

Blind River students ready to do some globe-trotting

BLIND RIVER — Julia Fryer and Sheila Schiller are flying high today as they head to their Rotary exchange destinations.

Schiller, 17, a student at Ecole Secondaire Catholique Jeunesse-Nord in Blind River, is on her way to Sakai, Japan, a city of two million people. Fryer, 18, is headed to Comitan, Mexico, a city of about 80,000.

For the past year Schiller has been studying Japanese by listening to cassette tapes so she has a feel for the phonetics. She's also been writing to better understand some of the written characters.

"I can ask for directions, order food and tell people I'm sleepy," Schiller said.

She's also able to carry a small conversation as long as people don't talk too fast.

Although Blind River is home, Schiller has lived in Timmins and Sault Ste. Marie, which are larger but by no means come close to approximating the size of Sakai.

"I think I'll be pretty intimidated at first," Schiller said. "It will be more crowded. I was in Toronto last month and I couldn't believe how many people were there."

Schiller says she expects to miss "the cozy, quaint" atmosphere of Blind River because Sakai is so big that she'll "always be crowded and itching for elbow room. Plus at home almost everyone knows everyone else."

Schiller will attend an equivalent high school grade in Sakai. She knows she's going to be lost from the outset because of the language barrier.

But she takes that in stride. "There are other classes, like hair dressing, which are in Japanese, but that I can still participate in," she said. "Also I could be in the library studying the (Japanese) characters."

The school she'll attend will also have classes in English or French for the Japanese students and Schiller says she knows she'll be called upon to help out in those courses. Before returning to Canada next July, Schiller says the highlight will be climbing Mount Fuji. "All the Rotary clubs in Japan get together at the end and they plan this hike to Mount Fuji," she said. "It's a very tourist-friendly climb because the foot trails have these vending machines along the way."

Meanwhile, although Fryer graduated from W.C. Eaket Secondary School, she'll be required

to attend school in Comitan.

She says Rotary prefers that students remain in a school atmosphere because "it makes it easier to become integrated with the language and that's where most friends are made."

Fryer has spent most of her school year learning about Mexico, especially the Mayan people.

She plans to take a bus tour of various parts of Mexico, including the Mayan ruins.

However, Fryer has refrained from studying Spanish, because she fully expects to pick it up once she's in Comitan.

Fryer has also received tips on Mexican customs. "We were told what we should wear," Fryer said. "And girls don't wear shorts in Mexico and that surprised me. They say women wear pants or dresses. It's the culture. Shorts are considered inappropriate."

Fryer, who will spend one year in Mexico, said there's also an intricate system on how to greet people. "With elders, some people you kiss when you meet them, others you don't. Some you shake their hands, others you hug."

During her absence, Fryer's mother will apply to several universities on her behalf so she can begin her university education in September 2003.

Because of the culture she'll experience, Fryer is considering studying international trade or mass communications.

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— Sheila Schiller



JULIA FRYER will spend the next year in Mexico.