

## The Japan Homestay Experience 2025

The two weeks I spent in Japan were truly an eye-opening and amazing experience. I was able to learn so much in the span of two weeks, I will be forever grateful. I never thought I'd be an exchange student, but if I could do it again, I would. Kagoshima is such a beautiful place, I'm so glad I went there, being it my first time in Japan. The culture, the scenery, and people are so wonderful! Every person I interacted with had such a positive impact on my life, I will forever cherish the relationships I built in such a short time. I came to Japan nervous thinking it would be hard to communicate; but once you get there and embrace the foreign environment, it all ends up okay! Even though I know Japanese, there were times where I did struggle. But a smile and a few hand gestures can convey it all and are a great lifesaver in a difficult situation. I truly believe there are no barriers that can prevent you from connecting with others.

Rural Japan is a gem—the neighborhoods, the tremendous amounts of rice farms, and architecture are all so beautifully interesting! Compared to America, the houses are quite close to each other, but despite this it is so quiet and peaceful. Furthermore, the streets are so pristine and safe—safe enough for kindergarteners to walk alone! As an American, I find that amazing. I was also given the chance to visit shrines. I went to Kirishima Jingu and Kagoshima Jingu, and it was such a great experience. I learned how to pay respect and learned about the shrine's history. I also wore a kimono with my two host sisters, I felt so beautiful. Since I came in December, it was almost New Years. My teacher from Kajiki High school gave me shimekazari and kagami mochi! But the highlight of my stay was seeing Sakurajima. The volcano is so beautiful! However, it's a little scary how it constantly emits smoke.

One thing that struck me the most is how everyone is so welcoming. Many Americans believe a lot of Japanese people are quiet and reserved, but what I experienced was quite the opposite. Almost everyone I interacted with was so excited and had such an outgoing personality. I am also beyond thankful to my host families who welcomed me and included me as if I was a part of their family. I can recall countless nights where we would just talk and share memories, culture, and funny moments. Because of their kindness, I was able to experience a Japanese family's dynamic and take part in their daily lives. Family time is also no different from America—with my first host family we played games like Mario Party and this monster naming card game. It was so much fun! A fond memory I have with my second host family was when my host mom cooked Larb. Which is a popular Lao dish! Everyone loved it and it was a wholesome moment. During my time I enjoyed numerous homecooked meals and even experienced a Japanese bath, which was very relaxing.

As the only American in an all-Japanese school, you become quite the celebrity. I received many stares, but that was to be expected. Everyone is just as excited to talk to you as you are. Surprisingly, my name travelled fast throughout the school and many students would shout my name or greet me. It was so cool! One thing I heard a lot about was how cute my piercings were. Students in Japan aren't allowed to having piercings, so seeing me with them must have been a surprise. Japanese schools are much stricter compared to American schools—students must wear their uniforms neatly, cannot have dyed hair, can't snack during class, and cannot use their phones on campus. Also in America, we use laptops in class and in Japan they use iPads. I wish I could use my iPad! During school many students would come up with many questions about America. It was so reassuring to hear their reciprocated curiosity about my home. It was also interesting to hear their perceptions about America. Especially about dating culture.

One thing I admire about students in Japan is their dedication. In high school, there are students who come early to finish homework or study. Moreover, students are so respectful. In Japan, it is respectful to bow and greet any adult. But in America, a simple hello would do. They also bow towards cars when they pass by.

One distinct thing I noticed was how people in Japan are very orderly and follow a routine. Whether it is at school or at home, there is always a routine. At school, students oversee certain tasks like cleaning the whiteboard, setting up the projector screen for the teacher, or writing the schedule for the next day. In Japan, most of the classroom responsibility falls on the students and in America it is the opposite. One big culture shock I had was at Kajiki Junior High school, where they ate lunches silently. It wasn't completely silent as there was music playing, but people barely spoke! Also, it was interesting seeing how the students are the ones who serve meals and everyone takes part in cleaning. There was a set cleaning time in both Junior High and High school. This explains why the schools in Japan are so clean! In America, we don't have cleaning time. What also astonished me was that laundry is done every day. It was a very different experience as in America it is common to wash your clothes once a week. Also, before any meal, it is custom to say “いただきます” and “ごちそうさまでした” which is something I wasn't used to but allowed me to show my gratitude for any meal in a respectful way.

My stay in Kagoshima left an everlasting impact on my life. I came back to America with a different outlook on the world, better culture awareness, and a heart full of love. I will never forget the people I met and grew close to in such a short amount of time. The knowledge I've gained and the memories I've created are like treasure, something I will cherish deeply. Words wouldn't be able to convey the amount of gratitude I have for these two amazing weeks, the people I met, and the people who made this happen.