

An Open Letter of advice from Juliette, an Outbound student from District 6510 in Southern Illinois (Central States) during her 8th month in Slovakia

Dear future exchangers,

By now at least one person has probably told you that 'exchange will change you'. That's not quite the right word. I would say that exchange will hone and polish who already are. You might not know it yet, but within each of you lies the soul of an adventurer with the strength and courage of a warrior. Exchange will magnify those qualities and bring them to the surface. It is your choice what you accomplish with your newly sharpened strength. Be a positive force, the world and your exchange, will reward you.

Every exchange is so unique and different that it becomes difficult to sort out what advice will best work for you. But there are some truths that hold across all exchanges. Go with an open heart and mind and most everything else will fall into place. Please, thank you, help, and I am sorry, are powerful phrases in every language. Use them. There will be times when you are either misunderstood or misunderstand. One single wrong word in a sentence can change its entire meaning. But don't be too hard on yourself when you make a mistake. You are learning and you WILL make mistakes...many of them. Some mistakes will be big and some small. But don't run from either because of embarrassment or confusion. It is easier to unravel a problem when it first happens than to deal with the consequences later. Remember that I told you that you have courage. You do. Use it.

Homesickness happens to everyone. It might come right away, or maybe not until Christmas or your birthday. But it will happen. And when it does, embrace it. I know this is the opposite of what you have been told, but hear me out. If you don't allow yourself to feel your emotions, they will forever sit on the peripheral edge like a gnat you constantly try to swat away. Instead, allow the tears and sadness to engulf you. Cry it out, good and hard. But look at the clock, and set a time frame of twenty minutes. When your twenty minutes are up, get off that bed, wash your face, and go do something! Have a chat with your host parents, journal about the good moments in your exchange, or look for interesting events that are coming to your host city. Yes, wallow in your sadness, but only for a moment. Give yourself the permission to feel and then allow that feeling to move on. You have an entire exchange ahead of you, fill it with wonderful memories.

Learning a new language is frustrating. Do yourself a favor and begin learning your new language NOW. TODAY. It might seem overwhelming, so start with a small goal. Focus on learning five words each day. On the web you can find a list of the 'most frequently used words' for almost any language. Take that list and chunk it into groups of five words. Write down your five words each morning and carry that list with you everywhere. The next day, add five more. Watch youtube

videos and search for music and news stations in your new language. You won't know what they are saying at first, but just listening to the pace of the language will help you.

I have a few tips below that have worked for me and maybe they will work for you. But remember, each exchange is different.

- Write down your host address on a small piece of paper and keep in your purse/wallet. You will get lost at least once, either walking to school or taking the train. Ask for help and show your written address down if there is a language barrier.
- Try not to say no when a Rotary member, family, or new friend invites you somewhere. You never know what type of adventure it might turn out to be!
- Make an effort to get know the people in your Rotary club. They have made this year possible for you...Thank them!
- Try to buy an 'unlocked' phone to bring with you. I had to purchase a new phone in my host country because my Verizon phone was locked so I couldn't just replace the sim card.
- Your head might hurt the first few weeks as you acclimatize to all the foreign words, foods, and time change. Bring some aspirin with you. Drink plenty of water.
- Don't compare your exchange to someone else's. It is impossible. So don't get too caught up in someone else's picture perfect Instagram exchange.
- If you want friends, sometimes you have to be the first one to say hello. I know it can be intimidating; but just remember, you have strength and courage!
- ALWAYS ask your host parents what their rules and expectations are. Especially the little things, like when you should be home or who/where to call if you are late. If you are unsure or confused by something, ask again!
- If you have other exchange students in your school/city, it can be easy to fall into a friendship with them. After all, they are experiencing the same ups and downs of life as you. But you do yourself, and your exchange, a huge disservice if you only hang out with other exchangers to the point of not making any native friends in your host country.
- Not every moment is rosy, but remember you can never have the ups without the downs.
- Take the time to really enjoy the minutia of what makes your host country special. Embed in your memory the way the sun looks in the morning or how your favorite tree sways in the wind or how a favorite food tastes.
- Keep a journal. Take photos. Keep your ticket stubs or train tickets. These are all memories you can look back on later.
- Your emotions will run the gambit from extreme excitement to utter misery. This is normal. But try to stay in touch with your feelings because it will help you understand, and moderate, your reactions.
- Most of all: This is a year that you never get to live again. It is a gift. Embrace it.

Have a great Exchange year!

Juliette