

# BIANCA GIBSON

SPONSOR ROTARY CLUB – KIPPA RING, AUSTRALIA  
HOST ROTARY CLUB – HAMM, GERMANY



Guten Tag!!!!

Hallo, everyone who is reading this!!

I was asked to describe my last 12 months as a rotary exchange student into half a page? That's crazy I couldn't even fit it into 20 pages, in fact I could write a whole novel and I think the intensity of an exchange students life- the highs and the lows could still only be understood by another exchange student but because I believe in this program and want so many people to have this incredibly life changing experience here is a snapshot of my year... in hope that it might inspire some of you to apply as an exchange student.

Who would have thought I have had some of the best moments of my life with a group of people I hadn't even met this time last year!!! When I first came on exchange naturally the first things on my mind was oh how cool- a new country, a new language and WOO a tour of Europe!! These things are all really AMAZING parts of this program- dont get me wrong but the most truly amazing thing, the thing that has really touched me, throughout my exchange- is an aspect I hadn't really thought that much about before my exchange- it was the people I met throughout my journey; the other exchange students, my German friends and most importantly my host families!! I have just been blessed by having met the most incredibly, caring, loving, genuine people who opened up their lives and allowed me inside their world, culture and daily life- wanting me to experiencing EVERYTHING I possibly could!!

They have stuck by me always even when I was not always on an "exchange high" because of the cold weather, cold weather or did I mention that Germany is a tad cold? and they always managed to turn my frowns upside down!!

Well my first four months of exchange probably went the slowest despite how busy and how much fun I had- I did have to adjust. Adjust to this completely new world, adjust to the fact that I was know longer the independent 17 year old who had finished school, could drive, living in the same country (actually the same house) with the same family, the same friends, the same beautiful Brissie weather and- not

to mention speaking the same and only LANGUAGE- I had always spoken since I was born!! It was not easy and I think sometimes you feel the most alone you have ever felt- but then there were those moments like when you wake up and look outside your snow frosted window and see the middle century pointy roofs of your neighbours houses and the donkey and ponies in your host mum stalls and you think wow this is my life! Or you go downstairs and see your host mum has set the breaky table with the peanut butter on "your" side of the table because she knows that's your favourite thing to eat for breakfast, or even when you come late to class and your friends save a space between them at the desks just for you- in these little things- all the loneliness goes away and you are on an incredible high!!

I had many German cultural experiences in these first few months including; seeing it snowing in a city for the first time, skiing, going to a German "Karneval", going to a German farm, riding (on the back of) a motor bike (with my host dad) through German forest, and much more.

Then the next four months went extremely fast the gorgeous summer filled with long days, with green fields and blooming flowers came and went in the blink of an eye and before I knew it I had seen more than 25% of Europe on my rotary tour which was just amazing. Not only did I get to learn about other European cultures and history but also got to learn about other cultures from around the world through the friendships I developed with the other exchange students (from America, South America and Asia) on the tour. Some of these friendships are life long, a bond with another exchange student becomes as strong as the bond between you and your family as at one point on your exchange they are the only ones who really understand your life- they can be your family!! After my Europe tour I started the next half of the school year and as I became more fluent in German, learnt more about the German ways, and lived in the City with my second host family, I started to become more independent. I got my hands on a bike and could visit my friends all by myself which was a huge relief and comfort to me- being independent again.

When the time came for me to move onto my third and final host family and I realised I only had 4 months left, and how fast time had gone by, I kicked myself into gear and I tried to do as much as I could with all the people I had come to love over the past 12 months!! I went to Soccer game with my second host dad, I went to my first host family's grandparents 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, I went to the North and East German coast with my third host family and just really enjoyed every moment spent with my friends and families. I managed to have my second lot of snow in the year, with winter coming on and wow it was awesome to see how much I had acclimatized from wearing 3 pairs of leggings and a pair of jeans, to just one



pair of jeans!! I also managed to have a European Christmas experience!! Actually three!! I managed to visit my French sister (who had lived with my family 3 months before my exchange) and her family just before Christmas and have a French Christmas dinner and then I flew home for Christmas eve where I celebrated with my third host family and the following day had another Christmas meal with my first host family!!

After Christmas came my last and maybe my hardest but by far the best month of my exchange. I came to say goodbyes and I did not want to leave- 6 more months, just 6 more months I pleaded for!! Although my final moments with my friends and family were awfully hard and painful as the realisation that these "normal routines" we had set in place over the past twelve months would no longer be normal or routine for much longer... they also made me the happiest person in the world. They made me realise I had managed to create my very own family, and friends in this strange place far away from everything I have always known, with this funny language and freezing weather.

It was not easy but it was worth it. I have never met an exchange student who wished they hadn't gone or said it should have been shorter. You learn the most you possibly can about your country of exchange, your own country and more importantly yourself in a year.

- You will have the most conflicting feelings...
- When what was once normal is no longer normal anymore...
- When something feels familiar yet strange...
- It's a feeling of complete independence, yet complete reliance...
- It's a feeling of accomplishment that shows you so much more to conquer
- It's a feeling of total happiness found in sadness.
- It's a feeling you can only experience through exchange...

Bianca.