Japan - Alex Beath

Hello again all!

Well it has definitely been a busy few months. The first thing that comes to my mind to tell you about would be that the North American exchange students have gone back home. It was definitely strange seeing all of them leave and watching how they handled it. It was a very strange feeling knowing that my exchange was only half over when it feels like I have accomplished so much in the past 6 months. This also came with the realisation that the exchange is in fact, half over. The exchange continues to fly by. I'm continuing to make the most of the last half of the time I have. I've improved my study habits and it has had amazingly positive results. I have more confidence now that when I make a comment it's roughly in Japanese. This has helped me achieve closer relationships with my friends and host families. Being able to just talk and laugh together has just made me love this country all the more. My newest host family that I have changed to is fantastic. Spending time with them is always enjoyable, whether we are launching fireworks or hiking above the clouds into the mountains it always seems to be incredible.

As for school I continue practicing kendo (the Japanese form of sword fighting) which has constant practice and luckily an amazing coach. I am starting to love the sport more and more with every "OUS" (a loud noise you make is seems every 5 minutes). After practice I usually manage to spend time with my friends that always prove to be interesting. Though our conversations may not be at all times comprehendible we always seem to get the point across which to this day still amazes me. My friends are unendingly patient with me whether I can't find the right word or have just made a huge mistake and did not realise it because I still haven't fully come to understand Japanese Culture. They are generally a rather funny group of students.

As for news on recent events, that would have to be the Tanabata festival, which to other cultures may look a little strange at first but turns out to be incredibly beautiful. The legend revolves around the queen and king of the Milky Way and how the gods had ruled that they should only allowed to meet once a year. And when they meet they grant wishes. So we tie our wishes onto a tree branch in the hopes that they will be granted. The trees are also filled with beautiful coloured lanterns that at night give the streets a soft coloured glow which will be hard to forget!

Hope all is well back down under.

Yours sincerely from Japan,

Sayonara,

Alex Beath

Japan - Lana Stirling

I'm turning Japanese, I think I'm turning Japanese, I really think so...

I don't quite know how to sum up 3 of the best months of my life in just 2 short pages. No words could possibly explain the satisfaction you feel when you suddenly realize you've got a basic proficiency- in the case of Japan- in the language and in the culture. I think for me the moment dawned when I found myself laughing along to a joke in reference to the maths teacher being `the devil`. But not only has this new found ability to understand group conversations left me with an enormous satisfaction- it has also made life alot more interesting. I have been blessed with extremely kind host families who have exceeded the expectations of how much care they should offer me. Now 1 week into my third host family I have had so many more amazing opportunities and met some awesome people.

I've been in a local sports carnival, helped my school friends loose several games in volleyball, walked with other exchange students through monsoonal rain, watched a professional baseball game, watched Japanese Opera (interesting to say the least), cheered on the school baseball team and so much more!! Two of the bigger highlights of the last two months would have to be the farewell weekend for our American/Canadian friends, as well as the trip I took to Tokyo with my host family.

The farewell weekend was held at a local hotel called `Runesu` and it definitely lived up to the expectations the Americans/Canadians had set of it for us. Basically when you enter the hotel you are presented with a band and told that anything you want to eat will be paid for by Rotary. Not wanting to `waste` all the potential `free food` all of us did very little other than eat from 6pm until 3am in the morning... then we slept for about 2 hours before getting back up in the morning only to eat more. I would hate to think about how many soft drinks and ice creams were ordered over a few short hours!! The hotel also had karaoke and waterslides so in all it added up to an absolutely awesome weekend. Being the farewell weekend it also had a scarier part attached, It's unbelievable that half of our time has slipped through our fingers already.

Then there was the trip to Tokyo only a few weekends ago. We spent the whole week watching weather reports because our scheduled trip was the same day that the Typhoon was scheduled to make its way to our prefecture. Despite my host mother panicing and a warning that bad weather could force us to return to Ishikawa without ever landing in Tokyo we made it, and the rain was at a minimal! The first day we saw Harajuku (picture perfect with all the umbrellas), Tokyo Tower and Tokyo's aquarium. That night we head down to Yokohama City which is prides itself on the fact that it is home to Japan's biggest China town. Sunday morning we went on a 5 minute cruise and rode on one of Japan's many Ferris Wheels before heading to the China town for lunch. We also saw the maritime museum and even still had some time to squeeze some shopping in before our flight home. Tokyo and Yokohama are so different from my `hometown Ishikawa` and whilst for a trip it was an absolutely awesome experience- I couldn't help but smile when I found myself back `home` amongst our rice paddies, where you can actually see a few stars each night! (Quite rare in Japan)

The summer holidays which are more than welcome. Rotary have generously organized a 3 day trip for a few weeks time and in the meantime I've had a chance to catch up on some sleep, get to know my new home/family and catch up with some of the other exchange students. Some of the best friendships I have made from this program have definitely been from the other exchange students from my area.

With only a little more than 5 months ahead of us here, there are so many things that I'm looking forward to. School continues to go well and I've almost completely memorised my Taiko (drumming) pattern for school. I can't begin to thank Rotary enough for this amazing opportunity. I trust that the other exchange students are having an awesome time and know that I'll be seeing you all again soon... maybe a little too soon for my likings!!

Until next time... またね！

Lana Stirling (D2610 Ishikawa Japan)