

A new country and a new me.

Japan

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Naples Council on World Affairs has given me the opportunity and provided me with the support necessary to immerse myself in the culture and language of a country that is half way around the world. I would never have been able to become a part of the culture of Japan, at the age of seventeen, without the opportunity that my school, family, NCWA, and the Experiment in International Living Program have given me. I pledge to continue to share my story and provide information to my school and community all while sharing the invaluable lessons that I have learned throughout my journey.

I watched my home in Naples become smaller and smaller as we pulled out of the driveway; it was bittersweet, as I knew I would miss my family, yet the anticipation of this adventure had been fueling me to finish strong during the last few months of my Junior Year at BCHS. I met another student in Miami and together we flew to California, where we met with more experimenters and waited until the next morning for our flight. After boarding our plane, I had a Déjà vu moment, as I watched our country become tiny out of my window as if it was saying goodbye, be safe, and open your mind to new adventures. Engulfed by the clouds, we were ready to be immersed into a new and yet unknown culture. I was overwhelmed by a hurricane of emotions feeling excited, nervous, fearful, surprised, and ecstatic as I anxiously awaited the pilot to say that we landed.

Some may giggle while reading portions of my essay, but the reality is that in other countries some of the everyday tasks that we experience are executed in a very different manner than we are used to. I won't go into the details now, but let's just say the immediate use of (chopsticks) to eat noodles and the bathroom utilities (the commode)

were just a couple of the super surprises, that I wouldn't change for the world, but more than probably provided some amusement for the Japanese people. After an 11 hour flight, although physically exhausted, we surprisingly felt alive and full of energy as we entered the grand city of Tokyo with our expectations blown away. There were huge buildings with kanji inscribed in bright colored lights, unique restaurants such as soba, okonomiyaki and ramen shops at every corner, and multiple convenience stores called Conbinis everywhere you looked. We saw giant models of anime characters outside shops and pachinko parlors, visited Ueno Park with its many shrines, trees, and natural beauty, and watched as hundreds of people dressed in business suits, casual clothing, or kimonos spoke a language that was still very unfamiliar to me. This unique culture shock was the first of many exciting and memorable moments that I would experience as I continued my journey into the land of the rising sun.

As we searched through the city we finally found our hotel. The beds were comparable to sleeping bags, called futons, in a tatami mat style Japanese room. Each morning, for the next few days, Diego, Emma, and I began what we called the running crew. We jogged several miles throughout the city and parks visiting unique parts of this urban jungle. After a traditional style Japanese breakfast our group spent time in language orientation as we were taught basic Japanese words, how to order a ticket for the subway, and formal customs when entering shrines and temples. Our instructors, as well as some Japanese hosts from a local university, guided us around this enormous city visiting temples such as the Sensō-ji with its Kaminarimon, shops that featured all Hello Kitty based merchandise, and intriguing Japanese food parlors that sold octopus, also known as takoyaki. After spending days experiencing Japan and becoming accustomed to this lifestyle, we began a scavenger hunt that took us through the most famous areas in Tokyo such as Akihabara, the electric downtown of Tokyo and Shibuya station packed with many people and the Hachikō Statue. After finding and

experiencing shrines, temples, important shops, and multiple Tokyo experiences, we finished our time in this great city by eating local curry. Surprisingly enough this was the one time everyone used a spoon and fork instead of hashi, the hardest eating utensil known to man, otherwise known as chopsticks! After one final run and onigiri breakfast we said goodbye to Tokyo as we moved on to a new city where we would be learning more about the Japanese language.

After a train ride through the countryside, our group arrived at the Sapporo eki (train station) where our new instructors Moka and Suguru were waiting for us. The Eki was ginormous, having over 10 floors with clothing stores and hardware departments, train and subway stations, food shops, and other unique stores such as an arcade with a Pokémon center. Our group visited these locations and went wild playing various Japanese based rhythm games, such as Taiko no Tatsujin a drumming game, eating fish cakes as well as dango, and taking pictures in a Japanese photo booth known as a Purikura. After eating ramen, our excited and hilarious hosts showed us our hotel, language school building, and other popular areas in Sapporo such as gardens and town halls. The very next day we began our lessons in Japanese with our teacher Michiko sensei. In our Waku Waku class we were given lessons on customary Japanese phrases, basic grammar, sentence structure, and useful vocabulary that allowed us to progress our fluency in Japanese.

After a few days of instruction we practiced our new language skills by interviewing local Japanese people about their favorite foods and celebrities. Once we all felt confident in our speaking ability, we began our class's final test which was a scavenger hunt around the city where we searched for specific foods, attractions, and words on signs. We were quizzed by our teachers at hard to find locations and had conversations with the local people. Needless to say we all passed with flying colors and gained a huge boost in confidence, since we came from knowing a small amount of Japanese and now were able to converse with people,

ask questions, and read hiragana, katakana, and some kanji. Our group also had adventures of our own during this time celebrating the Fourth of July by shooting off Hanabi (fireworks). We sang Michael Jackson songs and the Japanese version of “Let it Go” in karaoke with Suguru. We also visited the home of college students while later climbing and enjoying the view from atop Mt. Moiwa. With our new knowledge, we left with our heads held high, about to experience what I consider the best part of this trip, the homestay experience.

As we drove to the cultural center everyone including the instructors were nervous! As I waited in line and heard my name called out I wasn't sure what to expect - then I saw my new homestay family, the Higakure family! My new family and I were a bit nervous to meet the other; however, after breaking the ice we began to laugh and talk about various similar interests, such as surfing. Later that day we went with another camper, Diego and his family, to a candle shop, an ice cream farm with actual rows of cows being milked, a Japanese festival where we watched performances and ate delicious sweets, a Japanese barbeque, and finally a takoyaki party with Ben (another awesome friend) and his family. This was just the first night and I couldn't have been happier spending time with my new friends and family.

Throughout the next few days our group spent time with each other in the morning making soba noodles and visiting museums. One day we dressed up in kimonos with swords and ate slide ramen, my new favorite dish. Another particularly eventful day was when we visited a local high school where we experienced the life of a normal Japanese person our age and where I took part in a Kendo (Japanese sword play) in an afterschool club. We also visited a local college with a rock band and made flowers for our tea ceremony later learning about the Ainu culture and partaking in a peculiar dance about catching birds. Then the Sayonara party occurred and as we smashed watermelons, sang Japanese songs, and played card games, sadly our trip had almost reached its end.

I will always carry the memories of my new family and I will never forget telling them that they will always have a place in my heart, I then climbed on the bus and watched again as another memorable experience slowly vanished in the distance. However, the best memory that I had occurred recently when on my birthday I received a package from Japan from my host family with a book of collages describing each day I spent with them. These photos of fireworks, Jin, my new brother, always climbing on my back, reading manga together, playing instruments, Mario kart, babanuki (a card game similar to old maid), and spending time each day in my family along with handwritten letters in Japanese made me laugh, cry, and smile to know that they put this much effort into an amazing present that I will always cherish. I love my new family of Jin, Rin, Moe, Hana, Osamu, and Maiko and I can't wait till my next visit to Japan or their visit to America to see them again.

After the tearful final goodbyes to our host families and guides, our group explored Japan's most famous onsen (hot spring) location Noboribetsu where we became accustomed to this foreign tradition. At first, public baths seemed to be unorthodox and abnormal to us; however, after becoming familiarized with other parts of Japanese culture our group adapted to this new environment and enjoyed a hot spring experience unlike anything one would find in Naples. We then proceeded to Tokyo by exploring areas of a previously erupted volcano, watching fireworks at one of Japan's finest hotels, and embarking on a day's length ferry ride across the Sea of Japan. As we reached Kyoto I was reminded of the times spent in Sapporo and Tokyo as this was an urbanized area, but surprisingly enough this tourist location had many people from all over the world exploring shrines, temples, and other Japanese attractions. In this exquisite city we marveled at sights such as the head temple of Rinzai Zen Buddhism Tenryū Shiseizen-ji, a Shinto shrine (head shrine of Inari) with towering orange gates known as Fushimi Inari Taisha, an area known as Monkey Mountain, Kyoto international Manga Museum, the hike to Kōzan-ji a temple featuring the first picture scrolls of Japan, and Kyoto Tower. As our group

reflected on our journey with new information about food, language, cultural customs, and respect, we made our way to where it all began in Tokyo.

I have found my passion for cultural awareness and have gained an even greater appreciation for our global communities throughout the exploration of the beautiful country of Japan. The culture is so unique and intriguing that I would recommend this destination as a top choice for any student's immersion experience. My journey through Japan helped me to gain a better appreciation of the traditional way of life, the unique respect of the environment, and the moral code that the people of this land abide by daily. As I reflect on my experiences I can now look at both of my homes in Japan and in the United States while appreciating the similarities and the unique individualities of each.