

November, 2011



Robin

From Palgrave to France

## *I never thought I would eat Sea Urchins!*

Bonjour à tous!

It's been two and a half months since I left Canada. Where am I now? I'm in the city of Toulon, in the South of France. The South of France is one of those places you go during your summer vacation but you'd never ever imagine that you'd get to live there. Whenever I tell people I'm in France, for some reason people think I'm in Paris. So no, I don't live in Paris and I've never been there, but I assure you that the south is just as amazing if not better! The south is completely different from the rest of the country. It never snows here (except on the very very top of Mont Faron, I heard). It's all palm trees, beaches, islands and mountains - all of which can be seen from my bedroom window. During the summer break I spent almost everyday swimming in my family's pool or at the beach because it's so hot here. People in the south like to say that they're much more relaxed than the people in the north. Toulon is a military port town of about 200 000 people. I was lucky that I got to live in one of the "cities" because there's lots of things to do!

School is really long - class goes from 8am to 5pm or sometimes even 6. School here is exhausting but my friends and I make the best of it. I go to a technical school of about 1200 people where I'm re-taking grade 11 in a new program for industrial design. We study architecture, fashion, product design, advertising, ecology and other cool stuff like that. I went to an art school in Canada and now I get to do art again. Everyone in my class is really close with each other everyone is good at art. Sometimes it's kind of hard to follow lessons. In France, most teachers just talk (in math class, do we actually do math? No, we just listen to the teacher talk about math. Seriously). As for French literature class, just imagine doing an analysis of the french version of Shakespeare. However, my design class is amazing. I have a lot of work (it's so much work) but it's fun. I used to think industrial design was a boring and technical area but it's so creative. I feel really lucky that I ended up in this school. Even the cafeteria food is better than in Canada (in my opinion), because my old school didn't serve steak or fish and chips.

My friends at school are amazingly kind and funny. On my first day of school I got introduced to "the group" (my current circle of friends which consists of about 16 really close classmates).

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They were so welcoming and I already felt really comfortable with them the moment we met. It was frustrating at first when I never understood their jokes so I was the only one not laughing. But one time when they tried to translate their joke into English and I finally laughed, they all high-fived each other and shouted in victory. Now that I understand French so much better, I realize how hilarious they are. Everyone is so nice and they help me with everything so I've never had a lonely day. All 17 of us sit together at a big lunch table and hang out at "le mur" where we talk, study, share our food and play Uno. I appreciate everything we do together - the inside jokes, the trips to the store for buying a box of cookies for everyone, eating Häagen-Dazs ice cream at the Häagen-Dazs shop (they have an actual shop!) down at the port and the fun trips to the skating rink.

Last week I celebrated my birthday! Just when I was about to leave the classroom to catch the bus, the entire class stood in front of the door singing Happy Birthday in English. Then they gave me a cute card that all 34 of them (and the teacher) signed. I was really shocked and really happy! When I got home my host dad brought home a special cake and my host mom gave me a really nice gift (which I wasn't even expecting). It was a great day.

My host family has been so kind to me. My host dad is a doctor who loves making jokes. My host mom is just really good at being a mom and of course she makes great food! I like helping her cook and I enjoy watching movies (without the subtitles!) every week with my host dad. They've taken me to the beach, on bike rides and even sailing. The family owns a sailboat and we spent a whole weekend on it once. My host dad and I went diving for sea urchins on the ocean floor (my job was to hold the net...but I dropped it in the water and then we had to go looking for it...he laughs at this every time). I never ate sea urchins before but now I have. I've actually eaten lots of things here that I've never had before. On the topic of food, French people really love cheese, wine, nutella, crepes and of course, nutella crepes.

When I first got here I couldn't speak any French (yeah I know we all took French for 6 years) but I had to go back to the basics because I forgot it all. Now I can understand a lot more and people have been telling me how much I've improved. I can now understand about 80 - 90 percent of the things my host mom says to me. At first a lot of people spoke to me in English at school for the first month. But now they all speak French to me and I feel like I belong better.

I still have the same daily routine as in Canada but with differences - I still have to take two over-crowded buses home after school, but here all the bus drivers say hello and everyone says good-bye. We have bread on the table instead of rice. Instead of standing for the national anthem at the beginning of class, we stand because it's impolite to sit down unless the teacher says so. And in France I got to do things that I've never done before - learning how to play the piano, spending a weekend on a sailboat, riding on a motorcycle (my host dad was driving me to school), riding a bike for 40 km by the sea, spending the most time ever at the dinner table (adults here eat so much for so long at house parties) and going to my first pro rugby game.

I'm treated so well by my host family and their friends who are complete strangers to me. I feel really grateful to them and to Rotary for giving me this once in a lifetime experience!

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