

The time of their lives

Imagine you are an ordinary teenager who has never been away from home or your family for very long. Imagine arriving in a stranger's home on the other side of the world to attend a local school, where you may not speak or understand the language. Each year, thousands of teens across the globe embark on the journey of self-discovery, independence and adventure that is Rotary Youth Exchange. And there's no telling where the experience might take them...



Twin exchange students



RIGHT: Rotary Youth Exchange student Fergus Tod makes friends with the Kuopio ice-hockey mascot, while on exchange in Finland.

BELOW: ... and Fergus' twin sister Scarlett, also on Rotary Youth Exchange, in front of Christ The Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



"Our two children are having a magnificent experience," Sophie said. "They are just absolutely loving it. There is no sign of homesickness."

Fergus' first host family live on a frozen lake, which he and his host siblings ice-skate and cross-country ski on.

He is close to the family and is learning Finnish well, while gaining good results at school and loving life. He has made many friends, including classmates and other exchange students studying at his school.

Fergus has recently been on a week's alpine holiday with his family, where he snow-boarded, snow-shoed and had a lot of saunas, and has also enjoyed Rotary trips and camps with his club and district. He says he cannot imagine having an exchange in any other country – he loves the food, architecture and culture, and hopes to join an ice-hockey team when the new season starts.

Scarlett lives with her second host family and is so dedicated to her new life that she sat a geography test in Portuguese and scored an A.

Academic scores achieved while overseas count towards students' SACE results on return to Australia.

Scarlett loves the people, culture and food of Brazil and says every day is magnificent. Her school days start at 7am and finish just after midday, when she spends time with family and friends and works on her language skills. She has been blessed with a strong group of friends, who are all exceptionally welcoming and inclusive, and hopes to teach her "sisters" how to play tennis at their country club.

She loved her week in Rio de Janeiro, where she witnessed the spectacle that is Carnival and scuba-dived at Paratay.

"This has already been the best year of my life and I can't wait to see what it has in store next," Scarlett commented on social media. "Thanks so much, Rotary Club of Port Pirie."

With their own children due back in January next year, Sophie and her husband Iain have hosted an inbound exchange student through the Rotary Club of Port Pirie. The club is now keen to hear from students who may be interested in undertaking a 12-month exchange in 2021 (currently Year 9) and would also like to hear from potential host families.

"We have sponsored students for decades, both outgoing and incoming, and we know that undertaking an exchange makes an enormous difference to participants' self-confidence, outlook and career opportunities," club member Peter Arnold said.

For further information on how you can get involved in Youth Exchange, please contact your district Youth Exchange chair.

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Living under foreign skies, twins Fergus and Scarlett Tod are making the most of their international adventures.

They are Rotary Youth Exchange Students under the auspices of the Rotary Club of Port Pirie, SA.

Fergus is living in Kuopio, Finland, while Scarlett is living in Palmital, Brazil.

According to their mother, Sophie Tod, both children have settled in well and are studying the equivalent of Year 11 in their host countries, despite having been due to attend Year 10 back home.



A year of growth



Rotary Youth Exchange is a great way to gain a different perspective on life, and that's what this group of 20 students from Districts 9685 and 9670 achieved in June, when they hiked their way to the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Having just returned from a three-week whistle-stop tour around

Australia, this particular group of students could have been forgiven for thinking that Youth Exchange is just one long party. While it is true that Rotary Youth Exchange is a lot of fun, a day spent climbing this iconic Sydney structure proved that exchange is also about facing your fears... and doing it anyway.

Spending a whole year attending school in a foreign country, speaking a second language, and being away from their intimate support network is no easy task, but one that this group of young people, from all over the world, accepted with a maturity that defies their years.

As a host parent herself, Amanda Foxon-Hill, of the Rotary Club of Katoomba, NSW, says it has been rewarding to reflect on the personal growth of these students during their exchange.

"Seeing them take their first tentative steps off the plane and into their initial host families compared to now – the halfway mark for some students and the end of their adventure for others – where they can support each other in completing what for some was a terrifying task, is what Rotary is all about.

"Without a doubt, making it to the top of the bridge, surrounded by new friends, families and, for some, host siblings, has highlighted the growth in confidence, sense of self and support for others that exchange has fostered. It has been a joy to witness, and something that the students will both reflect on and benefit from for the rest of their lives."

Amanda says Rotary Youth Exchange is at the heart of their club's activities.

"It was our pleasure to facilitate this experience for our existing students. We hope to be able to offer this for future groups so they can all see themselves on top of the world with Rotary, and hopefully inspire others to join in the fun!" •

PICTURED: The Rotary Club of Katoomba, NSW, recently organised a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb for the Exchange Students in Districts 9685 and 9670 to raise awareness of the Youth Exchange program, both here in Australia and overseas.



Paying it forward



Ask and you shall receive was the order of the day, when *Rotary Down Under* caught up with past Youth Exchange student and newly elected Federal MP Angie Bell.

Elected to the House of Representatives for Queensland's Division of Moncrieff on the Gold Coast in May, Angie may well be Australia's first exchange student to take up Federal Office.

"I'm very, very proud to have been a Rotary Exchange Student. It was life-changing for me as a young person. Where I am in my journey now... it affected me so profoundly when it comes to my passion for equality of opportunity and that's one of my core principles."

While Angie goes out of her way to give back to the organisation she feels a great debt of gratitude towards – visiting many Rotary clubs and speaking at Rotary events as often as she can – membership of a single club seems too limiting for someone representing a vast and diverse population.

"One of my passions is for diversity and for minority groups and making sure nobody is marginalised. I welcome all walks of life with open arms. That's why I'm here, to serve the people of Moncrieff, to serve all of the people of Moncrieff.

"So I would prefer to help many clubs rather than just one; if I could be an

honorary member of Rotary or a global member of Rotary that would make me very happy."

And, indeed, at that precise moment, that is exactly what happened.

District 9640 governor elect Andy Rajapakse whipped out a pin, metaphorically got down on one knee and popped the question. "Angie, I invite you to be Australia's newest Honorary Rotarian. We will connect you with the Gold Coast Passport Rotary Club, which gives you a passport to go to all Rotary clubs – any of the 36,000 Rotary clubs in the world."

A delightfully unexpected twist to Angie's Rotary journey, as was her journey's beginning.

"All of the other Rotary Exchange nominees were from private schools – I was the only person from a public school," she recalls of the selection process. "The board asked a number of questions and I was the successful candidate. It was a bit of a surprise to my dad, because we hadn't told him that I'd been nominated.

"My parents were not Rotary members, they had limited means, so for me this was an opportunity that took me out of a large public school. It was something very special. I was the first person in my family to finish high school and the first person in my family to go abroad. It was the first time I had been exposed to another



(Photos: @rhysmartinphotographer)



culture, another language, another way of living.”

Angie spent 12 months in the Danish city of Herning on the Jutland peninsula. With the help of her first host mother, she was fluent in Danish within three months, and quickly made new friends; some of which are still her best friends today. At the end of her exchange year, she came back to Australia with an open mind, a firm focus on attending university and a great appreciation for culture and the arts. It was also the beginning of her representative career.

“I’ve been in representative roles since then; as a sales representative,

representing corporate companies, representing over 2000 women in Queensland as president of LNP Women and, of course, representing Australia was the highest honour. And I did that when I was 17 and shared our Australian culture in Denmark.

“Youth Exchange gave me that sense of representing something bigger than myself, and here I am now, representing the 177,222 people who live in Moncrieff. That’s the pinnacle of representation and I think Rotary set me up for that; it set me up for understanding what it means to others to represent your country and your family.”

While a political career was not part of the original life-plan, Angie says it

has given her the opportunity to help inspire young people, just as Rotary did for her; something she is very passionate about.

“It’s about being inspired and it’s about paying that inspiration forward. It’s so important for young people.

When I met Joe Hockey, for example, I felt inspired by his warmth and his friendship and the opportunity to get to know a cabinet minister. It had a very big effect on me and now, to be in this role, I need to make sure I don’t underestimate how that has an effect on young people and the people around me. It’s a very serious thing – to inspire young people.

“Joining the LNP gave me another opportunity to give. I started giving to the party and I started giving to the people around me; essentially, Rotary taught me that.

“And I think once you realise that’s what life is about, then the world’s your oyster. If you look after others, you will be fine. Learning that as a young person is so, so important to the outcomes in your life.”

Angie will be inducted as an Honorary Member of the Gold Coast Passport Rotary Club by District 9640 governor Harry Bolton on August 16. •

