

GENE 303

Tottori Exchange Survival Guide

My Eight Months in Tottori, Japan

Prepared by:

Lily Chai

January 15, 2007

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

I learned about Tottori Exchange in my 1A semester. Japanese was my second language in high school so I was interested in continuing my studies in the language, as well, I thought it would be a great experience to attend school for a short period of time in the world-leading country in electronics, thus I looked into exchange opportunities in Japan. I found that Tottori Exchange Program worked well with my schedule and that this program included a study and a work term; hence, I was determined to go to Tottori in my third year.

I was one of the four people who applied and were accepted for the exchange in 2006. Anna Bao and I were from Electrical Engineering, and Carmen Lai and Zhao Liu were from Systems Design. In our 2B study term the exchange program coordinator Professor Hipel held a few administrative meetings, but these meetings did not provide us with much information regarding the place and the school.

My exchange was for eight months, from April to early December, which meant that my 2B work term was shortened by a month; therefore, I self-arranged a co-op job in Taiwan for Winter 2006. I had to apply for visa with my Canadian passport through Japanese embassy in Taiwan, whereas Anna was in charge of applying for visa for the three of them. Other than the visa, everything else was done electronically through the University of Waterloo.

The four of us arranged our own way to travel from Kansai International Airport (関西国際空港 kansai kokusai kūkou) in Osaka (大阪 Ōsaka) to Tottori University (鳥取大学) located in Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture (鳥取県鳥取市 Tottori-ken Tottori-shi). I flew from Taiwan and met up with the others in the airport, and a student of the exchange program coordinator from Tottori University came to pick us up. We took the highway bus; it was a three and a half hours of winding road trip from Osaka to Tottori.

2 Living in Tottori

2.1 Housing

Prior to departure I knew I would be living in the school dormitory for international students, also known as the “International House” (国際交流会館 kokusai kouryū kaikan). I found some descriptions and pictures online about the place, but had no idea which kind of room I would be placed in and how to apply for residence. Upon arrival we were told by Professor Hosoi, the exchange program coordinator from Tottori University, that application for residence had been submitted and we could move in immediately; since there were three girls and one guy in the group, we were placed in single rooms on different floors. Information and pictures of the International House can be found in Tottori University International Students Homepage provided in Appendix A.

My room had a bed, a cabinet, a closet, a desk, and... a toilet. I was surprised to see a very small toilet inside my room, considering how the room was no larger than the smallest room in UWP (University of Waterloo dormitory). The sink was attached to the top of the toilet; when the toilet is flushed, water comes out from the sink above for washing hands. It seemed rather awkward at first, but after living in the International House for eight months I personally felt that this was the best design in the dormitory because a personal toilet was highly convenient (and of course, clean).

I had an awful experience with the mattress there. Although I received a residence guide and all the beddings I needed, from a pillow to a blanket, I did not pickup the importance of “futon” (布団) until July. I had no idea what a futon was when I read it on the residence guide, and the answer I got from asking around was that a futon is equivalent to a bed sheet. In the first three months I slept directly on the mattress and I could feel the springs inside the mattress hurting my back, but I tended to forget about this in the morning. Finally in July I got the manager of the International House to check my

mattress, and that was when I found out the quilt-looking bedding I received when I first moved in was actually a futon: a soft, thin mattress to be placed over the hard mattress.

I did not like the dormitory much, partly because of the mattress although it was entirely my fault, but also because of the greasy kitchen and dirty shower rooms that were shared by ten people on the floor. Although every week there was one person on the floor in charge of cleaning the common area and doing recycling, the floor was still quite dirty in my opinion. In addition, the walls in my room were so disgusting that I had to put up many posters to cover them up.

On the other hand, there were still some good aspects about the International House. First of all, the rent was cheap. The water and electricity bill of the common area split among ten residents on the floor plus my room rent turned out to be only 7,000 to 10,000 yen per month (approximately \$63 to \$91 CAD). Also included in this cost were supplies such as dishwashing liquid, paper towels, toilet papers and laundry soap. Electricity bills for my room were also quite cheap, ranging from 300 yen to 800 yen a month (approximately \$3 to \$8 CAD). Another advantage of living in the International House was that I could easily meet and make friends with exchange students from all over the world.

2.2 Transportation

Travelling near the university was done mostly on bicycle. There were local trains, but they came only once every hour and there were only three stations in Tottori City; however, to get to other major cities in Tottori Prefecture, namely Kurayoshi (倉吉) and Yonago (米子), I had to take the train. The station closest to the university and the International House was Tottori-Daigaku Mae Station (鳥取大学前駅), and down the street from this station were a lot of restaurants and supermarkets; hence, there was no need for me to travel all the way to downtown. There were also buses, but since they were highly inconvenient and costly (they cost the same as, if not more than trains), I never bothered hopping on one during my eight months there.

Every April, the International Plaza (国際交流プラザkokusai kouryū puraza) holds a bike lottery for newly-arrived foreign students. There are usually around 20 refurbished bikes in very good conditions donated by the City of Tottori. I was very lucky to win a bike because this year there were over 30 applicants but only 22 bikes; however, in the end everyone got a bike one way or another.

2.3 Life

Life in Tottori was relaxing, but could be quite boring at times. Despite being one of the biggest cities in Tottori Prefecture, Tottori City was still quite rural. Stores in downtown Tottori (the area around Tottori Station 鳥取駅) were closed on weekends, and all stores in general closed around 8 pm. Tottori was definitely not a shopping district, but there were enough shops to buy everyday necessities. I visited three places most often: Kita-Jusco department store (Jusco鳥取北店), 100-yen shops and supermarkets.

There were a few clothing stores near Kita-Jusco, and the department store was open from 9 am to 11 pm everyday; therefore, it was the place to go when I needed a break from studying. It was only a 15 to 20-minute bike ride from the International House to Kita-Jusco. Half way between the International House and Kita-Jusco there was a 100-yen store (百円館 hyaku-en kan). 100-yen stores in Japan had a wider variety of goods than dollar stores in Canada and the quality of goods was decent. Just about anything I needed could be found in the 100-yen store.

Supermarkets were another personal favourite. There were four supermarkets close to the university: Koyama-store (湖山ストア), S-Mart (エスマート), Sun Mart (サンマート) and Marui (マルイ). These supermarkets delivered flyers to the International House about twice a week; therefore, I developed a habit of checking flyers before I decided which store to buy my groceries from.

Because the kitchen in the International House was very dirty and I did not have any kitchenware, I ate out everyday. A set meal (定食 teishoku) cost about 600 to 1,000 yen (\$6 to \$9 CAD) but the a lunch box (弁当 bento) at any supermarket, which had almost identical food as set meals in restaurants except that the food was cold, cost only about 200 to 400 yen after it went on sale everyday around 6:30 pm; therefore, on days when I ate alone I usually bought bento boxes.

I also spent a lot of time in my laboratory (a laboratory is similar to a study room for fourth year undergraduates and graduate students with the same specialization to study together everyday) in the university for several reasons. My laboratory was the only place I could access the internet to surf the web or call home (calling out from cell phones was terribly expensive in Japan). My laboratory also had a tiny kitchen I could use to prepare light meals. Moreover, I made a lot of friends in the laboratory. They studied in the laboratory almost everyday; therefore, I could socialize with them when I felt bored. This was a great way to spend my weekends, talking to friends and improving my Japanese.

On other weekends, I planned one-day trips to sightseeing areas in the prefecture. It rained a lot in Tottori; therefore, I spent the occasional sunny weekends in the summer to climb mountains (大山 Daisen, the highest mountain in 中国 Chūgoku area, and 三徳山 Mitokusan) and lay on the beach (賀露 Karo and 白兔海岸 Hakuto kaigan). I also visited the famous sand dune (鳥取砂丘 Tottori sakyū). These places were rather hard to travel to by public transportation, but luckily I knew a few foreign students who kindly drove me to these places. I was surprised by the number of Japanese students in Tottori who had never been to any of these local sightseeing areas yet not at all interested in going.



not found

Figure 1. Daisen (大山) in June

3 Studying in Tottori

3.1 Laboratory

On our first day of school we were introduced to professors in Social Systems Engineering Department in the morning and to all engineering students at a welcome party that night. There were six laboratories in Social Systems Engineering, of which two had exchange students already; therefore, the four of us from Waterloo had a draw for the remaining four laboratories. I ended up in Urban Planning Laboratory (都市計画研究室 toshi-keikaku kenkyūshitsu) led by Professor Okuyama (奥山先生) and Assistance Professor Koike (小池先生). From conversations with Anna, Carmen and Zhao, I believe my laboratory was the most friendly and interesting of the four.

There were eleven graduate students and ten fourth year undergraduates in my laboratory. I had my own desk among the fourth year students. People in the laboratory welcomed me and enjoyed talking to me, unlike some of the other students I met in my lectures. The positive side about my laboratory members was that they were close to each other and cooperated well in the group, but the down side was that they lacked initiatives to do anything else outside of school work. I saw a lot of them studying in the laboratory overnight and on weekends, but they claimed that they did not actually have that much work and were only pretending to be busy in front of their professors.

During my stay in Tottori I unintentionally started up a number of lab events, most of them stemmed from my random ideas. When I saw or heard something interesting, for example shaved ice (カキ氷 kakigōri, a popular Japanese dessert) and squid-fishing (イカ釣り ikatsuri), I usually asked around to see if anyone else was also interested. People in my laboratory would then plan out a very well-organized event for the activity I found. We went squid-fishing and had a squid party, a barbeque by the beach, and a shaved ice hunt in the summer; and went on an autumn leaves sightseeing tour to Kyoto (京都紅葉 Kyouto kouyou) in November, and went to Kobe Luminarie (神戸ルミナリエ, a Christmas event to remember the dead in the great Hanshin Earthquake in 1996) in December. Everyone in the laboratory enjoyed these events, and these were definitely the most memorable parts of my exchange.



not found

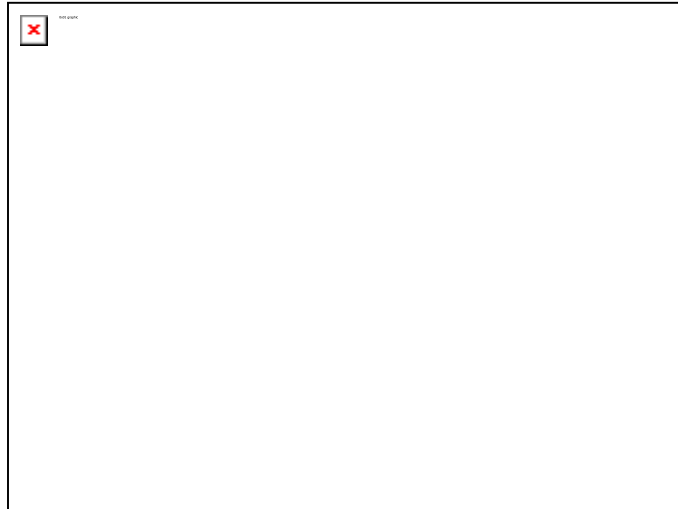


Figure 2. Left: Lab barbeque at Karo (賀露) Beach; right: squid-fishing at Uradome (浦富) in July.

3.2 Courses

Although I was an exchange student of Social Systems Engineering, my courses were Electrical Engineering courses that were the closest match available to Waterloo curriculum. During the application process I accessed the Undergraduate Calendar in Tottori University's website and picked out several courses that were approved by my exchange coordinator in ECE, but professor Hosoi overlooked that section of our application and was unaware that Anna and I were from Electrical Engineering. He contacted professors in Electrical Engineering immediately and put us in the right courses within a day, but we still got different courses than those approved by our ECE coordinator.

The courses in Tottori University were not as intense as those in Waterloo, and I would say this was the least satisfying part of my exchange. I was expecting some self-studying, but I ended up having to cover all my courses on my own. My professors were there to help, but I had difficulties communicating with them and conveying the idea that University of Waterloo teaches these courses in much greater depth and focuses on practicality.

Professors seldom talked about the practical use of concepts and equations taught in class, and students never asked. There was little to no interaction between professors and students in class, and sometimes it seemed to me that professors lacked enthusiasm in teaching and students were not there to learn. There were no assignments to do outside of

class as well, and neither did these courses have lab experiments. Exams were also as simple and abstract as examples in lectures. Overall, lectures were easy in Tottori and the study environment was unpleasant.

As an extra-curricular activity, I asked Professor Hosoi to enrol me in the third year Electrical Engineering lab course. Their 3A lab course consisted of labs from second-year courses in ECE, but conducted in a different fashion. The lab session was every Tuesday afternoon from 1:00 pm to 5:40 pm, and there were a total of six themes (for example, semiconductor devices and integrated circuits) for the twelve weeks of the semester. Each theme was supervised by a TA and a professor, who further divided the theme into two sections. The class was divided into six groups of twelve and rotated through the themes, and each group was further split into two groups of six for each section of a theme; therefore, it was basically one instructor looking after six students at a time. I liked this system, and gained a better understanding of course materials I learned in my second year in Waterloo.

An interesting phenomenon I noticed was that students in my classes were not very welcoming, or more precisely, they were “scared” of talking to Anna and I to the point that no matter where we sat there was always a ring around us where no one else would sit. Before the semester ended we asked one of our classmates who came to Waterloo for a three-week language program two years ago thus had interacted with non-Japanese before, why did people in our class ignored us, and his reply was that no one wanted to stand out. Talking to Anna and I would make them stand out in class because we were the only two girls in class, and were the only foreigners as well.

4 Working in Tottori

In the later half of my exchange I worked at a software-developing company called Lexer Research Inc. in Tottori. This company developed computer simulators for manufacturing plants, and had two offices, the Tottori head office and a branch in Tokyo. Lexer Research was a small company; hence the CEO of the company was also my manager. I talked to my manager in English but communicated with other coworkers in Japanese.

I was told by Professor Hosoi in June that all four Waterloo exchange students would be working in another city in Japan, as he believed that there were better cities in Japan than Tottori, but in the end Anna and I stayed in Tottori City. I was surprised to hear that

Lexer Research was only 15 minutes by bike down the road from the university (only one block south of Kita-Jusco).

The stereotypical image of a very strict and uptight Japanese company did not apply to the place I worked at. This company was stricter than where I worked before in Canada, but not by much: every morning there was a briefing on our goals and tasks of the day, and every week we needed to write a report on our weekly achievements. But other than that, I found my work and work environment to be not much different from past co-op terms.

There were three things I found quite different and interesting. First was that everyone was expected to do cleaning every Monday morning. Everyone was assigned a specific task: vacuum the carpet, sweep the staircases, clean up the washroom, and even wiping everyone's table top. In Canada, people are in charge of the cleanliness of their own workstation, but in Lexer Research everyone is in charge of the entire work area.

Secondly, people worked until very late although they were not paid overtime. Canadians prefer leaving work on-time so that they can engage in personal activities or spend time with their families, but Japanese people place work in higher priority than anything else. One of my coworkers had a new-born daughter during the time I was there, but he still spent hours in the company after work rather than spending time with his wife and child.

Lastly, my coworkers did not interact with one another much. I did not usually hear people talk in the company, and when people did talk it was always work-related. Even during lunch time people ate at their desks by themselves. For such a small company, I was expecting people to socialize more and know each other better.

There were both pros and cons for staying in Tottori for the work term: the up side was that I could easily meet my friends from school thus did not feel lonely, but the down side was that I did not maximize my exchange experience because I stayed in the same area in town for eight months. However, after listening to Anna, Zhao and Carmen's co-op experience, I was glad I worked at Lexer Research in Tottori.

5 Travelling in Japan

I had a lot of time to travel during my eight months in Japan, but I did not travel as much as I would like to because travelling in Japan was very expensive. I went to

Kagawa (香川) and Naruto (鳴門) in Shikoku (四国) during the golden week (a one-week holiday at the beginning of May) with Tottori students who were coming to Waterloo for their exchange; took the opportunity to go to Matsue (松江) when my laboratory members attended a seminar there; and visited my high school friend who was completing her exchange in Osaka (大阪) in June. Other than that I only travelled within Tottori Prefecture in the first four months as I was expecting a work term elsewhere.

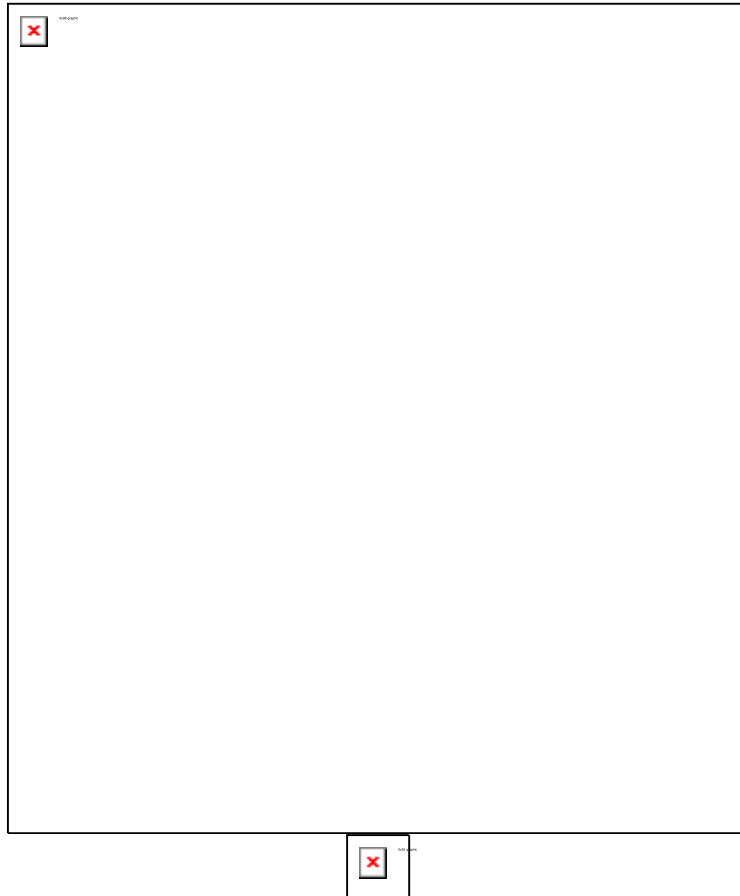


Figure 3. Matsue (松江) in June.

I was planning to do some travelling with my sister in August, but unfortunately I had to fly home to Vancouver for family reasons. I started to travel a lot in mid-October when I realized that I only had two months left in Japan. I first planned a one-day trip to Okayama (岡山) and Himeji (姫路) to see the famous castles, and then in mid-November I went to Kyoto (京都) with people in my laboratory. The week after that I toured Nagasaki (長崎) and Fukuoka (福岡) with a Japanese friend of mine living in Kyūshū (九州). Three days before I left Tottori, I also went to see the famous Kobe Luminarie (神戸ルミナリエ) with four others from my laboratory, and I spent my last week in

Japan visiting friends in Tokyo (東京), Nagoya (名古屋), Shizuoka (静岡) and Hamamatsu (浜松).



not found



not open

Figure 4. Left: Kyo-bento (京弁当, Kyoto's famous food); right: Kyoto (京都) trip with my laboratory members in November.



not open



Page 1 of 1

Figure 5. Left: Nagasaki Peace Memorial Park (長崎平和公園 Nagasaki heiwa-kouen); right: Fuji Mountain (富士山 Fuji-san) viewed from Shizuoka City (静岡市).

To cut down on travelling expense, I took highway buses to get from one city to another because that was the cheapest way. When possible I always took the overnight bus to save both money and time. Accommodations can be quite cheap in Japan, depending on which kind of hotel you choose to stay at. The traditional tatami-room inns (旅館ryoukan) and capsule hotels are the cheapest, but may not be as safe and clean as the more expensive hotels. I had a traumatizing experience finding a hotel in Nagoya: I found a “hotel” online with a decent price and a good customer's evaluation, but it turned out to be a capsule hotel which I did not feel comfortable staying at; therefore, my friend and I walked for hours trying to look for a business hotel. Prior reservation is necessary to guarantee room availability in business hotels because they are low-cost and located in convenient areas for businessmen, but in my opinion they are not all that cheap (around 6000 to 9000 yen, or \$54 to \$81 CAD, per person per night), considering the cost of ryoukan is half of that.

Luggage was another problem when I travelled in Japan in my last week. At first I carried my suitcases with me, but I found out later that sending my luggage via “express home delivery” (宅急便takkyūbin) is cheap and convenient. I sent my two large suitcases from Shizuoka to Narita Airport one day before my flight for a cost of only \$35 CAD. This saved me a lot of hassle from making a transfer with my luggage at the busy Tokyo Station.

6 Conclusion

I am glad I jumped at the opportunity to study and work in Japan for eight months in my third year undergraduate. In the beginning it was quite frustrating because a lot of paper work was involved in everything: applying for my “Alien Status Card”, enrolling in proper courses, applying for a bank account, wiring money from overseas, signing up for a cell phone, and not knowing enough of the language just made the situation worse. But by the end of my exchange I learned enough of the culture and the language to appreciate my stay in Japan.



Page 1 of 1

Figure 6. Exchange students from Waterloo: (from left to right) Zhao, me, Anna, and Carmen.

I also have a different perspective of the Japanese culture now. Japanese people are not as uptight as their stereotypical image. In many ways I found the Japanese culture to be quite ironic, for example, Japanese people do not wear red-color shirts because that makes them stand out, but they have big and sparkling accessories from head to toe; and they are polite people but they are not very friendly to pedestrians and cyclists when they drive. As ironic as the culture, my eight-month stay there did not seem fun until I looked back after I left the place.



Page 1 of 1

Figure 7. Everyone in my lab came to the airport to see me off on my last day.

I have been living on my own since I started university, but never once had I felt homesick until I went on this exchange. After all, living alone in a different part of the same country is much easier than living alone in an unfamiliar country. During my eight months in Tottori, I really missed my family, my friends, as well as the variety and freedom I enjoyed in Canada. It is interesting how through this exchange program I not only experienced another culture but also gained a greater appreciation for my homeland and its heterogeneous society. **Appendix A: Useful Websites**

1 Tottori University International Students Homepage (鳥取大学国際交流課)

<http://www.is.zim.tottori-u.ac.jp/ciatu/jpn/index.htm>

- This site contains information on events and housing.

2 JR West (JR西日本)

<http://www.jr-odekake.net/>

- Train schedules and information are available in this website.

3 Nihon Kotsu highway bus (日本交通高速バス)

<http://www.nihonkotsu.co.jp/bus/highway/index.html>

- Schedules and information on highway buses to and from Tottori are available in this website.

4 Rakuten Travel (楽天トラベル)

<http://travel.rakuten.co.jp/>

- A convenient website to search and reserve hotels online.