

Taking the plunge: life in a British boarding school

By Barbora Novotna (Czech Republic): Year 12, Harrogate Ladies College

I always wanted to be self-confident, effortlessly charming people with my easy-flowing speech and smart retorts. However, since the universe loves irony, I am everything but that. My confidence is non-existing and while I'm smart and forever fascinated with how incredibly similar yet absolutely different people are, my social awkwardness levels regularly break the world records. So why was I so excited to go to Britain? The simplest explanation is that I am terribly curious. How could I let pass a chance to live in a different country with so many things just waiting to be discovered? (Spoiler alert: I couldn't.)

Thus, I arrived into the exciting UK - to be immediately locked up in quarantine. The first few days I couldn't even begin to understand that I was actually *here*, at a British school. In retrospect, the quarantine had perhaps been beneficial, otherwise I may have fainted in the middle of the dining hall when the realisation finally hit me. I was locked up on the same corridor as several other girls. We had the typical awkward first meeting social-distanced conversation. The girls seemed nice - and much more extroverted than me, which I deeply admired and slightly envied. Little did I know two of them are quickly going to become my close friends. As I arrived a bit late, my quarantine ended two weeks after the beginning of the year, thus I was slightly lost. I plunged in the ocean; now, I had to swim.

It wasn't difficult to adjust to the educational system, mainly because I find a narrower focus on what interests me more pleasant than having to learn for seventeen subjects, ten of which I don't care about. Many of my classmates changed their A-levels several times, however, I kept my original choice of biology, psychology, literature and an EPQ related to creative writing. My grades dropped a bit during the first term (thank you, previous scholars, for warning me), but I caught up. It was the social rather than the academical aspects I was worried about, since I have an incredible skill of putting my feet in my mouth in the worst moments imaginable.

My worries about my (lack of) social skills were partly justified. After accidentally knocking one of my friends off her feet while she was carrying hot chocolate, spilling apple juice all over our table and having a brief but massive crush on one of my classmates, I was suspecting that my life was in fact a high school romantic comedy, just without the happy end. At times, the only saving grace was that I had my own room I could hide in. However, things got better. I managed to form a few closer friendships and before I realised it, I already had two roommates and was going to town with friends just as often as I was going alone.

I still enjoy having time for myself, but I realised I am not the only one that does. Harrogate Ladies' College didn't cure me of being an introvert. Nonetheless, I have the sneaking suspicion it did something more valuable: it suggested that maybe I don't have to be cured. Perhaps it is alright for me to just be *me*. Perhaps I need to accept who I am. I was not expecting this turn of events - probably a bit naive on my part, since my school's motto is "*I am me*". However, unexpected realisations may be the whole point: we'll never know what awaits us unless we take the plunge.