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University of Waterloo – Tottori University

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1

Introduction

From April 2004 to December 2004, I participated in the Japanese international exchange program between the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada and Tottori University, Tottori, Japan. The exchange consisted of a study term as well as a work term for the duration of eight months abroad.

I am currently in my last term of the Systems Design Engineering program and with a year passed since returning from my exchange I have been able to digest my experience abroad thoroughly and finally put to paper a detailed description of the administrative process, the study environment, the work culture, as well as the travel opportunities of the Japanese exchange. The purpose of this report is to provide future students who are considering an exchange to Japan with invaluable prior knowledge about the international exchange program.

The report is divided into five sections. The first section provides information about the country of Japan and personal experiences in observing the implications of its geography, history, society, religion and culture as a foreigner living in Japan. The next section is a step-by-step process of how to apply for the exchange which spans from first talking to the exchange coordinator to booking the 18-hour flight across the Pacific. The third and fourth sections are exposés of the student life at a Japanese university and work life at a Japanese company, respectively. Finally, the last section is a chronicle of my travels during the summer and Christmas holidays.

2

Land of the Rising Sun

2.1 Geography

Japan is located 38 degrees north of the equator and 138 degrees east of the Greenwich meridian. From north to south, it spans a considerable length from its northernmost point in Hokkaido (45°N) to its southernmost point in the islands of Okinawa (20°N) which are at approximately the same latitudes as Montreal and Cuba, respectively.

Japan is bordered by the Sea of Japan to the northwest, the East China Sea to the southwest, the Philippine Sea to the south and the Pacific Ocean to the east. Japan consists of 4 main islands, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, as well as 7000 smaller islands altogether. The land area of Japan is approximately equal to that of Germany.

Japan is divided into 8 districts and 47 administrative areas which are called prefectures. The districts are simply regional divisions, whereas the administrative areas are divisions of sub-national governing bodies. The different types of prefectures are distinguished only by name, but serve no administrative difference. Tokyo is referred to as a *to*, as it is the capital of Japan. Osaka and Kyoto are both *fu* (urban) prefectures. All other prefectures are considered *ken*. Tottori-*ken* is the smallest prefecture in Japan as it contains the smallest population.

The time difference between Toronto and Japan is 14 hours during the months of daylight savings time and 13 hours otherwise.

The population of Japan is approximately 127 million, the 10th largest in the world (2005).

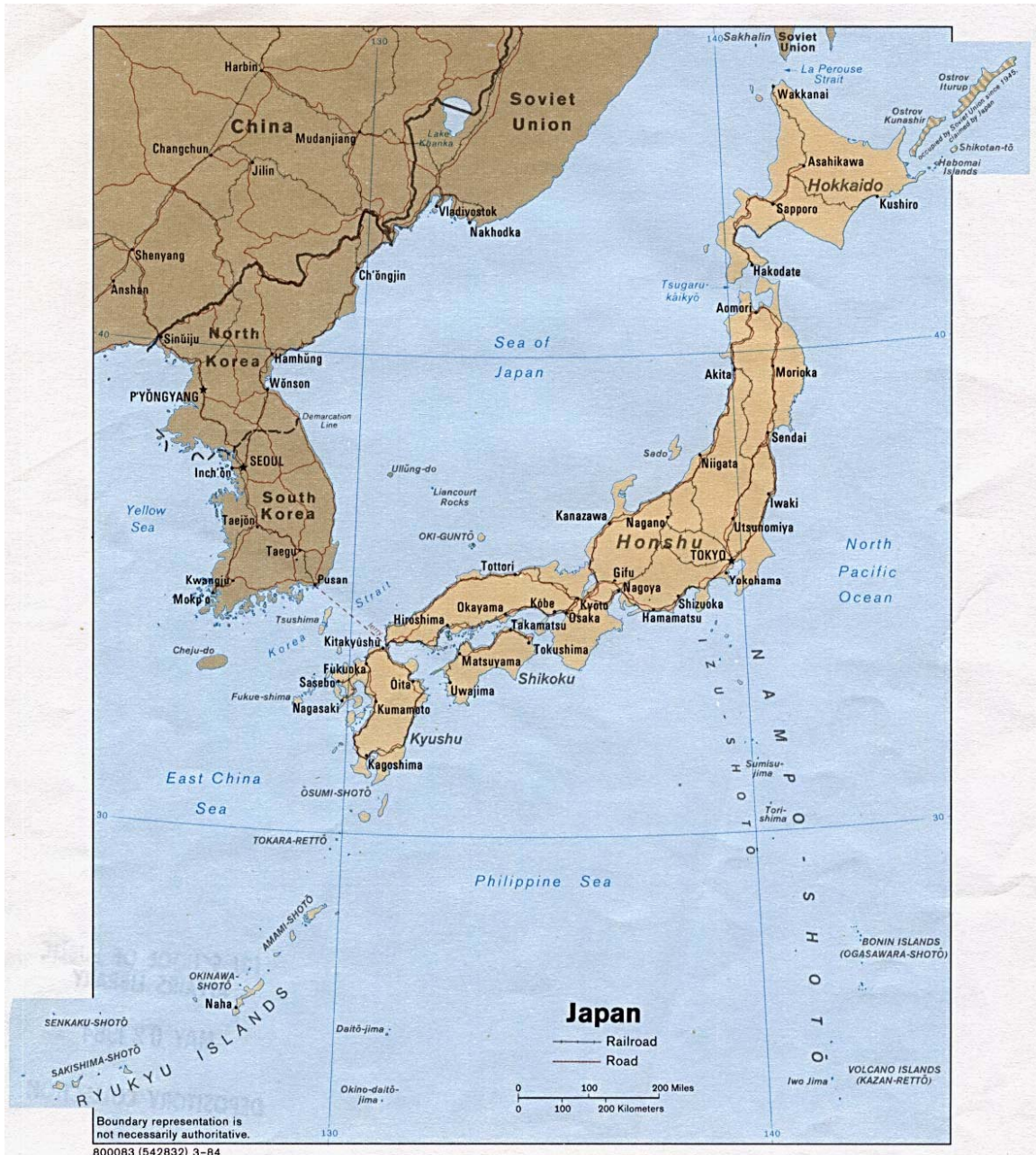


Figure 1: Map of Japan. [1]

2.2 History

Japan's history is full of political and cultural development. Japan has been closely tied to China and Korea of course due to their geographical proximity. Japan sent many academics to China to learn and return with valuable teachings. Japan did not have a native writing system and imported *kanji* (character writing system) from China. However, Chinese was not

known to many Japanese people and Japanese is distinctively different from Chinese as they are not even in the same language family. The Chinese style of writing was adapted to the Japanese language and to make it easier for Japanese to learn and understand, *manyogana*, a set of Chinese characters that indicated the pronunciation of *kanji* characters was developed. From *manyogana* emerged *hiragana*, a set of characters that represent syllables of the Japanese language invented in the Heian period (794-1191 AD) and used primarily only by women at that time. *Katakana*, also a syllabic alphabet derived from Chinese characters was developed and mainly used for foreign words.

Three important historical military leaders – Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu – lived during the Sengoku period (1467-1615), a period marked by civil war in Japan, and are characterized each by haiku poems.

Table 1: Haiku poems describe the characters of the three military leaders.

Oda Nobunaga	<i>Na-ka-nu-na-ra</i> <i>Ko-ro-shi-te-shi-ma-e</i> <i>Ho-to-to-gi-su</i>	The cuckoo doesn't sing? All right, kill it at once
Toyotomi Hideyoshi	<i>Na-ka-nu-na-ra</i> <i>Na-ka-se-te-mi-se-yo</i> <i>Ho-to-to-gi-su</i>	The cuckoo doesn't sing? All right, I'll make it sing.
Tokugawa Ieyasu	<i>Na-ka-nu-na-ra</i> <i>Na-ku-ma-de-ma-to-u</i> <i>Ho-to-to-gi-su</i>	The cuckoo doesn't sing? All right, I'll wait till it sings.

These three heroes struggled to reunify the country and each had a unique approach in their mission. Eventually it was Tokugawa Ieyasu that finally established internal peace.

An interesting event in the history of Japan that happened in 1641 is the closing of Japan to foreign commerce. The country which is already isolated by its water borders became almost completely cut from the rest of the world for two and half centuries, which although likely the cause for the severe xenophobia that seems to linger in its people, provided the country with the opportunity to flourish culturally and develop the characteristic Japanese style. It wasn't until the arrival of US Commodore Perry in 1853 that Japan re-opened its

doors to the world. Subsequently, Japan went through its first period of modernization during the *Meiji* era (1868-1914).

Although Japan's role in the Second World War is not often put in the spot light in Japan, the repercussions of the events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are highly regarded and memorialized in Peace Memorial Museums and Peace Parks. After the war, rather than experiencing ruin, Japan's economy grew thanks to the macroeconomic instigation of the global economy. Japan's economy completely recovered and has successfully earned a position in the G8 as one of the most industrialized nations in the world.

2.3 Society & Culture

Probably the most interesting part and the actual reason for going to Japan is the experience of taking in its unique culture and living in its respectably different and systematic society. There are two things that I found to be cultural staples in Japan other than rice. The first is beer, the second, baths.

Japanese like their beer. While at the university, there were often *nomikai* (parties) held on campus, welcome parties and goodbye parties, and while there was food, there was most definitely beer and lots of it. It didn't take long to learn how to say "Cheers!" in Japanese. There was so much beer, that a second party would take place in the student labs on campus in order to drink the rest of the beer from the first party. Whether, it was a night for karaoke or a night to hang out with friends in an *izakaya* (bar), drinking beer was a natural part of the evening.

Baths as well are an essential part of the Japanese lifestyle, which are not simply used for washing. In fact, washing takes place outside of the tub. Bathing is a method of relaxation and is often done in the presence of others in public bath houses which are called *onsen* since they are built on top of hot springs. In the public bath houses, the genders are split of course, but Japanese people are not shy in an *onsen*. It is expected that bathers are naked when entering the bath as towels are actually considered to be dirty and should never be submerged in the water.

As one lives submerged in the society, popular words are easily acquired and cultural customs and idiosyncrasies are quickly adopted.

2.4 Religion

When I asked my Japanese host friend about religion, she told me that Japanese people will often say that they are not religious. I found this to be interesting, but then again, if I was asked whether I was religious, I wouldn't particularly admit to being devout despite that fact that I had frequented Catholic mass every week for the first 14 years of my life. Japanese people may say that they are not religious but there is certainly a spiritual presence in their lives based on the thousands of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines that are found all throughout in Japan.

The two dominant religions in Japan are Shintoism, the way of the *kami* (gods), and Buddhism, while Christianity and other religions are comparatively miniscule. Shintoism is Japan's oldest surviving indigenous religion. Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century while Christianity was introduced a thousand years later. Japanese people will often practice and celebrate both Shinto and Buddhist traditions and festivals as there is no contradiction in their beliefs and it is in fact hard to tell the difference between them. The only distinctive feature of a Shinto shrine from a Buddhist temple is the entrance where shrines have a gate called a Torii and temples do not.



Figure 2: Miyajima Torii (Hiroshima, Japan).

3

Pre-departure Arrangements

3.1 Application to UW and language requirements

After investigating all other countries and exchange programs, when you've decided that Japan is the place that you want to go above all, it is important to have planned out the rest of your educational path. Before leaving for Japan, it is required to have taken the equivalent of two Japanese courses in Canada. If you were born in Japan and lived there until you were four years old and later came to Canada, then you have likely met the language requirements. However, if you are like me and didn't know a lick of Japanese except the media exploited words of *konnichiwa* and *sayonara*, then consider signing up for courses that are offered at Renison College. It is acceptable to take one of Japanese 101 or Business Japanese 111, then to take Japanese 102. Japanese language courses taken at another institution will also likely fulfill the requirements.

The exchange takes place in the spring term of 3A, which requires that the application be submitted in the previous winter term of 2A to the exchange coordinator, whom has been Professor Keith W. Hipel. The application consists of a letter of intent addressed to the exchange coordinator, the engineering exchange program application for undergraduate students which can be picked up in the exchange office or downloaded from the website, a curriculum vitae and unofficial transcript.

In the fall term of 2B, the exchange coordinator usually plans a pizza lunch get together for the students who are applying to the exchange and for the students from Japan that are on exchange at UW and it is at this meeting that the coordinator approves your application.

It is then required to meet with the Undergraduate Chair (Department Associate Chair) of your department to get approval of the courses to be taken on exchange. Note that you must

have maintained at least a 70% average over the course of 1A to 2A and should not have failed any courses.

It is also required to meet with the Co-op Program Administrator, which has been John Westlake, and get approval of your co-op work report and work term plan. The Japanese exchange includes a work term in the fall term which is at the same time as the fifth work term between the spring term of 3A and the winter term of 3B. Depending on your department you may or may not have to write a work term report during the work term before the exchange as well. This report will have to be submitted earlier than its due date, which is usually 7 days after the start of the study term, since you will be departing for Japan in April.

Once the approving signatures from the Undergraduate Chair, Co-op Program Administrator and Exchange Coordinator have been obtained, the application is resubmitted to the exchange coordinator who then obtains the Associate Dean and Registrar signatures.

3.2 Course Selection for 3A Term

For programs other than Systems Design Engineering, you will have to consult your department's core course requirements.

The core 3A course of the Systems Design Engineering Program at the time that I participated in the exchange were Optimization (SYDE 311), Engineering Economics (SYDE 331), Systems Models I (SYDE 351), Thermodynamics (SYDE 381) and Introduction to Design (SYDE 361).

The courses offered at Tottori University depend on the availability of instructors as the Systems Design equivalent courses may not actually be offered to its Japanese students as a regular course, however Tottori professors make an exception and offer to teach the course specifically for the UW exchange students. The equivalent courses for Systems Design courses at the time of my exchange at Tottori University are listed in Table 2.

While I was on exchange Systems Models was not offered at Tottori University, however it was possible for me to take Advanced Graph Theoretic Methods (SYDE 551) in the fall term of 4A to make up for that core course. If it is foreseen that System Models will not be offered at Tottori University, it is also possible to take SYDE 551 in the fall term of 2B if it is offered at UW.

Table 2: Course equivalents.

UW, Systems Design	Tottori University
Optimization	Mathematical Programming
Engineering Economics	Micro Economics
Thermodynamics	Fundamentals of Thermodynamics
Introduction to Design	Social Infrastructure Engineering Laboratory Exercises in Regional Planning
System Models I	not offered at the time

The details of the course offerings at Tottori University especially with regard to the Introduction to Design course may have change and I highly encourage you to obtain information through the exchange coordinator.

3.3 Application to Tottori University

In addition to the application package to UW, another application package is required by Tottori University, which includes an application form for a Certificate of Eligibility, a money certificate, a *rireki-sho* (short curriculum vitae), a letter describing your motivation to participate in the exchange addressed to the Tottori University exchange coordinator, and a clear copy of your passport. The required forms are supplied by the UW exchange coordinator. This package is to be submitted to the UW exchange coordinator in the fall term of 2B who then forwards it to the Tottori exchange coordinator.

A Certificate of Eligibility is issued by the Japanese Ministry of Justice and is required for all non-Japanese who are going to stay in Japan for an extended period of time. The Certificate of Eligibility usually arrives in mid-February which you can then use to apply for a College Student visa. The application for a visa is made at the Japanese General Council in Toronto and takes at least 3 business days to be processed. This should be completed as soon as it is possible.

A money certificate is issued by your bank and can simply be a letter printed on your bank's letterhead that states that you have \$10,000 (CAD) in your bank account which is

accessible during your 9 month stay in Japan. The certificate must indicate that the money is in *your* account, not your parent's.

You will also need at least eight passport photos 40mm x 30mm.

3.4 Work Term prior to departure

The work term prior to departure is usually cut short to three months as the study term for Japanese universities commence in April. It is definitely recommended to stay with a previous employer from your third work term. However it is also possible to negotiate a three month work term with a new employer as I did with the Department of Medical Biophysics at the University of Toronto/Princess Margaret Hospital.

3.5 Health Coverage and Travel Insurance

I actually didn't apply to any additional health coverage in Canada for overseas and did not obtain any additional travel insurance. So although it's not a bad idea, it's okay if you don't. On arriving in Japan, I applied for health insurance over there which was taken care of by the administrators of the exchange.

3.6 Plane Ticket

After completing the application process, having obtained a college student visa and an updated passport, and ensured enough money, it's good to do some travel planning. I knew that I would be visiting relatives in Singapore so instead of a round trip to Japan, I bought a round trip ticket to Singapore with a stop-over in Japan.

In considering how to get to Tottori, there are two methods. One way is to fly into Tokyo's Narita International airport, take a bus to Tokyo's Haneda Domestic airport and fly out to Tottori airport. The second way is to fly into Osaka's Kansai International airport and take a train to Tottori. The route that is decided upon depends on what the other UW exchange students plan on doing, the availability of flights, the flight and train schedules and the cost of tickets at the time of booking.

4

Study Term in Japan

I arrived in Japan in the first week of April just catching the tail end of the cherry blossom season.

4.1 Tottori University

Tottori *Daigaku* (University), also nicknamed *Toridai*, is located just two train stations away from Tottori-*shi* (city). It is a medium sized university, with four faculties in Regional Sciences, Medicine, Engineering and Agriculture. The university houses an Arid Land Research Center as Tottori is geographically located in the most arid regions of Japan, known for its famous sand dunes. There is also a Center for International Affairs which is notably characteristic of Tottori, which is heavily involved in the promotion of international activities and relations.

4.2 Courses and Class Schedule

I took four technical engineering courses, three Japanese language courses, a Japanese Society and Culture course and a *kanji* writing course. This amounted to 13.5 hours of class per week where each course was 1.5 hours per lecture and one lecture per week.

Although lectures were generally delivered in Japanese, homework and tests were given in English. It was a really good idea to bring my textbooks so that I could review a topic and understand it with the aid of English explanations. The Japanese courses were the most beneficial during my study. I was paired up with Japanese students who would help me practice my oral skills, which was invaluable.

4.3 Laboratory Mates

At the beginning of the term, each UW exchange student was matched with a research laboratory in the Social Systems Engineering department. In our laboratories we were given a desk which I used as study space. The students in the laboratory are often first or second year masters students but a few are also 4th year undergraduates. They were invaluable friends as they welcomed me to the university. It's best to always try to talk and practice Japanese with them and ask lots of questions. The students were usually very nice and more than happy to help international students.

4.4 International residence

Tottori University has an international residence (*kaikan*) which has rooms that are basically the same size as a room in UW residences. There is a common kitchen per floor. Bedding is arranged and cost 10,000 yen at the end of the term. Rent is heavily subsidized by the university and including utilities it amounted to about 6,000-7,000 yen per month.

The other international students were mostly from China, Korea and Africa. A few individuals were also from Jamaica, the Philippines, the US, and El Salvador.

4.5 Local Transportation

The most basic form of transportation in Tottori is the bicycle. I made friends with the international students that were in Japan already and one of them lent me a bicycle. It was also possible to borrow a bicycle from the *kaikan* as there were usually a few that were left behind by past students. To get into the city, it's about an hour bike ride or an 8-minute train ride.

4.6 Sports, Clubs, Extracurricular (Circles)

Due to the way that Japan has structured its educational system, when Japanese students attend university, they spend more time with their social group which they find by joining *sakuru* (circles) than they spend in class and studying. Japanese students work incredibly hard in high school in order to pass the entrance examinations to university. If they make it to

university, students are rewarded with a comparably lighter workload which allows them to devote more time in developing life-long friendships with their peers.

International students were very much welcomed into *sakuru* and it was a good idea to attend the first meeting of as many clubs as possible because the club usually hosted a *nomikai* at the same time. But one should not feel pressured to join the club right away because eventually it will take up a lot of free time. I had joined the Girl's Basketball Circle. In retrospect, it wasn't really what I wanted to do, but I succumbed to the pressure to join. It was fun in the beginning, but as the term advanced, the practices and games became more competitive. Often I considered giving up, but I stuck with it to the end because it seemed worse to just quit. In the end, it was a good experience, but it was definitely more hard work to practice basketball than it was to pass my technical courses.

4.7 Social Life

If you join a *sakuru*, your social life will revolve around the club's activities. But it was also quite easy to make friends with my lab mates, other international students, and the Japanese students in the International Friends Association (IFA) who often planned social events for international students. The most common social outings in Tottori were drinking in an *izakaya*, drinking in a karaoke room, or drinking during a *nomikai* on campus.

4.8 National Holidays

The university has several holidays that can be taken advantage of for travel. There is a week called the Golden Week which takes place in the first week of May. This time is often used by Japanese to return to their hometown. I spent Golden Week in Hiroshima with my basketball circle for a tournament. There is also a holiday on the day of the university's founding which is June 1st. Summer holidays usually begin in August and end in September.

5

Work Term in Japan

I worked in Tokyo from the beginning of September to the beginning of December. The work terms for UW exchange students were arranged by the professors at Tottori University. I was fortunate to obtain a work term placement in the software company, Ark Information Systems, Inc. The company is situated in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo and has approximately 130 employees. Established in 1987, Ark is a leading competitor in software development, solutions and consulting.

5.1 Work Visa

A work visa is required to work in Japan. The administrators of the exchange provide the forms to be filled in and help the exchange students in obtaining their visa.

5.2 Company Residence

I stayed in the company dormitory. The company paid for rent, heating and lighting expenses and also provided a bed, television, washing machine and tableware.

5.3 Pay Allowance

The allowance was 5,000 yen per day and monthly train passes for transportation between the company dormitory and office.

5.4 Dress Code

The dress code is business casual.

5.5 Work Hours

The number of hours per week of employment was 37.5 hours. It was mandatory to be at the office by 10:00am and to stay at least until 4:00pm. I usually arrived to the office by 9:30am and left around 5:30pm. Although the Japanese employees would stay much later usually because there was a deadline to meet, it was not expected that I stay late regularly.

5.6 Local Transportation

The local form of transportation in Japan is the train. Tokyo is so huge that you can't really get anywhere without it. While the train system can be a little intimidating due to the confusion of so many people and so many train lines, it is a basic survival skill to navigate through it.

5.7 Work Term Presentation

At the end of the work term, I was expected to make a presentation to the company on the work that I was engaged in which was also presented to the Social Systems Engineering department at Tottori University. The presentation was in Japanese.

5.8 Co-op Evaluation

In order to ensure that a work term in Japan is recognized by UW, it is important to send a job information package as though it were a student arranged job at the beginning of the term to the co-op advisor for engineering, whom has been Janet Metz. The package includes a job information form, an offer letter on company letterhead, an international work-term checklist, an emergency information form, and an acknowledgement of risk and responsibility waiver. A co-op evaluation also has to be filled out at the end of the term by your supervisor and sent to the co-op advisor. All required forms can be downloadable from the CECS website.

I don't quite know why but it seemed to me that it was impossible for me to achieve an outstanding evaluation in my company. My supervisors were very nice to me and understanding of the fact that my Japanese was perhaps not as strong as they might have liked. They gave me work that was achievable and in my mind actually, it was very easy. At the start of the work-term they told me that they didn't expected me to finish the project that

they gave to me or if it took the entire three months then it would be okay. I finished the assigned project in a month's time and continued to work persistently to complete two more projects independently. I was told that they were surprised at my progress and happy with the applications that I created. However when it came time for the evaluation, I merely received a rank of 'Very Good'. Now a very good is indeed very good, better than satisfactory, but when it is compared to an excellent or an outstanding, it then becomes mediocre at best. What I gathered from my evaluation is that compared to a Japanese employee, perhaps I am just mediocre. I would hope to disagree with my previous statement. I suppose that I've never really reconciled myself with my evaluation except with the attitude of *c'est la vie*. I worked hard during my work-term and I enjoyed my life in Tokyo. Although my co-op evaluation was less than what I had hoped for, it really didn't matter much compared to the kindness that I received from the people at the company that I worked.

6

Traveling in Japan and Southeast Asia

There is plenty of opportunity to travel while on exchange and it is highly encouraged to do just that. Of course, it is important to consider cost, scheduling and other people with whom you might travel.

6.1 Japan Tent

Japan Tent is an organized conference type gathering of around 300 international students from all over Japan which provides a great opportunity to meet people from all over the world and also to experience a Japanese lifestyle personally by staying with host families. The 8-day conference takes place in Ishikawa-*ken* during the first week of August. I was matched with two awesome Japanese host families. One was an elderly couple that lived in the mountains in Suzu. The other was a young couple with a two-year old daughter that lived in the city of Kanazawa, the capital of Ishikawa-*ken*. It was so much fun and I learned so much from the people that I met with regards to Japanese culture. There was also insightful exchange our personal experiences as international students living in Japan.

Applications for Japan Tent are accepted through Tottori University's Center for International Affairs in June.

6.2 Getting Around Japan

There are several way of getting around Japan which includes highway bus, train, and plane in order of least to most expensive. However if you will be celebrating your birthday while in Japan it is worthwhile to check out the Birthday Special on plane tickets from Nippon Airways (a trip to Okinawa might be in order).

6.3 Accommodation in Japan

While I was in Japan, I stayed in both hostels and hotels while I was traveling. Hostels usually cost about half as much as a hotel do, however, hotels have the added luxury of a private bed and bath.

6.4 My Travels

I traveled to Hiroshima, Kyoto, Osaka, Matsue, and Nara. I actually traveled to Hiroshima twice; the first time was during Golden Week for the basketball tournament and the second time during the summer holiday to visit the Peace Memorial Museum. Kyoto and Osaka, I explored during day trips with my lab mates who offered to be my tour guides. It was always important to visit the famous places, dine on the specialties of the city, and bring back famous tasty treats. I and a few other friends that lived in the International House went on a road trip Matsue, a city in the Shimane prefecture next to Tottori and the hometown of a few Japanese friends that I met through the International Friends Association. I visited Nara, which is one of Japan's former capitals, while I was living in Tokyo. During the Christmas holiday, I visited relative in Singapore and Malaysia with my sisters.

I admit that I had a good time, but I can't say that I have any over the top stories about my adventures in Japan. Life is pretty tame over on the other side of the world. Actually, I experienced my first earthquake while sitting at my work desk in Tokyo which was post to the huge earthquakes in Niigata. As well, I was in a car driving from Malacca to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia when the tsunami hit Southeast Asia. As close as I have been to the eye of danger I've been kept relatively safe and sound.

7

Conclusion

Although most of this report is actually about how to get yourself out to Japan, I find it hard to offer any more insight about what it is like in Japan without saying that you just have to experience it for yourself. For me, my exchange to Japan though highly rewarding was one of the most difficult times in my life. I pretty much went by myself to a country, whose language I knew but by introduction and lived for eight months pursuing academic, professional and personal growth. I met people, I made friends and I spent a lot of time by myself. Japanese culture is fascinating and the country is beautiful. Its people may sometimes seem a little bit strange at first, but optimistically, strangers are simply friends that you just haven't yet met.

An international exchange is an opportunity to experience the world beyond what you might normally be used to – to approach difficult problems with perseverance and calmness, to form personal relationships with people outside of your conventional acquaintance, and thus to develop yourself as a more worldly individual.

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