Belgium - Laura Beddow

Hello all,

As I sit here writing this report, I find myself wondering where the last three months have gone. I still have those vivid memories of saying goodbye to my family at Brisbane airport, the tears flowing, but excited at the prospect of a year of adventure in Belgium. I wouldn't consider that my time on exchange has been easy, its full of emotional highs and lows, with challenges such as a different language, and adjusting to new families, public speaking and fitting in at school, but all in all I have been really happy - and have loved the experience so far. And now to report on some of my activities whilst living in Belgium. My exchange started with a bang - I arrived at the airport at about 9 in the morning - to be greeted by a party of about 15 people - a mixture of Rotarians and host families- but we didn't dilly dally, the welcoming party moved straight to the heart of Brussels - known as the Grand Place, to a pub, to introduce the new exchange student to some fine Belgian beer. As you can imagine - after 26 hours on the plane, I was quite tired - So we said our goodbyes and then I left to meet the rest of my host family. My first home in Belgium - was on a farm. The house was very cottage like and cosy - I lived about 10 minutes from Dinant, which is where I go to school. My host family was wonderful - I had two brothers and parents who were eager to show me around the country - and who were patient with me as began to learn the language. My first big outing with my family was to the nearby city of Charleroi, to watch a big football match - between Liege and Charleroi - the atmosphere was great - but in normal European fashion – it started to snow during the match...sooooo cold - but still a thoroughly enjoyable night!! The following day I went to a Cabaret performance in Dinant with a mixture of comedians and musicians. In the same weekend my family drove me to the northern tip of France to the town of Givet – just 10 minutes away!!

My next big adventure was in the one week vacation for 'Carnaval' - traditional celebrations for the passing of Winter and the welcoming of Spring. For the first weekend, I was invited to stay with another Rotarian family in a seaside resort in the north of Belgium. I was able to see a lot more of the countryside and was further confused due to the northern half of Belgian - speaking flemish! It was a wonderful experience to see the Belgian beaches - and even though it was far too cold to swim - we had lovely weather for walking and sightseeing. During this same vacation – I went to one of the 'Carnaval' celebrations in a small town called Binche. It was definitely a good experience - with a number of processions through the streets - and the traditional throwing of oranges! If you receive an orange you have to keep it because it represents a gift of Spring - so that was all very interesting! The other days were spent with my family or meeting up with school friends and other exchangers. I love vacation time!!

The second vacation was just I month after and this was for Easter. In two weeks I was able to do a surprisingly large amount of travel. The first weekend, I went with my family and a number of other Rotarians on a wine gathering expedition in France. We drove for 5 hours to end up half way across the country, in a town called Bourgogne - with some of the finest of French wines. The next three days were spent shopping and sightseeing, with wine tasting and fine food - it was wonderful! We arrived back on the Monday just in time for me to present my weekly report at the Rotary meeting. The next few days I spent with another Rotarian and his family - who took me to see some of the beautiful castles and forests of Wallonia as well as museums and restaurants. I was then home briefly with my host family - when another Rotarian took me to see a concert in Givet, of African music, it was superb!!

One of the highlight of the holidays was Easter Sunday, with all the Belgian chocolate it was unforgettable lol!! I spent the day with my host mum's family - this was very nice - because she is one of 8 children - and as you can imagine it was a big celebration and a big Easter lunch. A true highlight of my year so far. After the celebrations - I went to Brussels to meet an Australian friend who was arriving on the Eurostar from London. It was so good to see a face from home - she then stayed with my family for three days to do some sightseeing in Belgium. My family were wonderful...on the Monday my host mum took us to Bruges - which is said to be the most beautiful city in Belgium - also known as Venice of the North, because of the canals that run through the streets. It was a truly beautiful city. We climbed to the top of this church to the highest point
in the city - and were able to see for miles - magnificent. We then went for a tour through the 'Chocolate museum' and did our fair share of taste testing! A wonderful day.

The second day we went for a big bike ride through the forest regions near to the village where I lived. The bike track ran parallel to the river Lesse - and the weather was perfect for the entire day. The third day that my friend was in Belgium - we went to Brussels to do shopping and sightseeing. Three very enjoyable days. But the best was yet to come...On the Thursday I said bye to my family and I headed off to London on the Eurostar for 5 days with my Australian buddy. I was unbelievably excited - The first day in London I was able to walk along the Sidewalk - and see Westminster Abbey, Big Ben and the London Eye, it was so surreal. My

time in London allowed me to see Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park, Buckingham Palace, the London Dungeon, Kew gardens and countless other tourist spots. Also another highlight of my exchange year so far...

When I returned from London I had three more days with my host family – and then I moved on to my second family, which was a very daunting prospect. But I didn't need to worry about a thing, my second family is very different from my first but also has a lot of similarities and I already feel at home after just 2 weeks here. I have two brothers also - but they are a bit older than my last host brothers.

To report on another aspect of my exchange year - school! Well I am studying fairly normal subjects including French, biology, geography, history, art, gym and religion - but of course with the added difficulty of language - it makes for a pretty interesting experience. I also have a regular language class at another school in my town - where the study is more focused on conversation - which is very useful indeed!! I also have an extra drawing class outside of school which I thoroughly enjoy as well.

So that brings you up to date with some of my activities so far - I could go on and on about my many and varied experiences through my year so far, but that will have to wait until the next bounder report.

A bientot
Until next time...
Laura Beddow