

My Experience in Japan

During my stay at both schools, I was asked to speak in front of the student body as an introduction, then another one as a goodbye on my last days. In both speeches, I spoke very hesitantly and incredibly simply, as my Japanese is not very good. It was well enough to be understood, and I even received some compliments afterwards, however, I wish that during those times I had the ability to thoroughly convey exactly what I wanted to say: My humongous gratitude and sheer excitement to be in that position; to be able to explore a culture outside my own. But this in turn led me to understand the most impactful aspect of this cultural exchange, which was the meaningful relationships I was able to build despite that small barrier of communication. Throughout my stay in Japan, I met so many amazing people. People I will never forget, and people I will be sure to meet again one day. I also gained knowledge of customs, traditions, and charming quirks of everyday Japanese life. It is hard to compress my experience into a single paper, but I hope I can portray my life-changing experience here.

Being a foreigner in a more rural area of Japan was a very charming experience for me. America is an incredibly diverse country, so seeing people of different backgrounds never drew attention from me. On the contrary, Japan is a mostly homogenous country. I thought it was incredibly sweet when my peers would express their curiosity about me. Sometimes girls would touch my hair, which is a bit textured and more on the wavy side. I would also get called cute often, but sometimes I was unsure if it was my appearance or my actions that were cute. But, nevertheless, 'kawaii' was a word I heard countless times!

Other than physical factors, they expressed curiosity about America. Did my school do something similar? Most of the time the answer would be no. Schools in Japan are different in many ways. For one, there is a humongous contrast in respect. Students quiet down as soon as they are told, and I have never seen a teacher scold a student for speaking or goofing off. Teachers are greeted politely in the halls, and we bow to them at the beginning and end of classes. Coaches are greeted with an even deeper bow, as I saw while I watched a few of the sports clubs. A few miscellaneous things I saw to be different was teeth-brushing after lunch, wearing slippers in school as shoes were not permitted, and teachers switching rather than the students moving to a different classroom.

When it came to social interactions with everyone, I found it easy to make friends. Clearly, I'm in a special situation, being an international student, but regardless everyone was incredibly sweet. I recall attending this winter festival in Kanoya, where I met with my host sister's classmates. They were extremely excited to see me, giving me hugs, asking for pictures, and being overall ecstatic to finally meet me. It was so wonderful! In fact, it was the same type of energy you would get from teenagers in America. Perhaps, I thought, teenagers everywhere will act this way when surrounded by friends. The excitement is truly one of a kind! Not only the attitudes, but the activities were incredibly similar. The mall was a hotspot for hanging out, just like American teenagers!

I think the most common image of Japanese people in the West is that they are shy people. This experience was not the only one I had where people were overjoyed and outwardly expressing it. So, honestly, I believe this image is false. Shy is not really the right word. I would say they place emphasis on respect. However, I did meet my fair share of peers that were in fact shy, but it's not in any way different from shy people you will meet anywhere else. I made many friends who were in fact a bit hesitant to speak to me, but we interacted in other ways! For example, one of the sweetest things that happened to me was when a girl drew me a picture of my favorite TV show character on a hand warmer! We did not speak, but I consider her my friend! Thinking back on all my friends, I can only long for the time we meet again. Especially those who I truly developed close bonds with. I remember on my final day of one of the schools, a peer cried for me. And of course, so did I. Eventually a few of us were in tears. However, apart from the sadness, it made me realize how incredible it was to be able to grow that close in such a short time. I had funny and cute interactions with everyone each day; there wasn't a single day I went without laughing.

Outside of school there was an entirely different world of meaningful experiences. I was able to wear a kimono and visit a shrine. It was such a beautiful time. I am so grateful to be able to learn about this beauty of Japan. My wonderful host sister guided me through each tradition to be done at the shrine and even gave me some background as to why. I purchased an Omamori for educational success, which I hope will serve me well!

I learned so much on my trip to Kagoshima, but the lesson I will never forget is to never be hesitant to try anything, never be hesitant to express curiosity, and never be hesitant to communicate, even if it seems difficult. And even if it seems as bizarre as raw chicken sashimi, which was really good, actually! My Japanese is not, and honestly may never, be perfect, but if I let that stop me from attempting, I would have never had the wonderful friends, knowledge, and precious memories that I have now, and that I will hold deep in my heart from now until the end of time.