



Stuart
From Kitchener
To Chile

Exchange is about having Barefoot, Easter Island, Mango Moments

The truth is, I really don't know how to start my Beaver Tail. I've kind of gotten to the point where, when you try to describe your experiences, the words you have written don't do justice to the depth of your feelings. However I'll just have to give it a shot and hope you all forgive me if I fall a little short. I'm going to start with what happened to me on April 24th, 2012 in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I was on Easter Island, walking down the main street without shoes, after hitchhiking there from my hotel. I was eating a mango I had just picked off one of the trees on the side of the road and I felt like I was in heaven.

It really seemed like the climax of my life, like it couldn't get any better than that. Maybe it was the mango, I don't know. To me, that is what exchange is all about. When I am back in Canada, in minus 30 degree weather, I will forever think back to my barefoot, Easter island, mango-moment.

Moving on from my ramblings, it's kind of ridiculous how infrequently we have to write Beaver Tails. I mean, I'm not asking to write more, but I feel like a legitimate lifetime has gone by since the last time I wrote and now I have to write about that in a couple of pages? It seems quite unfair to be frank. But nonetheless, here it goes.

First of all I went to the north...

We hopped on the bus and, with the other 40 students, some of them great friends, some of them complete strangers, headed to La Serena. It is a city that I had already visited with the Sotos, but never in summer.

When we arrived in the night, we immediately went to a parade in the town centre. Since we were a large group of exchange students, we caused as great a commotion as we could, joining in with the parade, joining the people on the floats, and having an incredible time with the locals. That was then followed by a night bus ride to the observatory further in from the coast where it is said you can see some of the clearest starry skies in the world.

The next day we went to Punto de Choros further north, where we hopped in boats, and traveled up and down the coast seeing dolphins, sea lions, and even small penguins. It was amazing, although we were all quite burned when we got back on the bus.

That night we slept on the bus and it ended up being worth it. We stepped off the bus, still tired from the rough sleep and we were in the middle of the desert, with snow covered mountains all around us. When we arrived in San Pedro de Atacama, we were truly in the most "deserty" town we had ever been in. All the buildings were made out of mud, sheep casually strolling through the streets.

The next days in San Pedro may have been the best on the trip. We saw volcanic geysers, swam in hot springs, and watched flamingos, it was really incredible. After spending all the time we could in San Pedro, we went to Iquique which is the farthest north we would get on the trip. We sunbathed on the amazing beaches, and visited the city.

On the way back down south, we stopped at Bahia Ingles, which I was already quite familiar with, and spent another day on the beach there. We also played soccer and had our last party with all the exchange students. We arrived in Santiago after 10 incredible days, with little time to recuperate since school was starting in less than a week.

Going back to school took a lot to adapt back to. After spending the last two months travelling, meeting new people, and waking up in a different city almost every week, it was strange to be back at my new house, going to the same place every day. All of a sudden my world shrank to what it was at the beginning of my exchange. However with school beginning, I also spent much more time with my school friends, and that helped my Spanish a lot.

During the first 2 months of school, I managed to keep the “summer” alive for a bit, by going to new cities like Talca, Curico and to Santiago a lot for Lollapalooza, the biggest annual concert, and just to see friends and host family. However, soon the winter cold was going to set in, but not before one last dose of tropical weather.

Easter Island is a part of Chile, which I didn't know before exchange. It's a five hour flight from Santiago into the Pacific and holds the reputation of being the most isolated island in the world. If the pilot had gotten lost, he really wouldn't have had anywhere else to land.

Lucky for me, and the 40 other exchange students, the pilot managed to get us there safe and sound, and when we stepped off the plane, we were greeted by lei's around our necks and humidity that reminded me of a Southern Ontario Summer.

The first day we visited the volcano closest to the only town on the island called Hanga Roa. We trekked around the crater, then down the mountain to arrive at our hotel just in time for dinner. The next day was spent seeing the Moai, the famous stone heads that the Island is famous for. They were sculpted out of the rock near the center of the mountain and transported kilometers to face the ocean. No one really knows how this was accomplished by the natives though. The next couple days were spent travelling the island, seeing the caves that were used as houses, spending a day on the incredible beach, and visiting the town's shops that sold all sorts of things made on the island. The last night was spent at a traditional native dinner and a dance afterwards where we were brought up on stage to dance. The next morning everyone climbed onto the plane after having little sleep the night before and headed back to Chile. This was possibly the five best days we had ever spent in Chile.

The minute we got off that plane, one thing became very apparent. We had just finished the last Rotary trip. Summer was over, winter was coming, and our days here in Chile were numbered, and that number wasn't three digits anymore. Since Easter Island I have been to many Despedidas (goodbye parties), to the airport a couple times to see friends off, and have been thinking many times about how little time is left, and how incredible the year has been. I recently went on a spontaneous trip to the south, to cities like Puerto Montt, Puerto Varas and Osorno. After seeing these cities I can proudly say I know almost all of Chile. There are 15 regions and I have been to 13 of them, along with Easter Island. That's something hardly any Chileans can even say. It's been an incredible 10 months and I know this last one will be incredible as well, although maybe the hardest yet.

I have numerous people to thank before I end this Beaver Tale. First I have to thank Rotary, because my exchange has really been something I will remember forever. I would also like to thank my three families, my two host families who really treated me like their own son and finally my family back home, who waited on my late blog posts, listened to my stories till they were old news and supported me through thick and thin.

Love all of you, and see you soon!

Stuart