

MY EXPERIENCE AT ST.JO LE HAVRE

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Hello, it's Sara, I'm 16 and I'm attending the third year in Giotto Ulivi high school, focusing my studies on foreign languages such as English, French and Spanish.

My dream has always been travelling, discovering and learning as much as I could, and since the first year I had lots of possibilities: a stage of one week in Salamanca (Spain), one month in the United States, and some months after, the most beautiful experience I've ever done... two wonderful months of exchange in Le Havre, France.

Let's talk about it.

I left on September 10th 2017, and came back on November 11th 2017, and I can say they've been the most beautiful months of my life. When I first arrived I was shaking, I knew that I was going to completely change my life, or I better say start it over again, in a place where I knew nobody except for my travel companion, Cristina, where I had to speak another language, and I was so insecure about my skills... I can't even recognize myself anymore.

My host family has been great: I started to feel comfortable since the first day. We were there, sat in the middle of the living room, eating, laughing and talking about me, about my life, my past experiences, about them, how their lives works, the school I was going to attend... everything.

My French family was composed by: my exchange partner Blanche, a nice and funny girl that after two months I started to consider more as a sister and a good friend than a simple "partner", her sister Aliénor that i had already met in Italy, so funny and, unselfish their big brother Jean Eudes nicknamed JE, who's always been really kind and nice with me, the brother I've always wanted, and my host mother Amélie, an amazing mum who's always been there for me, jovial, mentally open and direct anytime. Another member, even if not officially, is Amélie's new partner, François, a very kind and calm person. Everyone of them has considered me like a member of the family, a daughter and sister, therefore there was no embarrassment. It wasn't just the place I had to come back to after school, it was my home, that's what it became.

Thanks to them I had the possibility to visit one of my dream cities: Paris, where we stayed for a day, and then, during the autumn holidays, for two days straight. I fell in love with Paris, with its streets, the buildings... gorgeous.

I lived in the center of Le Havre, right in front of the beautiful park of Square St.Roch, and five minute's walk to the beach. From there I used to walk to school, which used to take me from 10 to 15 minutes every morning. I loved having the possibility to go to school by foot, because here I can't, even if the price was taking a long way of ancient stairs, but it's okay, I did some sport.

The private school I used to go to is the institute St. Joseph, or commonly called St. Jo. I felt really well there, I love my old school. Cristina and I were in the class 2[^]9, the international section where we used to do lots of English classes, and where the

students were probably the most **gifted** of all the others classes of the first high school year. We were between 32 and 34 in our class, but the climate was good, we liked everyone, and everyone liked us... we built a good friendship with everyone of them.

There we were treated like two normal students, so we did the homework they assigned, studied the same things as them and so did their exams. I appreciated and I still appreciate St. Jo, from the building itself to the teachers, the projects and so on and on. Our timetable was good: we used to start every morning, excluding Saturday at 8.00 a.m. or at 9.00 a.m., based on the day or the week, meanwhile our classes ended at 4.30 p.m. or 5.30 p.m.

Cristina and I took lots of good grades, seen from the report we received, maybe even better than the ones we take in our Italian school, and that makes me so proud of myself, I succeed in a foreign school, I'm happy about that.

Be in another school and start everything over again like "the new one" was a breath of fresh air for me, nobody knows you so you can be truly yourself.

This exchange gave me the chance to meet some people now I love with all of myself. Thanks to Blanche I met Zoè, Maelyss and Lèa, and then thanks to my good friend Alex, that I met in Italy, I met Hilian and Quentin. From my arrival we started going out all together and day by day we've built a really strong friendship: they were there for me and I was there for them, simply beautiful. I could be myself with everyone of them, no mask or fake smiles, just me, and that's great. I consider them some of my best friends, and I'm sure about that, because they were the ones that treated me like Sara and not like "Blanche's exchange partner", they acted around like I was an ordinary Le Havre's girl, and I'm grateful for that.

Aside that, my French improved a lot, and I mean really a lot. In terms of level, our private French teacher, said that the level of Cristina and I was between a B2 and a C1, based on the DELF's levels. Before leaving Italy I was so afraid about not understanding a word, not talking etc., but then all of the sudden when I came in my new home on the first day I couldn't stop talking, the words came out like I've always spoken in French, and every day was better, everyday my French improved a little more. Now I can speak it quickly, with almost no interruptions and I know so many new words and common sayings that now I can face up to long and complicated conversations.

So what did this experience leave me?

A new family, my French family, that I'm looking forward to see again, and them too, to the point that they invited me to spend the next summer holidays with them. But more than anything, the best exchange partner of the whole world, Blanche, who I'm looking forward to see again in April and spend together two months here in Italy.

My group of friends who I love and miss every day more; I can't wait to see them again and spend some days like old times, laughing, joking around... even sit up on a bench, listening to some good music and chatting was good with them, we didn't need much to feel good. We keep in touch every day and that's really important for me. Also, I strengthened my relationship with Cristina, who has been an important landmark for me during all the exchange.

It's not only a new foreign language that now I can speak easily, but a huge cultural baggage of another country that I thought I knew, but that I realized being completely different from all the stereotypes. I immersed myself into their way of living, and soon I started acting like them, living like them, talking like them, and that also because of my adaptability. I found out that the two schools system are completely opposite, and I understood the difference between each one of them, things that I appreciate a lot more in France, and others that I appreciate more in Italy.

The moment of departure was difficult, I would say terrible, everyone was crying, including me. I didn't want to go back to my normal life, because at that moment that was my life, my "normality", that was my school, and that my city, those were my friends and family... I was used to all of that. It was unthinkable for me to leave all of that, but I had to.

Now I feel more mature, there I discovered my independence and now I can appreciate more what I have. No more shyness with no reasons, no more unmotivated fears. I feel more confident about myself. I changed thanks to this experience and I won't forget that, never.

