Japan - Lana Stirling

My third and final bounder report finds me regretfully looking back at the past 9 months and trying to figure out where they went. But, admittedly the last 3 months since my mid-year report have been absolutely amazing. Every weekend has been full, and it seems like between Rotary events, student exams, and the school trip- I have barely spent any time at school. (In actually fact I have had but one full week at school since we started back after summer holiday- good life hey!)

Firstly summer holidays. Once again I had a really great family, including a 22 year old host sister. It was awesome to have someone my age around for once! The big event with them was our climb of Mt Hakusan (one of Japan's 3 sacred mountains). My host mother's shoe managed to break within about the first 20 minutes of hiking but the rest of the way we had no dramas. It was good to see the top though! I don't ever recall climbing a mountain in my life and am so proud that I actually did it (Naoko my host sister and I were the 2 leading the group – would you believe it!!) Being the smart Australian that I am - I remembered to slip-slop-slap… well I remembered sunscreen for my FACE. My arms somewhat resembled lobsters, but have thankfully recovered now! We also did summer activities like going to our areas biggest Fireworks festival (that lasted for over 1 1/2 hours!!) wearing my Yukatta (cotton kimono) that Rotary bought for me!

We have also had 3 main Rotary events of late. First was the 4 day Australian students' trip which was great even though there were just the 5 of us. Saw a lot of the main attractions that the mountains had to offer (no hiking though!) We also got to see the slopes of the 1998 (?) Nagano winter Olympics! It was so steep it was scary. A short time later 4 of us joined a group of about 40 Belgian students who were doing some type of short group exchange where we got to visit a traditional village and a robot factory.

Finally, a few weeks ago we had our first official Rotary event with the new inbounders from America and Canada. The festival held in my neighboring prefecture Toyama, was held on a Monday meaning we got 2 days off school! We also got to help push floats through the city whilst wearing our traditional work wear known as a Happi, given to us as a gift by the Rotary club who hosted us (we had short 2 night home stays).

My current host family own a Taiko (Japanese drum) company and my first weekend here I got the chance to travel to a prefecture I forget the name of for a Taiko competition. It was an awesome chance because they were performing at one of Japan's most famous shrines- and they are also one of the most famous Taiko group in Japan. Watching them really does take your breath away.

In school news things have been going really well. With each passing week I seem to be understanding more and more of my classes without even having to think about it. But the highlight of late would have had to be my class trip. I have just returned from a 4 day trip to Shanghai, China where I got to spend more time with my school friends, while experiencing a little bit of the Chinese culture.

I'd probably classify this as one of the highlights of my awesome year so far. Everyone seems just a little more relaxed and friendly outside of the normal school format, and I had the chance to talk to some of the girls I hadn't spoken to before. Shanghai was totally different to what I'd imagined it would be. So commercialized. As I had expected it is very different from Japan and after 4 days landing in Komatsu airport really did feel like I was `back home`. Back where I can understand what's being said to me. It was scary how many foreigners I saw- and how weird it felt seeing them. Apparently we were a bit of a sight with people taking photos of us left right and centre as we walked through the streets of Shanghai in our 2 straight lines (yeah I suppose a little like they did in Madeline…)

Well the weather here is returning to how it was when we first arrived in January and that in itself is a scary fact. With only 12 weeks left in Japan, I've decided I don't want to waste any of my weekends. I have caught up with the other exchange students more than ever lately- weekends spent doing karaoke, shopping, eating sushi and lots of other fun things. One weekend I remember in particular 3 of us had a Fairy bread picnic in a park. The other exchange students make up just a small part of the long list of people I'm not looking forward to saying goodbye too.

With that I must just say a big thank you to Rotary district 9600 who have let me live out my dream this year. This year has met and exceeded any expectations I had of what such an experience could offer me. My only hope is that my last 3 months will be as good as these past months have been.

I'm sure I'll be seeing you all a little too soon for my liking- not that I don't miss everyone- I'm just not so keen on giving up my life as a Japanese exchange student. ☺ Until January- Take Care.

Love, Lana