Report on German-Canadian student exchange 2018/19

For all my teenage life I had always wanted to stay in an English-speaking country for more than just a few weeks, so naturally I was super excited when I got the acceptance notice! In the weeks prior to the exchange I was getting a little apprehensive, because I had never stayed abroad for this long, without parents, that is.

On the flight to Edmonton, my anxiety found a quick relief, because being with all the other Germans I just knew that everything would turn out just fine. When I finally arrived at the airport, after a whopping eleven hour flight, I was oddly awake. The excitement of meeting my host family, to whom I had only talked once before via skype, pumped adrenaline in my body, which got me up and running in no time. On the drive home we talked about all sorts of things and I was pleasantly surprised by their kindness. Once we arrived at home, I was shown to my room. I gave them the presents that I had brought with me, all of which made them very happy. In the next few days we walked around in the neighbourhood and the downtown part of Edmonton. I got to meet my partner’s friends, who welcomed me into their group. Since summer break was lasting until Tuesday, due to Labor Day on Monday, we went on a short trip to Drumheller, looking at dinosaurs in the Royal Tyrell Museum and engaging in an adventurous hike in the valley.

After we returned from Drumheller, school was already about to start. On my first day, I was still having problems finding my way around the huge building that Harry Ainlay Highschool was. Harry Ainlay is one of the biggest schools in Edmonton, with roughly 2,700 students. With only one floor but more than twice as many students as my school in Germany, crowded hallways were a common sight. But after the first 2 weeks I got used to it and had no problem navigating around the school. The Canadian school system is very different to the German system. Most importantly, school starts at 9 am. There is 25 minutes of a program called HALO first, in which you can read, ask your teachers for help or just hang out with friends. Classes, of which you only have four per semester, start at 9:30 am. Moreover, the week is separated into A and B days. On my A days I took Math, English and Robotics classes and on my B days I took guitar lessons instead of English. Some of them were mixed courses where grade 10, 11 and 12 students learned together, which I quite enjoyed. I really liked the robotics class because the school had spent so much money on amazing equipment, so that each student had their own set of Lego Mindstorms. In that class I wondered why I always hear “new record of export revenue” in the news in Germany, but we don’t have the money to buy the same amount of equipment. In my school in Germany I also took a robotics class once, where we had to share our kits with other groups, which lead to a ton of missing pieces and unfinished projects.
After school I often went to the mall nearby my school with some friends. We had food and sometimes went to one of their houses. I rarely had to do any homework so most of my day was free time in which I watched shows with Gabriel or we would play video games in the basement. On the weekends we sometimes went to a café where they had board games and we would stay there for quite some time.

In the first third of my stay we went on a trip to the Rockies with the other Germans. It was an Adventure Camp with lots of hiking, climbing and teambuilding exercises. I really liked it. Sadly, though, the weather wasn’t very good so we had to put on lots of layers to battle the cold. I would definitely recommend for future exchange students to do that camp, it really was a mind-blowing experience.

Needless to say, we also toured around Canada to see some nature with my host family. The most exciting trip was our journey to Clearwater in British Columbia, the province west of Alberta. After a solid 8-hour drive, passing through Jasper along the way, we finally ended up at a small cabin in the middle of nowhere. Due to the fact that we arrived late at night and us being far away from any major light source, I could see loads and loads of stars in the night sky. It was astonishing. After a good night’s rest we set out to see the beautiful waterfalls the region had to offer. We visited the famous Helmcken Falls, a waterfall that cascades 141 metres down into the canyon below. On the second day we engaged on a 1-hour hike, leading to the beautiful Moul Falls, a waterfall you can go behind, getting completely trenched in the process. During that time, we had great weather so it was super nice to get a refreshing shower after the hike through the woods. On our last day we visited Dawson Falls, a waterfall that stretches its watery veil 90 metres across ancient lava beds. A true slice of heaven. On the way back to Edmonton we, once again, passed through Jasper, where we took a relaxing swim in the local hot springs on a cold and snowy day. The snow would melt before reaching the water and the hot pools would create a constant mist floating around in the trees.

Summarizing, I would definitely recommend any other student to take part in the exchange. For me the exchange wasn’t so much about learning to speak English but rather to get to know people in an English-speaking environment and to learn about the differences in growing up in a different country.