

Bayonne Exchange Essay

"A different language is a different version of life"

Fourth year has given me the chance to have lots of new experiences, one being the chance to do a French exchange. I had heard great reviews of the exchange from other students and from my older sister. From the beginning of fourth year, I knew that the exchange was something I wanted to do.

In October, Mr Cadogan told all fourth years that the exchange would be going ahead, but that they could only take a maximum of 21 students. That Friday, my friends and I, along with some other eager students, came to school early. We sat in the corridor outside Mr Cadogan's classroom, desperate to secure our places. Throughout the morning, we watched as our group grew and by 9 am there were 21 of us.

We soon filled out our personality profiles so that they could be sent to the French teachers and we would be matched with our correspondents. A few weeks later, we finally got our correspondents' profiles. We all rushed home to google map their address and find them on any social media sites we could. I started talking to my correspondent that evening so that we could start to get to know each other.

Lucky for us, our French students came to Ireland first so we were able to get to know them on our own turf. They arrived in Ireland on March 2. Of course it was lashing rain the day they arrived, a lovely first impression of Ireland! Despite the weather, Alice seemed delighted to be here as it was her first trip to Ireland. We had a jam packed schedule for the next 10 days. We had a traditional Irish ceilí, which the French absolutely loved. We went to visit the Dunbrody famine ship, Kilkenny castle and Dublin city. While in Dublin we showed them Trinity College and the city center. We also did the museum and skyline tour of Croke Park. Once you got over the fact that you were 44 meters from the ground, this was absolutely fabulous!

After 10 great days it was to say goodbye to our correspondents. It was quite an emotional event, despite the fact that our flights were booked for 10 days time!

In the early hours of the 23 April, we dragged ourselves out of bed to leave the school for Dublin Airport. At last it was our turn! We boarded the plane full of nerves and excitement and two hours later we arrived in Biarritz Airport. The airport was tiny. The minute we cleared security we were ambushed by the French language. As I was hugged and kissed by members of my host family I tried desperately to remember the phrases Mrs Byrne had drilled into our brains, but they had vanished.

Alice's father drove us home from the airport, where I met Alice's mother and brother. Alice's mother had prepared lunch for me so we all sat down together to eat. The family tried to ask me questions but soon enough they realised that I could not understand what they were asking. They then tried speaking slowly, in mono-syllabic sentences which my tired brain could piece together.

Monday soon rolled around and we were up at 6.30 am to start school at 8 am. I was suddenly very appreciative of our 9 am starts at home. It was lovely to arrive at L'Argenté to see all the Irish girls, Mrs Byrne and Mrs Moore. It was such a relief to see some familiar faces and to hear a familiar language!

Everyone at the school was very welcoming and they asked us loads of questions and included us as best they could in their classes. We had a tour of the school followed by a French breakfast, including warm croissants from the boulangerie. So far it looked like this was going to be an excellent trip! There were a number of excellent trips planned for our stay including a guided tour of the beautiful town of Bayonne, a tour of a chocolate factory, the Biarritz aquarium and the "chambre d'amour" in Anglet. Since we were staying in the Basque country we were introduced to some of their traditions. We had an introduction to the language and we learned how to play "peilot basque", a traditional racket game which was great fun.

My favourite trip was our trip to San Sebastian in Spain. We were very close to the border so it took us only forty minutes to arrive in Spain. We went to visit the science museum just outside San Sebastian. The museum was excellent. It was very interactive and we got involved in many of the experiments. After the museum we went into the city center. Form what we could take in as we charged to the shops, the city was very pretty!

All too soon it was time to say Au Revoir to our correspondents. We are very sad to be leaving our correspondents and all the other French students because we had become great friends over the past four weeks. To make matters worse, we leaving 26 degrees to come home to 10 degrees and rain. My host family could not have been any more welcoming and they invited me to stay with them again. We boarded the plane our heads a little fuller, our skin with a nice rosy glow and a little softer around the edges, all thanks to our many trips to the Boulangerie!

Doing the French exchange was truly one of the best things I did in transition year. Not only has my French improved but it was a great chance to experience a new culture and to live a different version of life. It is also a great chance to meet new people and make friends. I would urge anyone with the chance to take part in an exchange to grab it while they can!!

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