

## Letter from Dayle Raftery - Youth Exchange Program - Finland

Terve!

Sorry I've been out of touch for so long! I sent an email through back in May, so I hope you got that one! Here's what I've been up to lately (sorry it's a bit long!)

June was a HUGE month for me, and it went by so quickly! This month I had my EUROTOUR! It was amazing! 9 countries in 19 days! I can hardly believe it's over now; I've been waiting so long for it!

90 exchange students from all around the world, plus 2 tour leaders and 4 rotex and 2 AMAZING bus drivers set out from Finland on the 1st of June to embark on a 19 day tour of Europe. Wowee.

We took a boat over to Sweden, and gained an extra hour in our day. We arrived in Sweden the next morning, and pretty much drove straight through, heading to Denmark. We stayed in a little hotel just outside Copenhagen. I was really jealous, because when my roomie and I went into the room, my roommate's name was on the TV, but not mine! Very unfair, haha. That evening we went to Tivoli, which is a huge amusement park type thing, with rides, and restaurants, and lots of cultural stuff. The rides were pretty expensive, so me and a few friends only went on one, which was this huge swinging chair ride that went way up in the air, and was pretty freaky! But so much fun! We spent the rest of the night seeing the sights in Tivoli, and taking photos that only exchange students take, haha.

The next day we had a tour of Copenhagen, with an excellent tour guide (one of the best of the trip!) and every time she mentioned the Royal Family, and Princess Mary, all the Aussies in the bus would cheer and make noise, which probably drove everyone else nuts, but we were proud of our Mary! After the tour, we had a bit of free time in the city, which was a lot of fun, and included eating Danish danishes! We then left Denmark by ferry, heading over to Germany, where Bremen was our final destination for the day.

On the 4th, we headed for The Netherlands. Our tour guide had been on exchange in Finland a few years ago, so that was pretty cool! We drove over a really long dike, about 32kms or something. Our first stop was at a clog and cheese factory, where we saw a clog being made, and how got told how they make their cheese. We also got to try some cheeses; most were pretty good.

Our next stop was in a small seaside town, where we had free time to shop, before we had lunch in a very fancy restaurant where many famous people have eaten, including Clarke Gable, Muhammad Ali and other such people.

After lunch, we left for Amsterdam, and had a water boat tour of the city, followed by a visit to the Anne Frank museum, which was absolutely surreal. The museum is housed in the same building that the families hid out in! It was mind-blowing to think that I was standing in the same place where they had hid! It was definitely a eye-opening experience.

The next day saw us leave the Netherlands, and head for France. We had a short break in Brussels, Belgium. We were meant to have about 2 hours free time, but we couldn't find anywhere to park the buses for ages, so we had about 45 mins free time instead. On top of our shortened free time, it was also raining, so that wasn't a very nice view of Belgium. We had lunch in Brussels, which was quite nice, and involved all of the Australians doing a bit of an Aussie medley for everyone else in the restaurant, whether they liked it or not!

We left Brussels and headed for Paris!

Our first sight of the Eiffel Tower was just AMAZING! It was so much bigger and more impressive than I expected! Unfortunately, not all of us got to go to the top level, due to there not being enough tickets for everyone. I was one of the people who had to go to the middle level, but it was still completely amazing! Just to think I was one a world famous icon, looking out over Paris... amazing! And as we got there in the evening, when it went dark, the lights started to flash, and it was just even more awesome! Definitely a highlight of the trip!!

A city tour of Paris and Versailles filled our next day. Our tour guide was not very good, as she pretty much was like "And there's the very famous building, and that's the famous river, and that's the famous bridge, and that's the famous church..." and it seemed like everything in Paris was famous, even a tiny little Finnish shop. Versailles was amazing though, seeing the castle, and the gardens.

At night, we had a free night; so a few friends and I decided to head over to the Artists quarter and after getting a little bit lost, and then climbing about a million stairs, we came to Basilique Sacré-Cœur (Basilica of the Sacred Heart) which was amazing. We went inside, and there was a service going on at the time. It was so moving; I think we were all affected.

After the sacredity of the church, we decided to head to the Moulin Rouge! Haha. It was definitely an adventure getting there, as we walked through the red light district, but very worth it, to see that windmill!

The next day we had a free day in Paris. Me, 2 other Aussie girls, and an American guy decided to go on a walking tour (which we had to run to, to find it in time!) It was really great, we went past the Eiffel tower, military school and museum, The Louvre, the courthouse building where the Revolution trials took place, and finished at the Notre Dame. We went inside

the Notre Dame, but it was a bit of a disappointment for me, because there were so many people, it didn't really feel like a church. From there we headed back to the Louvre, and went inside. Of course we saw the Mona Lisa, but again the number of people there ruined it a bit.

After the Louvre, Dan had the great idea to walk to the Arc De Triomphe, telling us 'It's easy, we can see it and it's just in a straight line, it's not far!' 2 hours later, we arrived there. The sore feet and blisters were very worth it though. We climbed the 300 odd stairs to the top, and were rewarded with an amazing view.

We decided to head back to the hotel after that, and call it a night.

The next day was a full day of driving as we headed to Southern France. We had one stop at a liquor factory, but that's about it. When we got to our hotel in Grenoble, we all just relaxed, and enjoyed seeing mountains for the first time in a long time.

Another day of driving followed us, as we headed to Cannes. We had two stops, one in a small mountain village for lunch, and the next in Grasse, where we visited a perfume factory. When we arrived at Cannes, everyone headed straight for the beach. Despite the cold water, we were all so happy to be at the beach, we all jumped in and frolicked.

Nice and Monaco were next on our list. We had a tour guide for these two towns, though we mostly just drove through Nice, with Monaco as our main destination. Monaco was extremely expensive! And very hot! Especially after 4 months of the temperature hardly going over 15 degrees!! We took a trip up to the Monte Carlo Casino, but it cost 10 euros just to go in, so we admired it from the outside.

We left Monaco and went back to Cannes. After dinner, some friends and I took a taxi into the centre, and spent the night near the beach, which was lovely.

On the 11th we left Cannes, and our hotel was very glad to see us go (they pretty much hated us, haha). We headed for Italy, with a stop in Verona, home of Romeo and Juliet. We arrived at Lido Di Jesolo, and after dinner had a free evening. A few of us set out to find a Laundromat. We braved the rain in search of a washing machine... only to discover (after a half hour of walking) it was still very far away, and most likely closed. We returned to the hotel wet and defeated.

Venice filled our next day, and pigeons filled Venice. We pretty much had a free day in Venice, broken only by a glass factory visit and a gondola ride. We got lost quite often, as many spots looked the same. Great day though. After we got back to Lido, we discovered we had a free evening with no curfew! So 90 exchange students hit the town of Lido... which wasn't that bustling, especially not on a Thursday night, haha.

On our free day in Lido, the weather was awful, so it was pretty much a day of rest and washing (whoo hoo!) It was nice to have a relaxing day.

We left Lido on the 14th and headed for the Alps, with our tour leader giving us an update every 5 minutes on how high above sea level we were. When we arrived in Bellamonte, we went for a walk in the Alps, which was a hike and a half! We all made it to the top, and to the snow. It was really amazingly beautiful.

The next day we left Italy to start our journey home. We stopped in Innsbruck, Austria, for a few hours. Everyone was disgusted by the amount of Swedish flags in view (due to the European Cup) until one boy shouted, "Look! There's the Finnish flag!!" We all looked excitedly only to discover he was pointing to the Greek flag.

We stopped in Garmisch-Partenkirchen for lunch with Bavarian entertainment, and then kept driving onto our final destination of Regensburg.

The next day was a full day of driving, as we headed to Berlin. We had a short stop at the Nurnburg War Museum, and made it to Berlin late in the evening. We were granted a free night, so a group of us decided to brave the trains and travel into town. We were in Berlin at the right time! Germany was playing Austria that night in the Euro Football Cup! Luckily, Germany won, so the streets were filled with people celebrating and having a good time! It was pretty amazing.

In the morning, we all climbed on the bus to have a guided tour of Berlin. We saw the Berlin Wall, the Pleasure Fields, the place where the burning of the books occurred, Checkpoint Charlie and many other historical things in Berlin. After our free time in the city, we got back in the bus to drive some more. Whoo hoo! We headed back over to Denmark, and straight through to Sweden.

As the 18th dawned, we were all quite sad because we new Eurotour was coming to an end. We cheered up a little as we visited a candy factory, and had group photos. We headed towards Stockholm, where we ran into navigational problems as almost every street our buses needed to go down was closed! We had a bit of free time in Stockholm, before we got on the boat again to head back to Finland.

After dinner on the ship, we had the nightclub to ourselves to celebrate our last night together, and no curfew!! We had a small ceremony type thing where we thanked our tour leaders, rotex and especially the bus drivers, as well as the oldies passing things down to the newbies. Afterwards, we just danced and had fun with each other on our last night.

The final morning of Eurotour brought tears as we all had to say goodbye to each other. We had formed some great friendships over Eurotour, and it was quite hard to say goodbye to people we may never see again in our lives.

So that was Eurotour. Sorry it was so long! It was the fastest 19 days of my life! When we were getting back on the boat to go back to Finland, it felt like we had been on the boat only 2 or 3 days before hand.

Lately I've just been enjoying the Finnish Summer (it's only just cracking 20 degrees now, and raining all the time!). I've changed families twice since eurotour (I stayed with my youth officer for about a week) and am now settled into my family here. It's been raining a lot, and my family always makes jokes that I'm happy it's raining, because I never see rain in Australia!

Thanks again for the AMAZING opportunity!! I'm having the time of my life over here!

Dayle.