

## **My Experience in Japan**

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The nerves that everyone tells of feeling before a big adventure, were not there at all for me. I didn't have any waiting in the airport in Fort Wayne after our delay. None when we boarded the 30 minute plane ride to Detroit. Not even when we took off heading towards Japan with the light shining through the small decrepit airplane window and knowing, not just that I'd be on the plane for 12 hours straight, but that that was the last I'd see of America for two weeks. Nope, no nerves at all, what I felt is indescribable. It was my dreams coming true. I was finally living something that I accomplished alone, it was a taste of what my future would bring. Excitement and adrenaline is what I felt, not to mention the indisputable feeling of home.

When our plane landed in Japan all I could do was smile. I probably looked crazy on a plane in which everyone looked half asleep. Even after watching about five movies straight and getting maybe an hour of sleep, still all I could do was smile. We unboarded the plane and went through the rush of customs and security checks. We then met our wonderful travel assistants. We checked our bags and exchanged our money to Yen and saw our first vending machine. We waited about an hour till our bus came and then drove what felt like 4 hours with our heads falling every 3 minutes from exhaustion and snapping them back up not wanting to miss the view of Tokyo at night. After a very steep decline in the road, we made it to Prince Hotel. It was beautiful. We checked in and everyone seemed to be grumpy. We went into an elevator which smelled of cigarettes and chocolate to a floor that smelled of soap. Autumn and I went into our room and threw open the curtains and we stood in awe of the beauty of the enormous city that stretched out to the horizon. We left our room and of course forgot our keys so at around 11 at night less than 20 minutes since we'd checked in we already got locked out of our room. The hotel employees were very understanding and respectful and an employee came running over to our room and opened the door for us.

We woke up bright and early because for some reason 12 hours of flight and rushing through airports doesn't make you tired at all. We went down to the Luxe restaurant after reviewing our choices we presumed it would be the safest choice considering our unfamiliarity with Japanese food but still wanting to engage in the culture right away. The restaurant served both western style breakfast and Japanese breakfast. We sat at a table with Nathan and Sam. After grabbing croissants, nato, boiled seaweed, and of course rice we began eating. When we were almost full was when we began experimenting with different foods. First the fish paste, then the interestingly tasty seaweed, and the sticky unpleasant nato. After breakfast we packed our barely touched carry-ons vacant of hotel amenities and passed them to a service that would care for them while we scurried around Tokyo. We saw interesting hotels and signs that half of

us could make out a meaning, and of course the beautiful and efficient vending machines. After grabbing lunch and a small convenience store inside the station we boarded the Yamanote line and the Hokuriku Shinkansen bound for Takaoka. The ride was long, quiet and filled with beautiful scenery, I admit I fell asleep.

When we arrived in Takaoka, Nick and Mrs. Kabuta were there to greet us. We boarded the interesting lace seat covered bus with retractable seats and headed towards the City offices for the welcome party. The welcome was wonderful and meeting my host student Aoi and her family really made it settle in that I was in Japan. Honestly, I confess that when I saw the American flag and the Japanese flag side by side and the Mayor greeting us in his accented English my eyes watered and I realized the true impact that we as people can make, the friendships we can create, and the lasting peace that we can implement. Our dance, I must say was a success! It was so fun being able to dance around and be silly with my host student knowing the nervousness we probably both felt.

My first night with the Kobayashi family was filled with gifts, tours, introductions, and google translate. The room they had decorated to welcome me truly made me feel welcome and special. The next day was school, we woke up early and I had my first meal with my host family. We walked about 10 minutes to a tram stop and rode for about 15 minutes and walked 20 minutes to Takaoka Nishi High. Everyday to school was different though. The next day we had rode bikes, that I hadn't ridden in years and terrified me of the proximity of the street and the sidewalk, the rest of the time my host family drove us to school after I almost hit a pedestrian with my bike. The first day we were greeted by smiling faces and introductions. Once we were settled in our meeting room that would hold us for some time during the next week, we were ushered in front of the entire student body to give a speech about Fort Wayne and our gratitude towards them in both Japanese and English by Nathan and Sam. We gave our nervous self introductions and then headed back to the room to be handed our schedules for the day and awaited our host students to lead us to our first class. My memory a bit foggy the class might have been either Japanese Classic or Mathematics, I didn't understand much of what was said, I attempted to figure out what was being taught, wrote some notes, and at moments I was completely lost I attempted to copy the words scrawled on the chalkboard. I feel that I learned a lot from going to school but I didn't learn much of the actual classes but more of the people and the culture of students and the youth of Japan. The meeting with the mayor thought challenging in its inception went smoothly thanks to the translating provided by Nick. The gifts given by the mayor were wonderful and very spirited. The mayor was charismatic and amiable.

The next few days consisted of a variety of classes and an interesting participation in their english communications class. We helped with their vocabulary

words and their pronunciations. Obviously their english class was the only one of which we understood. They also invited us to a tea ceremony performed by students of the high school. It was a wonderful experience to see the difference in activities that they engaged in. My host family took me out to eat and I ordered raman which was huge portion but delicious. I can hardly believe that they think american portions are huge, Japanese are truly the one's with bigger portions!

We were invited to participate in the dance for the Goinsai Festival. We were graciously given the opportunity to be taught the dance and practice with many charming people. The festival was beautifully decorated and in such a historic part of Takaoka. We dressed in traditional Kimono's provided by our families. We were fed Onigiri before the festival as a snack, the salmon one was delicious! The colorful yet uniformed wear of the kimono was absolutely breathtaking. We went to a shrine and were blessed before the festival. We then stood in a line waiting slightly impatiently for our turn to dance through the street. The length of the street was greatly miscalculated. I felt like we danced for hours! Though our feet were sore and our waists were stiff from the kimono I would have danced all over again if asked, it was such a wonderful feeling to be a part of something so important and so traditional to the culture of Takaoka. We were interviewed by a local news station and we then skurried as fast as our Geta could take us to the food stations, we were starving! We bought French fries as a last resort because the lines were so long! We returned to where we had dressed and changed out of the kimono back to our regular clothing and interacted with some others that had participated in the festival, they were incredibly nice. The next day, in the evening, my host student took me with her to her traditional dance teacher and we dressed again in kimono's and I was taught a traditional dance to the song Sakura. We had tea and chatted about the teacher's assistant's experience in America.

Also, we had the opportunity to visit Fushigi Elementary School. There we had the opportunity to meet younger children and got to know their curriculum. They gave us a tour of the school and allowed us to play a few games with their P.E. class. We played a different version of tag and dodgeball as well as Rock, scissors, Paper!. We had lunch that consisted of rice, chicken, okra, and a mandarin. After our visit we went to the local Aeon mall for about an hour and looked around. Autumn and I bought Udon in the food court inside and a macaroon that was amazing! Afterwards my family took me out to dinner at a conveyor belt sushi restaurant. The sushi, of which I'd never had before, was delicious. We won a small keychain after eating, 20 plates of sushi. In total we all ate 36 plates of sushi! After, we went to an ice cream shop and bought Ice cream. I had macaron, green tea oreo, and melon ice cream!

On Saturday my host student took me to Kanazawa along with Autumn and her host student. We rode a train and arrived at Kanazawa station from there we bought an

all day bus pass. We rode the bus to a small area full of shops. We bought a few things and tried Green tea ice cream. From there we went to the mall. We saw a little pig walking alone in the street in front of Starbucks! We looked through the mall and I fell in love with the Liz Lisa shop, everything was so incredibly cute, or as the Japanese would say "Kawaii!", but very expensive so I couldn't buy anything. We went through the rest of the mall and Autumn and I bought a few things. I found it very strange that there was only one size of everything in the stores that we entered. We then went up and had our first encounter with Purikuras. We paid to borrow costumes and dressed up and took various pictures in the Purikuras, they were so fun and interesting! Autumn and I agreed that they would make a lot of money in America as well.

The next day was the barbecue provided by Takaoka City and Takaoka International Exchange Association. The location of the Barbecue was astonishingly gorgeous. On the side of a mountain overlooking Takaoka and the sea, it was perfect! All the food provided was absolutely delicious! My favorite would have to be the soba. We went out and took pictures of the beautiful scenery and played a game of Ninja with some of the host students and family. Afterwards they presented gifts to us which were beautiful cloths and we headed to the sea to have a walk around and collect shells.

We visited the sister school of Carroll high school the next day. Takaoka Kogei High School focuses on Architecture, engineering, and the arts. It was a beautiful building filled with wonderful students. After the tour of the school, we stopped by a small European themed cafe. There we ate lunch. I had the french toast and milk tea which were amazing. We then headed to our destination which was the National Heritage Site, Shirakawa-go. It was absolutely breathtaking and not just because of the climb up the mountain for the view of the entire place. The shops contained cute antiques and souvenirs. The bridge to the city was also beautiful. It was so historical and interesting, the place was one of my favorites from the entire trip.

In the following days, we went to Zuiryuji Temple in Takaoka. It was wonderful and filled with a lot of interesting and historical artifacts. We also saw the third largest Buddha sculpture in the world it was humongous! Also, we bought a fortune there and had Nick translate it for us. We saw the Takaoka zoo and were treated to yet another tea ceremony. The tea ceremony was held in a beautiful traditional Japanese shop. The garden it had was amazing and serene. We also made wind chimes in a local shop we had the opportunity to decorate them and pour the metal ourselves!

Too soon it was time to leave Takaoka and return to Tokyo. Our host families gave us more gifts that barely fit in our suitcases and drove us to the train station. We said our goodbyes and took more pictures with tears streaming down our cheeks we boarded the Shinkansen and waved to our host families. The long train ride was needed

in order to regain our composure, especially Linda, and get excited for the sightseeing we would do in Tokyo.

When we arrived in Tokyo we went back to our hotel and tried to check in but we couldn't check in until 2 and it was around noon at the time. We waited and finally we rode a taxi to a bus station and we took a sightseeing bus tour of Tokyo. We passed Ginza, Akihabara, and many other places. We stopped at Asakusa and saw a large Buddhist temple, Pagoda, and various little shops. The only problem was that it was raining and we constantly had to duck and move to the side to not get hit by other people's umbrellas or hit others with our's. We then took a tour of Tokyo Sky tree that's view despite the rain was spectacular. Later in the evening, we went to Akihabara. It was raining the entire time. We looked through many shops filled with anime and toured a very interesting Don Quixote. Sam bought an umbrella that broke less than five minutes after he bought it because of the strong winds and rain. Our last place we visited that night was Shibuya which was huge and an exciting thing to be a part of the hundreds of people crossing the street! We visited yet another Seven Eleven for dinner.

We all decided to eat breakfast in the western style restaurant partially because we needed refreshing and also because it was on the top floor and the view was amazing. We went to Harajuku and the shrine nearby where we participated in a traditional cleansing. In Harajuku everything was so colorful and interesting. Linda, and the other's bought crepes and Ms. Rhodes and I bought special potato chips, mine were covered in chocolate and had a side of ice cream! After walking through some nearby shops we decided to have lunch at Wolfgang Puck to decide what we would do next.

Afterwards we returned to the hotel looked around a bit and relaxed in our rooms. Soon it was time to go to Tokyo Disney!!! We boarded the Yamanote line and then transferred to another line that took us to Tokyo Disney. We bought tickets for Tokyo Disney Sea and entered. The beginning of the park was all Italy themed, it was beautiful. We rode a couple of rides and ate at an interesting american themed diner. We then spent the rest of the time shopping. Linda appeared with tons of bags and minnie themed things all on her, she obviously had tons of fun! Ms. Rhodes, Nathan, Sam, Linda, Sakhi, Linda's friend and I waited in the long line for the Tower of Terror. The ride was so much fun! We then started our tired journey home.

We awoke tired and sore of the day before's adventures. Autumn and I ate breakfast in the Japanese style restaurant in honor of our last meal in Japan. We had a bowl of rice, udon, miso soup, smoked salmon, and an omelet. We returned to our rooms and finished packing we then descended to the shops in the lower floor of the hotel and looked for last minute souvenirs. Linda bought Rilakkuma bears as did I as well as a sushi T-shirt. We then repacked and took our luggage down stairs and waited

for our transport to the airport. The bus ride was long and the last look at Tokyo was sad as we remembered our host families and all the adventure we had and still wanted to have. We entered the airport went through security and made some purchases inside the airport shops. We then boarded the flight and flew for 10 hours back to America. I watched a few movies and thankfully I sat next to a guy that slept the entire flight and Autumn. We played cards most of the time in the layover in Detroit and then with heavy hearts took the last flight to Fort Wayne. We were greeted by news cameras and family members. The experiences we had in Japan will be with me for my entire life and I hope to be able to continue to be connected with Sister Cities to share my experiences and hopefully participate in more things!