

Linda Ngo

Whenever I think back to the two week journey in Japan, I cannot help but be filled with numerous amounts of everlasting memories and extremely positive emotions. I feel that words cannot do justice to describe the once in a lifetime trip and all the events that I experienced. I honestly could write an endless amount of pages about my experience in Japan. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to spend time with my host family, going to Nishi High School and sightseeing in Takaoka, and having the opportunity to spend almost three days in Tokyo.

The Takaoka community had organized a welcome ceremony to introduce all the host families to us, the foreign exchange students, and the get together was a good way to start off the trip because we were exposed to Japanese foods and were able to connect with our host families. All the participants were extremely kind and friendly; many came up to me to start a conversation, which I greatly appreciated because I was a bit nervous. However, that nervousness quickly disappeared as I spent time with the Nakai family, my host family, during the trip. They were a family with an enormous heart who happily accepted me with open arms. They constantly cooked different Japanese foods for me to taste everyday, and an example of such foods were: katsu, miso soup, curry, green tea, yakisoba bread, rice with furikake, and many many more. They also taught me the various aspects of Japanese culture, such as the roles of each family member, the teenage fashion statements, reality TV shows, friendships between others, and others. In addition, the Nakai family surprised me with a trip to Kyoto, via bullet train, to tour the old capital of Japan. I was able to eat at a sushi store with the conveyor belts, where the sushi moved along the belts to the customers. My host family was always very proud to introduce me to their friends, who were also very excited to meet me. Many individuals that I met were without a doubt friendly and attempted to converse with me, even though my limited Japanese was a hurdle. However, every person still treated me with much kindness, like they do to everybody else. It made me think about how respectful Japanese people are towards one another and how Americans need to learn to be more humble and hospitable like the Japanese.

Upon entering Nishi High School, I was filled with excitement and twinge of nervousness because I have read many books about how Japanese schools are quite different in comparison to American schools. I learned that instead of the students moving from class to class, it is normally the teachers who do so. The students help set up the beginning of class by bringing the necessary items for the teacher. For example, a couple of students would erase the board, set up the map

and other items for history class, and move to their respective seats. Some classes that I participated were extremely intense, with students feverously taking notes and the teacher speaking very speedily, like in history class, old Japanese folklore class, and new Japanese folklore class. Other classes, such as cooking class, were more laid back but all the students were still hard working when they were creating their dishes. An aspect about the school system that I didn't find effective was the teaching method in their English class. The teacher gave handouts to the students and they practiced reading the passages, which contained very odd and difficult words that would not be practical in a basic conversation, such as "stimulant". They were then instructed to listen to a CD read the passage and repeat after the CD. I found this type of teaching a bit weak in the learning process because the students seemed to only want to get through the lesson, not actually absorbing the information taught. What I found interesting about Japanese schools, however, is the fact that they do not have any janitors because the students are the individuals who help clean the school after lunchtime. I was greatly impressed by this small action because in America, we take for granted how much janitors clean up after our own mess that if we just take fifteen minutes out of our own day to clean our messes at school, there would be no need to rely on others to tidy up for us. On some days, sightseeing was scheduled so we did not have to participate in a whole day of class. Instead, we took time to visit popular landmarks in and near Takaoka, such as the Big Buddha, Zuiryuuji Temple, Shirakawago, Toyama Bay, Doraemon Station and tram, and others. We also had time to visit Kogei High School, Carroll's sister school, and Fushiki Elementary School, where we learned about Kogei stressed a more hands on type of learning instead of academic learning.

Leaving Takaoka was one of the most heartbreaking moments in my life because after spending two weeks with my host family, I felt that I was actually apart of their family. However, I will always remember the memories made there so I am extremely grateful for being able to experience. The day, we were schedule for a tour of Asakusa and Tokyo Sky Tree. We visited the beautiful area of Asakusa where we saw large, ancient temples and had the chance to get slips that had our fortune upon them. I enjoyed shopping at the various shops that lined the street within Asakusa because they sold many souvenirs that many tourists found interesting. Afterwards, we proceeded to Tokyo Sky Tree, where we took an elevator that traveled nearly 350m in less than a minute to the top. Although the sensation of our ears popping was uncomfortable, the view was worth the sensation earlier. We saw the buildings of Tokyo stretch

into the distance and even though it was foggy that day, the view was still breathtakingly beautiful. As our tour pulled to a close, we had decided to venture to Akihabara and Shibuya. Akihabara contained many items and shops that appealed to those who enjoy anime and manga, Japanese comics. Because I am familiar with anime and manga, I found this area to be quite interesting and very fun to venture throughout. Shibuya was an extremely crowded area of Tokyo and I was so happy to be able to walk across the famous Shibuya crossing. Although it was very hectic, I loved knowing that I was one of those tiny people who walked across that intersection. The next day consisted of visiting the Meiji Shrine, Harajuku, and Tokyo Disney Sea. Nestled in the middle of the bustling Tokyo, Meiji Shrine was surprisingly quiet and serene. I felt so peaceful and very well connected with nature when I visited the shrine. We traveled to the crowded and busy street of Harajuku, where teenagers swarmed the area with their friends. I felt that this place appealed to me because I fit in the age range of the area and I was very intrigued by the different fashion and costumes that some people wore. The street was lined with countless stores that sold various items. We spent nearly two or three hours there and yet, we had not gone through most of the stores there. Later on, we went to Tokyo Disney Sea, which was a place that I looked forward to visiting. Many Japanese students had told me their love of Disney and kept suggesting that I go to Tokyo Disney and finally, we were within the whimsical world of Disney. The time was spent mostly riding roller coasters and conversing with one another, which I felt created a deeper bond between the members of the group. Being able to spend our last day in such a wonderful and magical place gave me the feeling that it was a perfect way to end our trip in Japan.

Even after going on this trip and coming back home to America, I still cannot believe I had the opportunity to experience such a wonderful country. From dancing an exhausting hour in the Goinsai Festival to accidentally burning the yakisoba at the BBQ with my friends, I can truthfully say that this Takaoka Sister City Foreign Exchange program is the highlight of my life thus far. I was able to create everlasting bonds during this trip with the friends I made at school and the family that I had lived with. I am only a high school student and yet, I was able to travel across the entire world to witness many beautiful and exciting things. This trip and all the memories that go with it would not be possible without this program, Fort Wayne Sister Cities program, and the Chapman Fund. I sincerely thank each and every individual who was a part of

this program that allowed me to make the unbelievable trip to Japan. I will never forget the beautiful city of Takaoka no matter how many years pass.