

Letter from Kate Edwards
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Bonsoir tout le monde!

So much, as always, has happened since I last wrote to you five weeks ago. In this time I have visited 4 different countries, been skiing, met the new exchange students staying in my region, as well as going back to school for the new term!

I went skiing with my host family the weekend before the holidays started. We went to the mountains to the East of France near Perpignan, and my host sister, Charline, and her friend joined us too. We arrived after about a 3hour trip and unpacked everything. Cèlia wasn't able to come, as she was working at her school restaurant. (Cèlia attends a 'professional' boarding school, which focuses on learning and studying how to cook and work in a restaurant). Therefore, I shared a room with Romain. We spend pretty much all of Saturday skiing. And I loved every second of it. Unlike most other things I've tried here, I took to skiing immediately. I had finally found something I could do with little effort on my part. I stayed with Charline most of the day, as she liked skiing almost as much as I did.. almost. It was a hot day for winter, and most of the snow was man-made. But it didn't matter. Especially coming from Perth, the closest to snow there being rain, which just can't compare =P

On the Sunday the family decided to take a drive around and see the mountains. It was so pretty. We had lunch and then went sledding, this being Romain's favourite thing to do. We had brought one of the dogs too (Aku) and it was hilarious to watch him chase the sled down the slope, jumping on top of the rider on more than one occasion, always resulting in the entire family in hysterics by the end of it. At about 6pm we all reluctantly packed up our things and headed home. It had been a wonderful weekend, and we all slept soundly that night!

I then had one more week at school before holidays which, much to my surprise, flew by. On the 13th of February, the first Tuesday of vacation, myself and most of the other new and old exchange students went to Toulouse to help 'Les Restos du Coeur'. This is a big volunteer organisation in France, aimed at helping people with little money by supplying them with food, toiletries, etc. Just over 10 AFSers came to help. We arrived at a massive warehouse after a short bus trip from Toulouse and were asked to help arrange all the items into boxes of the same product. It took almost all day, but we got the whole warehouse sorted out and fully organised. It was great knowing that we had done something to help this fantastic organisation, as well as having a great time ourselves. It was the first time I had met any of the new exchange students and so we had a lot to talk about, especially as one girl was also from Australia! It was also great to catch up with all the other guys, whom I hadn't seen in a while

The thing about all being exchange students is that you all understand each other. It never feels stupid admitting I miss home, or the language is hard, because everyone knows how I'm feeling, having experiences it themselves. You are able to meet a new person and talk as though you've known each other forever, even though in reality,

you've only met a few minutes before. It's because, as exchange students, we all share the same knowledge of what it's like to leave everything at home for an extended period of time. And because of that, it's like we already know each other.

The 15th of February was definitely one of my most exciting days here in France. I woke up at 4.30am, and by 6am, was sitting in the car with my host dad on the way to the airport in Toulouse. I was going to Amsterdam, and I had been looking forward to this day for over a month. We arrived a tad after schedule and so had to race into the airport with my luggage, over packed as usual. Little did I know at the time, but out of the five planes I was to catch within the next two weeks, I was most on time for this one.

Eek!



Emily and I in Amsterdam

Emily and I hadn't seen each other for over 6 months, and so there was a lot to talk about! It's a good thing we had nothing planned for that night, as my luggage wasn't delivered until 11.30pm! The next day, Kay took us on a tour of 'his city', as he

liked to call it. We visited the Van Gough

Museum, which was amazing! And then the Anne Frank Museum, or Anne Frank House, which I loved. It was so amazing to be there and the history of it is absolutely phenomenal. You were not allowed to take photos inside, but I don't think I'll forget it for a long time! Definitely worth visiting again someday! Kay had to go to work in the evening, so he left Emily and I to do a bit of exploring ourselves. We quickly located the central shopping area and stayed there for hours. By the time I left Amsterdam, my suitcase would barely close. And when I say barely, I mean I was sitting there for an hour packing and re-packing my bag to try and fit everything in! I did finally manage, although I did have to put a few extra items in Emily's bag.. =P

Sunday we slept in. Go figure. In the afternoon we went to visit Geurt VanDenBerg, who is a friend of Emily's poppa in Australia. We stayed there for a few hours and he told us all about Amsterdam and about the city that Emily's poppa is from. It was located about 45 minutes from Amsterdam by Train, so we decided to visit. It was a gorgeous little town, with all the traditional flowers and windmills of Holland. A nice

change from the bust streets of Amsterdam and Harlem, and a great finish to our time in Holland.



Tuesday the 20th of February, Feastings in Vienna: from what I can gather from this day, it's to celebrate the last few days before the 40 days of Lent commence... and pretty much just an excuse for everyone to dress up in ridiculous costumes and party! Everyone at school was dressed up. From Sponge-Bob, to cows, to babies, to batmans, to guys dressed up as girls, etc, it was there. Emily and I, being the original and creative girls that we are, went as Australians. We did put in effort though. There were cork hats, thongs and flags involved. That night everyone went to the city centre, where all the pubs were opening especially. It was a bit hard for me, as I speak no German what-so-ever, but most people in Austria are able to speak English perfectly, so it didn't pose much of a problem. Again, a great night was had by all!

Friday was school again, although after this we went to Gratz, which is a city about 2-3 hours away from Vienna. Here we visited a friend of mine, Birgit, who had stayed in France for 6months. It was great to catch up again! We stayed with her the night and she showed us around the next day. We went to see a big clock which is built at the top of a mountain and is a sight that Gratz is famous for. Emily and I then got rid of all our change down the wishing-well in an



The clock in Gratz, Austria

fairly peculiar fashion (causing a group of Japanese tourists to burst out laughing). We then caught the train back to Vienna and home.

Sunday I was headed back home again after an awesome week and a half. Let's just say it was not as easy trip. I got lost on my way to the airport several times as I had to catch several trains to Bratislava and Emily wasn't able to come with me. It took over 3 hours to get there and again, I was dreadfully late for my plane. Luckily, the plane had already been delayed, so all I had to do (after they had re-opened check-in for me) was blend into the complaining crowd of British people, and act as though I'd been there the whole time.

Connecting flight in London (though it was London Stansted this time). Again my name was called over the loudspeaker as I ran towards the last gate in the furthest corridor, that just happened to be mine. I made it. The hassles of airports were finally over, one thing about my trip that I'm quite happy to leave behind! I arrived in Perpignan just under 2 hours later, when I was met by Charline and taken back to her house for dinner. She then took me to the train station, where I took a train to Toulouse and my home away from home.

The next day I was back at school again after a fantastic vacation and things started to settle down again. I am now three weeks into this term (another 5 week term) and things for me are pretty normal. It is hard without my American friends, but I'm coping. My French, understandably, is improving considerably now that I'm obliged to speak it all the time. This weekend the family is going to a friend's house, 100km South of Paris for St. Patrick's Day. There will be a party Saturday night and it promises to be an unforgettable weekend! I can't wait! The weekend after, a friend of mine from Austria, Vera, is staying at my house. I am also performing in a 'spectacular' for school on Friday and Saturday playing the flute. And then on Sunday there is an AFS gathering, in which we are all going to go on a 3 hour hike to a castle and have a picnic. Again, this sounds great and I can't wait to catch up with everyone again!

The next few weeks here for me should be fantastic, just like every other week I have spent here in France. Again, this is all due to the opportunity given to me by The Water Corporation. I grow up more everyday, as I continue to understand more and more about the world and the many different cultures and people that surround it.

Bonne nuit à tous!

à Bientôt!

-Kate Edwards