



Olivia

From Cambridge North to Switzerland

You could virtually eat your way through Switzerland

It is unbelievable to think that I have already been in Switzerland for almost three months. To say that I am happy here is a huge understatement. It is such an amazing country and I know that I will never forget the people I have met so far. Everyday I learn something new, and every day I come to love this country even more. I have no idea how to describe the feeling I have while living here, but I will do my best to share my journey with you so far in this Beaver Tale.

For the first three weeks of my exchange, I attended a language school in Zurich with about 25 other exchange students from all over the world. Language school of course was helpful in learning German, but I also made so many new friends. It is a really cool feeling knowing that you have friends on every continent! I learned a lot of the basics in the school and also had a lot of fun with the other students. We usually got to go on field trips to the Zurich market, or to the city which was awesome!

There are many great things I have experienced about Switzerland in my travels so far. My favourite place that I have visited is probably Ascona. Ascona is in the south of Switzerland, close to the Italian border. The weather is warm and there is a combination of palm trees, and snow covered mountains everywhere- so amazing. My friends and I rented a paddle boat and paddled out onto the big lake in Ascona. It was the most beautiful view I have ever seen and I know I will never forget that day. Also Swiss Rotary gives all exchange students a "GA" which is a free train bus and boat pass anywhere in Switzerland! It is so great because I can travel anywhere in the country totally for free. Often times I make trips with other exchange students to major cities for the day and we have so much fun. Another beautiful city which is only about an hour from where I live is Zurich. Zurich is the largest city in Switzerland even though it is only about a little bigger than my town in Canada- which I keep telling Swiss people is pretty small. The first time I went there was with other exchange students during our language course in about the third week I had been in Switzerland. We were sent on a scavenger hunt across the city so that we could see the city's famous landmarks and the beautiful old architecture. Little did our

teachers know we spent most of the day in “Springlis” which is an amazing Swiss chocolate shop. But hey, we were learning about the culture either way, right?

In terms of host families I have been more than lucky. I will have four in total, so every three months I change families. Leaving my first one was a little hard at first because after almost three months I felt very close with them. Coming to Switzerland I don't think I realized how hard it would be to switch host families. They were a great host family to have in the beginning because they were always so helpful and patient with me. They had four children, all teenagers and we got along really well. My host parents were also very helpful in my learning of German which I am also grateful for. But I am looking forward to seeing them again throughout the year, and already have plans with them for a fondue night in a couple weeks! Fortunately when I switched families my new host family is easily as good as the first. They have three daughters so it's really fun to be around girls all the time. We all get along great and I couldn't be happier where I am now. I am excited to get to know them better and already I am starting to feel close with them. Having good host families has definitely made my trip here much more enjoyable.

I started at my school, the Kantonschule Wil about two months ago and it was for sure another huge eye opener. After spending three weeks in a language course to learn German, I was more than a little discouraged when I came on my first day and still understood almost nothing. Although I knew how to talk about the weather and count to 100, I apparently had not learned enough to follow my first lesson of the day, Calculus. School here is very long and much different than Canadian school. It took a bit of adjusting at first, especially being so frustrated with the language, but things are definitely a lot better now. I have a really nice group of friends, and they love teaching me funny German phrases, (one of them being “Hey Gangster, I got the money and the style,”) so we laugh a lot, even if we don't understand each other all the time. But learning German is way more difficult than I had anticipated. I have learned that you cannot learn a whole language in 3 weeks or even 3 months, but I have also learned to be proud of myself for the little things that I do know. I have come a long way, from getting off the plane and knowing how to say “Guten Tag” to now being able to at least have a conversation with somebody. I am beginning to understand some of my classes which is an amazing feeling and with the aid of my friends and my host family I will continue to learn more.

But fortunately after only 4 weeks of school, it was fall holidays and we had 3 weeks off of school! During the second week of the vacation, my host family and I made the journey to Scuol, which is in the middle of the Alps on the east side of Switzerland. Scuol was a really cool town to see and I learned a lot of Swiss history. During the week I saw a lot of the area and we travelled a lot to towns nearby so I got to see a lot. My host family and I had so much fun together during the week, and I for sure felt closer with them. I learned many new card games and also plenty of new German phrases! We also visited the town of Guarda which is where the famous Swiss children's book character “Schellen Ursli” comes from, which is apparently a must-see in that area. It was very interesting to see even more of Switzerland and the mountains

were absolutely incredible. We also took a train ride to Italy one day and rode through glaciers that were thousands of years old! I will definitely never forget that trip!

The Swiss people, and the Swiss way of life is another thing that I have had to get used to. First of all Swiss food is awesome. It is pretty much unlimited amounts of cheese, bread, meat and chocolate, which are basically a combination of all my favourite foods. We usually have big lunches and smaller dinners which I guess was a little strange in the beginning, but not too hard to get used to. I also tried Raclette and Fondue for the first time about a month ago, which was sooooo good. Who doesn't love melted cheese? Also the food in the Cafeteria here is so much better than Canada. No more of Southwood's famous grilled cheese! In terms of the people, I have definitely learned that they are quite different than Canadians. The Swiss are quite formal and can sometimes be a little bit hard to get to know. It was also so weird in the beginning to shake everyone's hand. Even with close friends and family, Swiss people only shake hands!

As for homesickness, I have been pleasantly surprised at its absence. Although I do love my family and think about them often, I am in no way ready to go back to Cambridge yet. Switzerland still has so much to offer and I even feel a little pang of sadness when I think about boarding the plane again in 9 short months. I write a lot of letters to my friends and family which has been nice, and I Skype with my mom and dad every once in a while to tell them all about my adventures. I have made so many friends here already and I don't know how I will be able to leave them.

Switzerland has taught me a lot of things in so little time. I have learned a lot about myself, and I have learned that sometimes it is nice to be alone with your thoughts. I have had a taste of independence and I definitely feel like I have grown up in the last three months. Being on my own has been fun and also a breathe of fresh air from my life in Canada. Having time to think and reflect is a great gift that Switzerland has given me. This trip has not at all been what I expected, but so much more. I can only imagine what awaits me in my next 9 months here.

So I hope that gives you just a little taste of what Switzerland is like, but it is just too hard to describe on paper. Everyone needs to come here at least once in their life. I will end by saying thanks to Rotary for this amazing opportunity, I know that this will make my life so much richer in the end. I am so excited for the rest of my year here, and every morning I just wake up and feel so happy and grateful that I am here. Switzerland is an amazing country and I can't wait to learn more about it, and I am definitely looking forward to learning more German. Until then Auf Wiedersehen!

From Wil, Switzerland,

Olivia

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