

Cross-Cultural Adjustments

My time in Amsterdam is now almost crossing the two-month mark and I can now firmly say that I have settled into my new home away from home. Hurray for me! Though it is still surreal that I am here in Europe, I am feeling increasingly more comfortable with each passing day. It is crazy to think that it has nearly been two months since I packed my suitcase and embarked on my European adventure.

(On a side note: I am happy to announce that I have smashed my previous record of two weeks' time spent in the Netherlands! So hurray for me again! And champagne for everyone!)

Despite the fact that I have been to the Netherlands several times before in the past, I still can't help making comparisons between the Netherlands and Canada. The differences and similarities between the two countries are something that I continually think about as I am riding my bike throughout the city. What were my findings you ask? Well fear not! In this blog post I plan on sharing the observations that I have made in regards to the cross-cultural differences between the Netherlands and Canada and the adjustments I have made in order to become settled.

Whenever I move to a new place I always like to establish a routine so that my life becomes easier. For me, the first order of business was to find places where I can get food. One of the main food retailers in Amsterdam is the Albert Heijn supermarket. I'll never forget the first time I walked into these stores. What struck me the most was the size of the products. To me, everything seemed much smaller when I compared it to Canadian food products (I'm sure my fellow North Americans will agree). Also, the fact that you are able to purchase alcohol in the grocery stores is certainly a new concept for me. I mean, I'm not complaining or anything, but still!

The proximity of these grocery stores in relation to one another was astounding. For example, Albert Heijn has 82 locations scattered throughout Amsterdam! They are pretty much everywhere throughout the city! Meaning you could literally throw a rock and you'll hit an Albert Heijn. Fun fact! I actually field-tested this theory and as a result I am now only able to shop at 81 Albert Heijn supermarkets. :(

However, while getting banned from supermarkets is certainly a shock, the biggest thing I had to adjust to was the size of the Netherlands itself. The fact that I come from a country whose area is 9.985 million km² compared to the Netherlands 41.543 km² is something difficult to ignore. I always laugh when I'm talking with locals about distance. For them, a 2 hours journey seems like a lifetime. For me, it's a trip to my job and back. The fact that everything is so compact in the Netherlands was definitely something new for me to adjust to. It amazes me still that you can drive 500 km in almost any direction and you will find yourself in another country where the people speak a different language.

Whereas in Canada you'll get lost in the woods... And be hunted by wolves... And cougars... And bears... And the occasional blood thirsty moose... And the most dangerous animal of all... MAN! But I digress.

I am joking of course (or am I?!?!) but the difference in physical environment is something that I am still adjusting too. Back in Canada, I lived in an area with many diverse ecosystems and landscapes. Forests as far as the eye can see, gaping valleys that were carved by mighty rivers, glacier-fed waterfalls so cold they take the breath out of your body, and majestic mountain chains that stretch beyond the horizon. So by moving from Canada to the Netherlands, I uprooted myself from the vast wilderness and planted myself in the urban jungle.

It may sound like I am depressed about leaving Canada but that couldn't be further from the truth. While I do miss my home country, I am extremely excited to be in new unfamiliar surroundings. My new favorite activity is riding my bike on the cobblestone streets of Amsterdam. Traversing along Amsterdam's canals and through its narrow alleyways has become a game for me. I purposely get lost in the city so that I am able to discover something new.

All the while, I am breathing in the city's amazing and diverse architecture. Buildings such as the Royal Palace, the Rijksmuseum, and Westerkerk are stunning to behold. The crooked/leaning buildings are perhaps my favorite because of their uniqueness; they are tall, narrow, and deep structures that line up along the streets and canals. As a student of history, I enjoy marveling in the beauty of past, and I have even encountered buildings that are older than Canada itself! While I do miss the wilderness of Canada, I think the beauty of Amsterdam is a fair trade.

In closing, there are certainly many things that I had to adjust to that I couldn't fit into this blog post. At times, I have experienced things that made me slightly nervous and uncomfortable. However, I have learned that those are the moments that help us grow as human beings. I was certainly comfortable when I was back in Canada, that I can't deny. But whenever I find myself in a prolonged state of comfort there is a quote that I often say to myself:

“A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.”



The meaning that I take away from this quote is that it is a good thing to go out into the world and explore something new. All of us in the Semester in Amsterdam program find ourselves in a unique position where we can continue to explore and expand our horizons. We'd be fools not to embrace the opportunity.

Until next time my friends!

-Ruben

Semester in Amsterdam Student Blogger

