campo Grande* is located in Pantanal, the world's largest wetlands are home to everything from jaguars to parrots. About five minutes after crossing state lines we saw two toucans flying. Sadly I couldn't get my camera out fast enough! The state is also home to many native tribes of Brazil. We toured a museum that told the history of each tribe. We learned about their way of life, their beliefs, values and how they

used the land. It is still an ongoing struggle today in Brazil between the Native peoples and the Government. All in all it was an amazing time including the almost constant rain. It is the world's largest wetlands after all.

I've also gotten to travel with the other exchange students. In my district we have 55 exchangers spread out either alone in small cities or in groups of about 10 in the larger cities. For one weekend we organized that 30 exchangers travelled to stay in *Presidente Prudente* to go to a giant music show. It was a *sertanejo* show, meaning Brazilian country music which is very popular in this region. I stayed in the house of my friend from California. It was a great weekend and really nice to see my exchange friends again. The next month many of us travelled again to the city of *Bauru*. The first night I spent in the house of my friend from Mexico. We had a giant North American girls-night sleep over with two Americans, two Mexicans and myself. We all got to talk a bit in our native languages and made a giant mix of North American food, including guacamole and milkshakes! The next day we went to the *chácara* (a farm type resort to spend time and make parties on the weekends) of another exchanger for his birthday. We had about thirty exchangers from around the world. We all spent the night together at the *chácara*. It was an adventure until the last minute as we almost missed our bus back to our cities. We ended up waiting at night on a sideroad for a bus that came 45 minutes late! Coming up in the last weekend of May is our district 4510's final conference. Everyone is really looking forward to it, however it is sadly the last time we will all be together. We have all become such good friends this year, making it truly feel like a second family here. I look forward to travelling more in the future and hopefully visiting some of them around the world!

Holidays! For Easter weekend I was still living with my 3rd host family. They don't have any young children so Easter wasn't made into a big deal. I actually went and spent Easter Sunday with my 1st host family at their *chácara* spending the day eating, horse back riding and swimming by the pool. Probably one of the best parts of Brazilian Easter is the giant chocolate eggs. Here chocolate egg hunts aren't common, rather parents buy their children these giant chocolate eggs. I was lucky that I received two, including one of white chocolate, my absolute favourite! A little while after Easter was my 18th birthday. Here in Brazil your 18th birthday is a big deal as you now have the right to get your licence and to drink. Spending my birthday away was odd for me, as I am used to sharing the day with my twin brother. My birthday was made special however by my friends both here and in Canada. My friends from school made a box full of all the Brazilian food I love, everything from *brigadeiro*, *goiabada* and *guarana*! My friends from Canada also sent me a wonderful video with my classmates all saying happy birthday.

With my blond hair and blue eyes I am still considered to many of the people in my town as the 'gringa', however I don't feel that way in the slightest anymore. Although I may not fit in with the Brazilians by appearance, I have certainly come along way from stepping

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off my plane not knowing even the slightest bit of Portuguese. Going on exchange has shown me a whole other side of this country the large groups of tourists in Rio dying from the heat speaking in English will never get to see. I have made friends and family here that I have become closer with than I ever imagined possible in such a short time. This country, its people, and its culture have shown me a whole new way of living and I am blessed to have had the opportunity to embrace it.

Exchange for me is not over yet. In the last ten months I have tried to make the best out of each moment and plan to do just the same for my last six weeks left here. My friends from school joke about locking me in their closets and getting me a job selling *Icegurt* (a frozen yogurt popsicle that men sell walking down the streets with a very loud bell) so that I can at least stay till our graduation next December. Even my host parents tease about adopting me, claiming how we look so much alike! Although I sadly cannot stay I still have much to do and see before my plane takes off again. Our final Rotary conference, my town's annual four day rodeo, a trip to São Paulo and all the final goodbyes are just some of the highlights I'm looking forward too.

I feel honoured to have had this opportunity and to have been able to learn so much about a different culture. There are so many people I have to thank for making this year possible for me. To both my Rotary clubs (of Burlington North and of Rancharia) as well as my districts (4510 and 7080) here in Brazil and Canada, muito obrigada! I am so grateful for all the time and effort each you have all put into this program. I also am so thankful for my four Brazilian host families and my family back home that have all been there to help me when I needed it. This year truly has been a life changing experience, and although it is coming to an end I've got memories for a lifetime and I know that I'll be back one day!

Love Always,

Emily