

Autumn Shomo

Takaoka Exchange

The flight from Detroit to Tokyo was the second worst part of the trip, preceded only by the flight home. Unfortunately none of our seats were together during the flight, so we weren't able to talk to each other. Customs was very easy after we landed, but we had to rush to exchange our money over to catch the next bus to the hotel. We missed it and sat at the airport for another hour, all of us exhausted and sleep deprived. Finally we made it to the hotel, checked in, and went to sleep. Although it felt as though we could sleep for hours, we all woke up very early.

We took the train to Takaoka, and the whole time we were all nervous. At the welcome ceremony we all recited our self introductions with no problem (although we were all very nervous). Both our group and the students who had visited Fort Wayne performed our dances. Everyone was very friendly and welcoming. My host family introduced themselves and took a lot of pictures, which my host brother Hiroto photo-bombed if he wasn't included! At the house, Moeka showed me around where I would be sleeping and where the bathroom was, then we did sparklers.

We visited the mayor of Takaoka the next day, where we gave our self introductions for the second of many times. We then went to an assembly in front of the entire school where Sam gave a speech about Fort Wayne and Nathan gave a speech in Japanese. We did our self introductions again (for the third time) and all of the students high-fived us or shook our hands after. Throughout our stay at Takaoka Nishi high school, all of the students went out of their way to be welcoming. Any time they passed us in the hall they'd say "Hi!" or "Good morning!" and were eager to show us around.

When we visited Kogei high school, we were all very impressed. The school was much newer and more modern looking than Nishi. However, the students English was much poorer than at Nishi, as many of the students in the English class we visited couldn't understand anything we asked them. They were still friendly, however, especially the teacher who showed us around the school. High school in Japan is different than in the US, especially in how the students don't switch classrooms except for gym, art, and music. Gym class was almost the same as in the US, though. The elementary school was a lot of fun to visit! The students were shy at first, but they soon warmed up to us. Gym class was a lot of fun, even though we never quite got the hang of their version of dodge ball.

At the BBQ they held for us, we were seated about 8 to a table. At my table it was me, Wendy, Linda, and a lot of the host sisters and friends. There was a place in the middle of the table where you cooked the food, and leaving 14-16 year old girls in charge went just about how you'd imagine. We accidentally burned yakisoba because we all ran outside and forgot to leave someone to stir the food, but we managed to salvage some of the burnt remnants. The food (besides the burnt stuff) was delicious, and it was great being able to hang out with all of our host siblings and classmates outside of school.

The sightseeing in Takaoka and elsewhere was amazing. My host sister, along with Wendy and her host sister, went to Kanazawa by train on the Saturday we got to spend with our host family. We got to see a historic street of the city and do some souvenir shopping. The entire group from Fort Wayne got to visit a world heritage site in the mountains, where we did some more souvenir shopping and took pictures on top of a mountain. The views were stunning and nothing like what you could find in Fort Wayne. Even the places we visited within the city, like the café that only serves things from Takaoka, were amazing.

Houses in Japan are set up much differently than in the US. Open floor plans common here aren't used there- I got lost going to the bathroom multiple times. My family had a kitchen table and chairs, while some of the other students' families did not. The toilet and shower wasn't only in different rooms, it was on the complete other side of the house. My host mother also worked extremely hard, waking up at 4 am to prepare breakfast, lunch, and do household chores. She would stay up until 11 on some days cleaning and doing laundry.

Often she would cook something for dinner, such as eggs and yakisoba, and the same food would be served at breakfast and put in our lunch boxes. Each day for lunch I would get two containers, one with rice and one with vegetables and meat. I always got a seasoning packet to add to my rice, and often some sort of cake or jelly treat as a dessert. It was unusual to me at first that everyone always packed their lunch, since people at my school who pack their lunches are often made fun of. Of course, it was odd for Moeka to learn that almost no one at my school packs lunches. We went to a sushi restaurant a few days before I left, where I tried sushi for the first time. I enjoyed the sushi that had cooked fish, but raw fish (or 'fresh fish' as they call it) wasn't my favorite.

We all cried when we left Takaoka, but were also excited for our plans in Tokyo. However, when we arrived at our hotel we weren't able to check in, so we had to carry everything we'd need in a purse or a backpack. We went on a bus tour to Asakusa and ended up at the Tokyo Sky Tree. We went to Tokyo DisneySea the next day, where we stayed until late that night. We visited the Meiji shrine and Harajuku also. We never had a dull moment in Tokyo, we were always on the go. The entire experience was amazing (except for the plane rides, maybe) and I'm so thankful to Sister Cities and the Chapman fund for making it so I was able to go. It was a life changing experience and even a month later I can't stop talking about it.