

Japan 101

What was Japan like? What sorts of things did I experience in my travels over the past 4 months? Who did I meet, how did I interact with the natives, and how was communication? Was the food good, were there things to do in the city, was it safe? What sorts of things did I wish I did before I left or wish I brought? Did I feel homesick, did I get culture shock, am I experiencing reverse culture shock now? These are all great questions which a future traveler to Japan would want to know. Within this article I hope to address some of the major issues, concerns, learning experiences, and joyous moments I experienced during my stay.

Japan was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I had never been outside the country before, so I had no idea what to expect. I had read a few articles on Japan, culture shock, and on *soto* vs. *uchi* culture (a unique cultural set exclusive to Japan whereby all things varying from language to body language and status are based on either being in an in-group or out-group). Ultimately nothing prepared me. First arriving in Nagoya after my 10 hour flight I was tired and alone. My roommate was working, so he didn't have time to pick me up. After I unpacked my things I simply lay in my bed and thought "now what". After exploring the city for a while and having a few days to myself, I couldn't help but think "what have I gotten myself into." Everything seemed foreign. They had some similar things: McDonalds, and 7-11, but even these were filled with unfamiliar things. The first week I felt it necessary to call my mom often. Even this was hard because the phone system was all in Japanese and even the basic setup was strange and unfamiliar. This was how it was the first

month. Everything I touched, everyone I interacted with was completely foreign. Everyday tasks such as buying groceries or mailing postcards became marathons of patience and stamina. Ordering food in restaurants or traveling around the city also proved to be huge tasks. As all things do however, my foreign world within a month and a half became common. I settled in quickly and made many friends, a great deal of whom were Americans like me (and in the same level of Japanese language class, so we saw each other on a daily basis). We got to travel around together, play on weekends in the city, and share our hardships. Undoubtedly it was my friends who helped me out when I felt alone or was having difficulties; they were having many of the same problems themselves. In time, after studying the language so intensively at Nanzan with their 4 hour a day regimen, I started to become more proficient than I had ever been. Even though many things remained unclear, I started to understand a lot of what my native roommates were saying. A real turning point came to me the day I came in from class and noticed the sign that had been on my door since the first day I moved in. It said in Japanese “*koko de asonde ikemasen.*” It dawned on me at that moment the sign read “You cannot play here.” When I read that, I knew at last that I was on the road to understanding. Not just the language, but the culture as well. From then on, I still had difficulties communicating, and I still got frustrated on an almost daily basis, but the feeling of absolutely foreignness slowly began to fade from then on.

So what about those questions I posed in the first paragraph? What was the country like and where did I go? I could write 5 more essays on my travels, but in simple terms, my experience was amazing. I traveled all over the country, saw some of the holiest sites, went to some of the wildest night clubs, visited world famous sites, saw amazing festivals, and tried unique and tantalizing cuisines. I met not just great people, but friends with whom I

consorted greater and more in depth than any other people in my entire life. I saw the world outside of America, I was exposed to media other than the biased, slanted views of American news. I watched movies and listened to music unlike anything I had heard in America. Because of my exposure to so many different spheres of life in such a different light and because I lived in them for so long, when I got back to my country, I no longer felt as I was an American. I definitely wasn't Japanese, but I wasn't quite as "closed off" as I used to be. I was seeing in myself something that I had seen in Japanese students who had traveled and lived in the United States. It was something "in the eyes"; an understanding of things in more realistic terms, and an ability to see beyond what you hear and see everyday. In short, I was able to see things I had always seen, but in drastically different ways. I suppose this is why I felt as though I wasn't American when I first returned.

Going abroad was so much more than seeing new sites, eating strange food, or meeting different people. It was an opportunity for change and growth. Having traveled abroad, I now feel more than ever that I am no longer the same, simple minded American I once was. I feel like now when I watch television, especially American news or commercials I am more able to see deeper into the hidden messages and more able to decide what messages I want to digest and which ones I'd rather leave behind. I also feel more apt at making friends, regardless of what culture they come from or language they speak. I've gained a greater appreciation for minority cultures living in the U.S. and a greater understanding of their daily struggles to fit in. All in all, Japan was something that has not only changed the way I view and interact with people, but how I digest media and view my everyday world.

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I was not sure what to expect when I first arrived in Japan. I had study the language for two years, but I didn't know very much about the culture. Those first few weeks in Japan where not as hard as I was expecting. My roommates, who included: a girl from Michigan, a girl from China and a girl from Japan, were very helpful. My roommate from Michigan had been in Japan for a semester at the same college, so she was familiar with the things I needed to do when I first arrived. There were a lot of things I had to do when I first arrived, which included opening a bank account, getting health insurance and applying for a foreign resident card. The process was not that hard for that newer student because older students help out and the newer students helped each other. When I went to open my bank about ten of us went to the bank together so by the time the teller got to me, the teller knew exactly what I wanted, so I had very little trouble opening the account.

I have a couple of things I wish I knew before I went. I chose to live in the dorms because I was worried about the commuting time. I felt I got lucky because I was in a dorm right across from the university. The dorm was set up like an apartment, with a kitchen and living room combined and four separate bedrooms. It took about five minutes to get to class and when I heard stories of people who were living at home stays traveling for more than an hour to get to class, I felt satisfied with my choice. Still not everyone at home stays had such a long commute, some people only had to travel for fifteen minutes. Also, I another thing to think about is that public transportation in Nagoya, such as the trains, stop running at 12am, so no matter where you live you will have to think about commuting times, especially on the weekends. I went out one weekend and I just barely made the last train, it would not have

been fun paying for a taxi. I think there are advantages and disadvantages to living in both places. Certainly, I probably had more freedom than most people living at home stays but I probably didn't get to practice my Japanese as often and I probably missed out on some Japanese dishes because I had to make my own meals. Still, as someone who was used to living in an apartment, I felt that staying in a dorm was a good choice for me. But I talked to a lot of people who enjoyed living with a host family, even though they had a long commute.

Another thing to know about living in the dorms is that you will not have internet in your bedroom for about three weeks. In another dorm someone set up a wireless router, which people used to get internet, but no one did that in my dorm. That's not to say that you won't have access to the internet for the first three weeks, you will just have to use the university computer labs. I'm not sure about the internet situation in home stays, I think most host families had internet. I think anyone who has decided to participate in the program needs to think about the advantages and disadvantages to each living choice before making a decision.

Another thing I wish I had known before I arrived was how much money to bring. I brought about four hundred dollars, which was actually a little less than what I probably should have brought. Although I was fine because where I lived there was a foreign ATM, which I could use to get money from my American account. Just a warning, if you stay in the dorms you will have to buy your own food and most small Japanese grocery stores and convenience stores do not take credit cards, so having money on you at all times is a good idea. Because I was staying in the dorms, I had to pay for my internet to cover the whole five months, which was about two hundred dollars. I didn't know about that before I arrived so I hadn't planned for it in my budget. Also, it takes time to open a Japanese bank account and

even once that is done the Japanese ATM card do not come for a couple of weeks. Plus, although you paid an advanced deposit that the university uses to give money back to you each month for living expenses, the university will not be able to give you money for first month because you will not have a Japanese bank account until a couple of weeks into the program. So, I was really dependent on the money I brought and my American bank account. I think especially for people living in the dorms it is a good idea, if you can, to bring more money than you might think you will need because there are a lot of unexpected expenses. I'm not sure if someone living in a home stay had to deal with the same things in regards to money, it might have been a different experience. The only time money was a really stressful issue was the first month, once I got settled and things started to smooth out I was not as worried about money.

Going to Japan was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Even though some of my experiences were stressful, I had an amazing time. No matter where you live or how much you plan to prevent problems, it all just turns into one big adventure. The food was amazing and traveling to other parts of Japan was exciting. And if you have a chance, try traveling to other Asian countries because the airfare is really cheap compared to flying from America; I went to Korea and had a great time. So, I would recommend just trying to having a good time, even if it is just running to catch the last train of the night.