

# **Faculty of Engineering**

## **LIVING ABROAD IN JAPAN**

Tottori Exchange Program Apr 2003~Dec 2003  
Working Abroad in Japan Aug 2004 ~ Aug 2005

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## Chapter 1 Living in Tottori

I began my exchange program at Tottori University on April 6, 2003. On April 5 2006, upon my departure my plane got delayed due to a heavy snowstorm that hit the southern Ontario. The night before my departure I called my supervisor and informed him about the delay. On the next day, after 14 hours on the plane and many hours of waiting in the airports, I had finally reached the land of the rising sun.

When I was given the opportunity to study at Tottori University, I was absolutely thrilled, as I always wanted to visit this country and thought that it would be the only time I could visit there. After arriving the Kansai airport which is located on an artificial island of about five square kilometres in the sea near the city of Osaka, I got on the limousine bus to the Osaka bus terminal and took another long bus ride to the Tottori bus terminal where I met my Japanese supervisor and his wife.

I left the airport at noon and arrived the city of Tottori at 10 pm. Kimura-sensei, my supervisor, was waiting when my bus reached the terminal. I was surprised that he spoke English so fluently. I realized most of the Japanese people at the terminal and at the airport did not speak English and I felt somewhat relieved that I studied the language before coming to Japan. Even though I took the language courses at university, my listening and vocabularies were very limited. On the way to Tottori, when the bus suddenly stopped and everyone began to leave, I hurried and grabbed my luggage not realizing that the bus stopped for a washroom break. I did not understand the driver's announcement and did not know the proper word to ask if this was my destination. Traveling alone can be exciting but you sometimes feel helpless when you do not understand the language. Luckily, I arrived my dormitory safe and sound.

Tottori is a very small town. The prefecture is bounded by the Sea of East and is the seventh smallest prefecture in Japan. The city is famous for its sand dune. The dunes stretch along the coast east of Tottori City for 16 kilometres and extend up to 2 kilometres away from the coast. I was told that the “desert” has existed in the area for

over 100,000 years. When I visited the dunes, they offered all kinds of activities such as camel ride and donkey ride. I found it was rather expensive; one ride costs 1800 yen (\$20 CAN). The view of the ocean is the most spectacular when watching it from the sand hill during sunset and sunrise.

The campus in Tottori University is nothing like the ones in North America. The concrete buildings are old, much like the math building in the Waterloo campus, only smaller and dark inside. Sometimes the atmosphere gave me the creeps when I was alone in school late at night. The old wooden doors that squeak whenever the wind blows, spider webs by the windows and dark hallways with flickering light reminded me of a horror movie I once saw. They just began renovating the school when I was there. I was often the only one that stayed in school late at night since most of students would leave early to do other club activities. Japanese university life can be so much more exciting if you are involved in after-school extracurricular activities; they are usually run by students (called *sakuru*). This is one of the places where foreigners like me make friends with the Japanese students and possibly improve their Japanese skills. During my four-month stay, I was a member of the Adventure club (also known as the Outdoor club) and the Jazz band club. They are the major arenas of student energy outside of the classroom and I strongly recommend that every exchange student should take advantage of them.

I found classes at Tottori, by and large, to be quite relaxing compared to classes at Waterloo. They offered free Japanese language courses to all the exchange students at Tottori. Outside of class, I did a lot of extracurricular activities, which gave me another opportunity to use my Japanese, and to meet interesting and friendly Japanese students. Even though most of Japanese people are shy, university students are the most outgoing and fun people that you can easily make friends with. Professors invited me to dinner with their families, invited me to their Japanese golf game and showed us around the town. They really wanted us to have a good time and I did form a great relationship with professors outside the classroom. It is the most rewarding experience I've ever had. I loved the place, loved the people and loved the life.

## Chapter 2 Living in Kyoto

Kyoto is the old capital of Japan and is one of the most historic cities in the world. Having enjoyed the Japanese traditional life to the full, I felt I was extremely lucky to live in it. Bounded on three sides by mountains, as I was warned, the heat would become unbearable in summer but the city was a stunning beauty in autumn. During my three-month stay, I lived in a three bedroom apartment in *Hanazono*, an inner suburb near the western mountains, *Arashiyama*.

The bus that left Tottori before the sunrise arrived Kyoto station just before the noon. From the bus station, I took a cab to the company where I was greeted by my supervisor who was also the Quality Management manager at the company. We often went to bars and talked about any problems I have had with living in Kyoto, he would give me thoughtful advice. We could talk for hours but I had to catch the last train to get home. He helped me move in and out of my apartment and showed me around the town by taking me to the great temples. He invited the coworkers and me to his barbeque party. I had a great time in Kyoto.

Many Japanese are shy of foreigners, not without good reason. It seemed to me as if their life follows an orderly pattern supported by a thousand rules of etiquette, respect language and a confusion of social traditions beyond the foreigner's grasp. I was brought to the company dormitory that I was to share with two other coworkers for the next three months. To my disappointment, during the time I lived with them, I never really got to talk or hang out with my roommates. I wasn't surprised that they would rather spend time alone, eat meals and watch TV in their rooms. I became accustomed to their introverted lifestyle and it didn't strike me as odd.

Kyoto has the second most prestigious national university and twenty private universities. Where I lived was close to the Japan's largest private university called *Ritsumeikan*. Whenever it was too hot to stay inside on summer days, I took a stroll on campus and

enjoyed its scholastic atmosphere. I sat on a bench near the library building and watched the students hasten as they tried to get to classes on time. It made me miss being a student.

Even for the Japanese, learning to read and write the Japanese language with a minimum of 2000 Chinese characters takes up a good deal of their school years. Being able to read Chinese characters is one of the biggest challenges any foreigner faces when they first come to Japan. The most essential skill you need to live in Japan is not how well you speak the language; it all comes down to how well you can read the Chinese characters. You could put salt instead of sugar in your favorite dish if you can't distinguish the Chinese characters for salt and sugar – that's how I ruined my dinner on numerous occasions.

I left my bike in Tottori before leaving the place so the only transportation I depended on in Kyoto was the city bus. I took the bus to work or to shop. I always admired the punctuality and reliability of their bus service when the traffic in the city could be so unexpected. Kyoto has undoubtedly the most reliable bus system in the entire country, possibly in the world.

Unlike many cities in Japan, Kyoto has a very orderly city plan based on streets that intersect at right angles. Kyoto was established in 794 after the Emperor Kammu moved the capital from Nara. From where I lived in Kyoto, I was in one block away from a busy shopping street faced with every urban convenience and ten minutes away from one of the most famous temples, *kinkakuji*. It was a great and convenient place to live in.

The Kiyomizu-dera is one of the oldest temples in Kyoto and was established six years after Emperor Kammu decided to move his capital to Kyoto. It is one of my favourite temples in Japan and one of the must-see temples on a tourist's list. It begins as a traditional Japanese street and ends in a short flight of steps which leads into Shannen-zaka. In turn, Sannen-zaka also ends in a steeper set of steps which leads up to Kiyomizu-zaka. Walking uphill from here, you can find a crowded street full of tourist shops that sell everything from geisha hair ornaments to traditional ironmongery, geisha quarters

and traditional food. Once the top of the hill is reached, the city view is breathtaking and the temple itself is magnificent. This is a fountainhead of Japanese culture and it is a miracle that so much remains after all those years.

I always wondered what exactly goes on in Buddhist temples and monasteries, so open yet so enclosed. For most of the temples I visited, they share something in common. Within the grounds of these large temples the main temple buildings occupy the center of the site and a number of semi-independent sub-temples surround the main temple. The sub-temples vary in size and prosperity, some owning great works of art. There is usually at least one garden around the sub-temple. Every temple has its own characteristics and history, but I realized that after seeing so many temples, it's impossible to remember all but only a few, the great ones.

Within a 45-minute train ride from the Kyoto station, there is the third largest city, *Osaka*. Despite the contiguity of the two cities, the extreme reserve of Kyoto people and the openness of Osaka people are notorious among the Japanese people. Osaka is largely a concrete city with a port handling 40 per cent of Japan's export trade. I like its outgoing people and its lavish food but I prefer Kyoto's version of such tourist fun.

What I miss the most about Kyoto is its traditional appearance, conservative people and the natural perseverance. Sometimes I refused to take the bus and walked around the neighborhood, took small streets instead of the busy shopping streets and tried to gasp every detail of the Japanese life and surrounding. There are so many hidden treasures in Kyoto such as traditional gardens, shrines and buildings that most visitors who merely wander around the great temple complexes would miss out. Behind those great temples, there are small paths leading to where one discovers the mysterious and uncontaminated Japanese life. I felt lucky that I got to live in this great city.

## Chapter 3 Living in Tokyo

I spent most of the time in Kanagawa prefecture working as a software developer for speech recognition tools at a Japanese company. I lived in a place called Atsugi-shi in Kanagawa-ken located 45-minute train ride to the southwest of Shinjuku, Tokyo. My coworkers and I often went to Shibuya and Roppongi on weekends for social activities and it costs about 800 yen (\$10 CAN) for one-way train ride.

Tokyo is the ultimate consumer city, itself producing little significant modern art, intellectual or literary life and no great modern theatre; and with a social scene that is exceptionally provincial. It is difficult to master Tokyo's sprawling geography, quite the contrast to the orderliness of the Kyoto city. The best practical way to getting to know the city is by reading the subway map and knowing which subway gets you to the place you want to go. I was told about the gruesome stories of the Tokyo rush hour. On one September day, there was an accident in one of the subway lines putting every Tokyo subway to halt and leaving tens of thousands people behind their schedules. When such subway disaster occurs in Tokyo, the outcome can be devastating. I've never seen so many people in my life and to the point where I couldn't see my own feet. When the subway was back on running, I was squeezed and pushed into the carriage till I was literally lifted in the air. I was so glad I got home in one piece.

Tokyo is the political, economic, commercial, transportation, educational, cultural and psychological center of Japan and almost all major corporations have their headquarters in Tokyo. Since I was not used to living in urban areas, it was a bit overwhelming at first. Once I understood how the metropolis was organized and linked to the transportation system, it wasn't as confusing as I thought. This is where you see the modern side of Japan and meet lots of foreigners who are living in Japan. On Sundays, I was often awakened by a loud commotion. A high-decibel speaker that came from a recycling truck that traversed the neighborhood was blasting my apartment with its endless call "Got any broken TVs or video decks? We'll take them off your hands for free whether they play or not". In some evenings, you hear a quiet, haunting tone and realize it's the revolving



ramen truck, a temping midnight snack. You also hear the school bells and children's chatting noise on their way home from school. When I came back in Canada, what I missed the most about Japan is the public noise and its liveliness. For some reasons, it gave me the comfort and the feeling of safeness.

As a working person, I have different view and perspective on things about Japan. Even though the employment in Japan has improved markedly in the past decade, college graduates are still having a hard time landing jobs. Newspapers would report on a growing number of Japanese youth who choose to become *freeters* (part-time workers). They stay up all night, sleep during the day, and live off one or more part-time jobs – a life far removed from the white-collar workers. A lot of my friends started working as a part-time as soon as they got into college and a number of people I met work as *freeters* even after they graduate universities. This seemed like an interesting phenomenon that you wouldn't expect to happen in Japan.

I loved living in Tokyo for its people and entertainment. I took the train to Tokyo on Sunday mornings, sat on a table at a nice French café, sipping my morning coffee and watched people go by. It is interesting to watch people and try to guess where they are going and what they are up to. It's not something you would do in Tottori when the only person in the city is you. Shopping is also very fun in this city. Even though you don't expect much of the traditional side of Japan in Tokyo, the city has its own beauty and energy.

## Chapter 4. The Rules

When foreigners visit Japan the first time, they often get frustrated with the culture difference. At first, I had a difficult time trying to read people's minds because the words are left unsaid. They hardly ever say 'No' and instead, they would say it is 'difficult'. They said I was too "*hakkiri*" (meaning: straight-forward) and usually I got away with being too *hakkiri* because I am a foreigner. No matter that you do always be polite. This is one mandate that every person in this land must follow. Japan is the most polite country in the world and has myriad rules of behavior grounded in this principle. Here are some of the rules I've learned while living in Japan.

- Do not eat food while walking down the street. Ever since I came to Japan, I broke this rule almost every day till someone came up and told me I wasn't supposed to. Now I know why those people were staring at me when I was munching a bag of chips on the street.
- Do not blow your nose in public. Sniffing is recommended.
- Do slurp your noodles (more like inhaled). This is probably the only country in the world that encourages you to slurp your noodles.
- Do give a slight bow upon meeting someone; a lower bow if they are your elder or boss. Sometime I saw people giving bows to people who they just met in an elevator. Japan is a very polite country.
- Don't wear shoes or slippers on *tatami* mats or you will cause heart failure.
- Don't give anyone four (4) of anything, because the word for 4 sounds like the word for death: *shi*
- Say *sumimasen* after everything you say. This word is an all-purpose polite word meaning everything from excuse me to thank you to hello.
- Don't smile in formal pictures.
- Always give your seat up for children on trains.
- Don't stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice. This is only done at funerals as an invitation to the dead.
- Don't wear shorts to temples or shrines; wear skirts or long pants to be respectful.

- When sitting on the floor, do not point your feet at anyone. It is considered insulting.
- When visiting in a Japanese home, bring a small gift such as flowers, chocolate, or a present from home.
- Never be direct (*hakkiri*). Listen to what is not said.
- Wash before you get into the tub.
- Don't laugh with your mouth open.
- Do wear a mask when you have a cold or flu.
- Don't climb Mt. Fuji!!!

## Chapter 5. Pictures

Here are some pictures I took in Kyoto and various places.



















