

Waterloo-Tottori Exchange

an Essay on Japan

Systems Design Engineering

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1.0 Introduction

What does it mean to be 'on exchange'? Some people say it is simply a unique and unforgettable experience. Others say it is a culture shock. And some say that it is an experience of a life time. In my opinion, they are right, it's all the above. The exchange has given me the opportunity to do one of many things: The chance to escape Canada, to see the world from a different perspective, the opportunity to learn more about myself and most importantly, what it means to be a Canadian.

During the 3A academic term, I was apart of an exchange program to Tottori, Japan. I spent a total of nine months overseas. The first half of this exchange was an academic term at Tottori University. The second half was a work term at CTI engineering. Through this report, I will share my experiences with you. The first section is used to illustrate university life in Tottori. The second section is used to share some of my travels during my stay in Japan. The last section briefly describes my work term.

I strongly encourage every student to go on an exchange. For those of you who are still considering whether or not an international exchange is right for you, my advice will be: "stop thinking and just go!" Good or bad, the experience is well worth it.

Unlike other reports that have been written, I have focused my attention to the exchange experience itself. Through this report I will try to share my experiences with you. I hope it will become a positive motivator for your decision. After reading this report, you will have lived through some of my experiences. I hope your journey will be as enjoyable as mine.

2.0 The Exchange

Arriving in Japan

I don't remember if I was scared or excited when it was time to actually leave for my flight to Japan. It was an awkward feeling of emptiness. I had no idea what to expect. The 14 hour flight did not help either. The first touch of Japan was also a little awkward. It was a sense of happiness and confusion. With three other classmates and four pieces of luggage each, we landed in Osaka Airport with no clear idea of what to do. We were still 4 hours away from Tottori. While the others guarded the suitcases, I remember being the designated person to find spare change and use an old Japanese style payphone to call Kita Sensei, the head professor of the social systems engineering at Tottori University. Since then, awkwardness is something I have learned to live with.

After finding our way to Tottori by bus, things started to pick up. It was night time when we arrived at the Tottori city center. It was nothing like I had imagined about Japan. Tottori, located in the eastern part of Honshu, is probably one of the smallest Japanese cities. A professor and a couple of Japanese students picked us up from the bus terminal and together, we ate dinner at a local restaurant. The first mistake we made was paying for dinner. It is tradition to treat the guests on the first meal. I realized that everything I thought to be 'culturally correct' now needs to be modified. After the meal, we were dropped off at our residence and given a chance to organize ourselves. The residence was located in front of a convenient store and surrounded with farm land. Again, it was not something I had expected. Internet was also nowhere to be found.

A good friend of mine, also in Tottori for the same exchange program, spontaneously decided to explore the city at 10:30 at night. Being curious and ambitious as we were, we headed for the train station. Our destination: Tottori City! Of course, our luck brought us in the wrong direction. We actually found ourselves in a neighboring town opposite to the city center. There, we took a few photographs and caught the next

train heading the other direction. We were full of energy and ready to join the Japanese night life. Instead, we managed cover all of downtown Tottori in 20 minutes. That's what I call a small city. At this point my expectations for the exchange have already plummeted to zero. Expectation is something I learned to live without.

This first day definitely set the tone for the next nine months. There were so many lessons yet to be learnt. Since then, things got exponentially better day by day.

The Welcome Party

It is tradition to host a party to welcome guests. Students and professors from all the engineering departments celebrated and welcomed us to the school. Each of us was expected to introduce ourselves in front of the entire room filled with no less than 60 people. It was a night of food and drinking. Not long after the party ended, we were pulled into the "second" party organized by the students. It too, was a lot of drinking!

Alien Card

To be granted temporary residence in Japan, all foreigners need to apply an alien card. This process requires a passport photo, the proper paper documentation and a paper application that needs to be processed at the city hall. The entire process takes about three weeks to complete. It is recommended that it be done as soon as possible.

Other International Students

Tottori is home to many international students from places such as Korea, China, and Nepal. Many of these students, like us, do not have advanced knowledge in Japanese. Many extra classes are available to help us adapt to the culture and learn Japanese. Even in a campus as small as Tottori, I could easily imagine there to be over two hundred of international students at any time. My residence alone, housed over 60 international students. Many of them come to Tottori University either for a degree or simply as an exchange program.

Residence

As an exchange student, I had the pleasure of living in Tottori University's international student house. It is a single room apartment style complex used to accommodate international students during their first year of study. Each room is furnished with a bed, desk and chair. Amazingly each room has its own sink and toilet. Students on each of the five floors have access to communal bathroom facilities and a shared cooking area.

Phoning Home

There is a payphone available in the lobby of the international house for long distance calls. During my stay I used the Skype service for most of my long distance calls back to Canada since the payphone is often occupied by other students making calls. Internet telephony services such as Skype and Voip are also a less expensive alternative to the payphone.

Getting a Mobile phone

Getting a mobile phone is not absolutely required. Even if the mobile phone service in Japan is much more expensive than that of Canada, I would highly recommend students get a mobile phone as early as possible. It is a convenient way to keep in touch with friends and family especially when you find yourself on the road.

Getting a Bicycle

Although Tottori is a relatively small city, it is not small enough to walk. Luckily for international students, there is a draw for donated bicycles. Bicycles are a convenient way to commute to school and travel to regions further away from the university area. Believe it or not, there are as many bicycles on campus as there are students. Just take note that the Bicycle lottery does not happen until June. Be prepared to be walking everywhere for a month!

School life, clubs & teams

Clubs and school teams are one of the most important parts of university life. There are a wide range of clubs and team activities at Tottori. These include sporting activities such as badminton, basketball, swimming and tennis and recreational activities such as break dancing, hip hop and kendo. For some reason, clubs were seen to be more important than classes. Students spent a majority of time with club members both within and outside of the club activities. It is a fantastic way to meet new friends and build a healthy school life.

Aside from school clubs, a majority of the time will be spent in the 'lab'. As engineering students on exchange, we were all paired with a different department within the social systems engineering faculty. Each lab provides a working area for all the masters and PhD students in that department. There are approximately 10 to 20 students in each laboratory. It is amazing how much time is spent with them. These students not only help you adjust to Japan, they also plan a lot of activities and gatherings.

The academic portion of school life is much like Waterloo. The difference lies in the fact that some courses are taught in Japanese instead of English. Being in Japan, material taught in Japanese needs to be self taught. Assignments, tests and examinations are similar to that of Waterloo. Some of our courses are specially given in English by professors. The school term lasts for approximately 4 months from April until August.

Although I believe that the academic portion of the exchange is important, I think that traveling is also a great learning experience. The next section will explore some of the places I have traveled in the duration of my nine month exchange.



Alien Cards



International Students



Bicycle Lottery



My Laboratory: Information Systems

3.0 Places traveled in Japan

I found traveling to be the most enjoyable part of the exchange experience. In my opinion, traveling was just as important as school. I believe the exchange experience is more about the opening minds and accepting new ideas as opposed to the education gained in a classroom. Weekend trips were a great way to learn more about Japanese history, culture and language. Every new place I visited was a new adventure and a new experience. It is amazing how many life skills I have gained by simply planning and traveling to unknown territory! Over the course of my stay in Japan, I have traveled to many different places. These places include Kyoto, Tokyo, Nagoya, Hiroshima and Osaka. Each destination was unique and provided its own set of life lessons. I strongly urge exchange students to travel whenever they have an opportunity. It is so easy to indulge yourself into the many cities of Japan.

In the following sections, I will describe some of the interesting facts and experiences in each of the places I have traveled.

Kyoto

Sakura, otherwise known as Cherry Blossoms, only blooms for a relatively short period of time once a year between late March and early April. This rare sight is enjoyed by the Japanese for its beauty. Full bloom is usually reached within about one week after the opening of the first blossoms.

There was no better way to enjoy and experience the beauty of the Sakura than at the nation's old capital, Kyoto. Within the third day of arriving in Japan, I already found myself traveling to a distant city.

Kyoto was formerly the imperial capital of Japan. It is the only large Japanese city that still has an abundance of prewar buildings. Kyoto is located on the mid-western portion of the island of Honshu. The original city was laid out in a grid pattern modeled

after the ancient Chinese capital during the Tang Dynasty, in accordance with traditional Chinese geomancy, with the Imperial Palace facing south.

Filled with history and resemblance of the traditional Japanese lifestyle, Kyoto is city that must be explored by all visitors. Although I spent less than two days here, I was already able to grasp the sense of Japanese culture lingering around every household.



Sakura viewing inside Kyoto's Imperial Palace



Traditional Japanese performances



Kyoto's Imperial Palace



Modern day Kyoto: shopping district

Tokyo

Tokyo, the nation's capital seemed to be the next best place to visit.

Tokyo, has been designed to be rail-centric, that is centered around major train stations in a high density fashion, so suburban railways were built relatively cheaply at street level. This makes the transportation around Tokyo relatively easy. Tokyo's subway and commuter rail network became the busiest in the world as more and more people moved to the area.

From my understanding, the generally-accepted center of Tokyo is the Imperial Palace. But as a rail-centric city, there are a number of major urban centers where business, shopping, and entertainment are concentrated around major train stations. These include: Shinjuku (location of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building), Marunouchi and Otemachi (the main financial and business district of Tokyo), Ginza and Yurakucho (major shopping and entertainment district), Shinbashi, Shinagawa, Shibuya (center of shopping, fashion and entertainment for the younger population), Ikebukuro, Ueno, Odaiba (waterfront area that has become a major tourist point), Nagatacho, Akasaka, and Aoyama.

Golden Week refers to a period containing the following public holidays in early May. It is a week long holiday consisting of Nature Day, Constitution Memorial Day, People's Day, and Children's Day. Being the longest vacation period of the year for most Japanese jobs, Golden Week is an extremely popular time to travel. Flights, trains, and hotels are often fully booked despite significantly higher rates at this time. I took this opportunity to travel to Tokyo. Due to the limited transportation methods at the time, I traveled to Tokyo via a 12 hour overnight bus.

For those that are traveling to Tokyo or any other major city center, I recommend staying at a capsule hotel. It is quite the experience. The capsule is roughly 2 m by 1 m by 1.25 m, providing just enough room to sleep. A typical customer would be the businessman after a night of drinking who has missed the last train home.

The following are some photos of the places I have visited in Tokyo.



Kaminarimon gate and the lantern



Asakusa Shrine



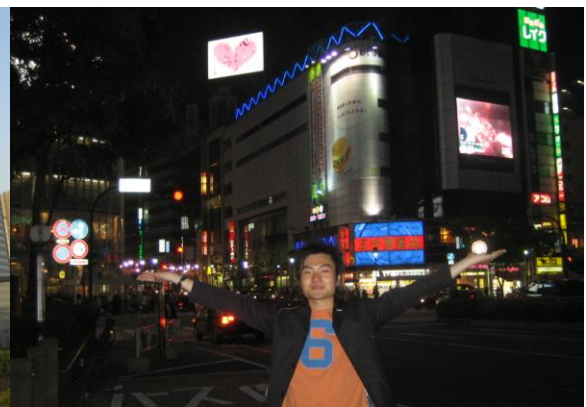
Capsule Hotel Room Layout



Capsule Hotel Bed



Odaiba Island: Fuji Building



Shibuya



The Tokyo Fish Market



Rainbow Bridge and Tokyo skyline

Nagoya

Nagoya, located in the center of Honshu, is the capital of the Aichi Prefecture. It is one of Japan's major ports. The main reason for traveling here was to see the famous Toyota city. Toyota is a highly regarded brand in Japan. From my travels in Japan, I found that almost every car sold in Japan is manufactured by Toyota. The efficiency and the productivity of JIT (or also known as Just In Time or kanban) system is really amazing. For those that wish to travel to this area, I strongly recommend you to book a free tour by calling the Toyota headquarters.



Toyota Factory Tour



Nagoya Port

The second reason for traveling to the Aichi Prefecture was the world expo. It just so happened that the world expo was being held in the same year as my exchange to Japan.

Expo 2005 hosted by the Aichi Prefecture. The Expo ran for 185 days between March 25 and September 25, 2005. The theme of the Expo was "Nature's Wisdom", with national and corporate pavilions expressing themes of ecological co-existence, renewable technology, and the wonders of nature. The mission statement reveals that "We must

come together and share our experience and wisdom, in order to create a new direction for humanity which is both sustainable and harmonious with nature.”

Great care has been taken to build the pavilions out of recycled or recyclable materials, to lessen the environmental impact on the site, and to provide environmentally friendly transportation to and within the Expo area. The recorded 22,049,544 visitors greatly exceeded the estimated target of 15,000,000 people intended for the event. Interestingly enough, I was at the Expo on one of the most crowded weekends.

Although it was hot and crowded, the overall experience was exciting. The expo showcased some of Japan’s most advanced technologies. Lineups for some of the events lasted more than 4 hours.



Expo 2005 Aichi Japan: Entrance



Expo 2005 Aichi Japan: Global Commons

Hiroshima

Hiroshima is forever remembered for being the world's first atomic bomb target on August 6 1945. The Peace Memorial Park reminds the world of these tragedies. Hiroshima has since recovered from the event and has built a thriving new city.

The A-Bomb dome, as shown below, was once the Industrial Promotion Hall until the bomb exploded almost directly above it. Nearby, the Children's Peace Memorial, inspired by leukemia victim Sadako, encourages children from all over Japan to fold paper cranes for display around the memorial. Cranes are a symbol of longevity and happiness. In addition, the Peace Memorial Museum carries a message of Peace by telling the story of the bomb and the destruction it wrought. Filled with history, many lessons are told just by walking down the streets and parks of Hiroshima.

To the south of Hiroshima city, Miyajima island shows off the famed Itsukushima shrine, renowned by its floating torii. Also on the island is Misen, a 530m tall mountain. The five hour hike up and down Misen was one of the finest walks I have taken.



A-Bomb dome



Itsukushima Shrine



A-Bomb Peace Memorial Park

Osaka

Osaka is the working heart of Kansai. Other than Tokyo, Osaka is one of Japan's busiest and most advanced cities. It is divided into two areas. The north is the city's main business and administrative centre. The south is the city's entertainment district and contains the shopping and nightlife zones. Osaka is known for its shopping, pachinko parlors and phenomenal food.

Again, the exploration of another city makes me realize the diversity within a small country such as Japan. Food, culture, lifestyle are all intermingled together. Each city I have traveled to has a life of its own – its unique style. It is amazing that I have traveled to more places in Japan than I have in Canada. It's unimaginable how much I will be able to learn if I took the time to explore different parts of Canada. All in all, I truly believe that an international exchange is not fully experienced by just attending classes. Traveling locally as a student within a foreign country has definitely changed my perspectives and brought about so many life lessons.



Osaka Namba Train Station



Osaka's amazing display of food

4.0 Work term in Japan

As part of my exchange, I was lucky to have worked at CTI Engineering, the second largest engineering consulting firm in Japan. Headquartered in Tokyo, this firm deals mostly with road planning and transportation systems. Although the work done at this company is not much different than a typical engineering consulting firm in Canada, the work life in Japan is vastly different than that of Canada. The cultural differences in culture, mindset and attitude separate Japan from the rest of the world.

Company dynamics are unlike the ones I have been use to. The organization is heavily dependent on departmental groups and teams. It is not uncommon for employees to spend 12 to 15 hours with the company. I have noticed that my coworkers arrive at work as early as 9AM and many do not intend on leaving until 9 or 10 at night. Most of them aim to catch the last train which runs sometime after 12AM. Drinking after work is also a common sight. Company parties and completion of projects call for hours of drinking. On occasions where the workload is demanding, many will also drink with one another to vent and release stress.

My life at work wasn't much different than theirs. I lived in a company residence in the prefecture north of Tokyo. The commute takes 1 hour and 45 minutes, each way. This, I learned, is not uncommon for many Japanese businessmen. The living costs are so high in Tokyo that many workers are forced to live in neighboring prefectures. After transferring between three trains and one subway, I will have finally made my way to the business district. I usually stop by a local convenient store to buy breakfast before heading to the office. Work begins with a morning bell, an announcement and stretching. Lunch is not a long time away. Lunch is usually spent with coworkers at a local restaurant. When time is tight and work gets hectic, bento boxes are the way to go. After the short break, work resumes again. Although I work overtime, I can't keep with the insane hours some of my co-workers put into their work everyday. I typically commute back home, eat a late dinner and read a couple pages of my Japanese comic before sleeping.

The most intriguing part of the work term is definitely my commute on the train. Because of the large number of commuters in a busy city such as Tokyo, many people stuff themselves onto a train. Conductors are often needed to help people fit their arms and legs through the train doors ready to close. I find it amusing how determined these people are about getting on their train.

Weekends are spent exploring the city. It's amazing how much you can find out about Tokyo even if you explore it yourself! Weekends are also a great time to go places with co-workers who have knowledge about the area.

5.0 Conclusion

The exchange is an unforgettable experience. I would say that this opportunity is a “life lesson.” It is not just a simple academic term overseas. It is an exchange of culture, insights, ideas and perspectives. No matter where you decide to go, an international exchange provides much more opportunities for exploration and self learning than an academic term in Canada. It is an opportunity to see a country from a student’s perspective.

Keep your expectations low and just enjoy your time! It’s really that great. You have to try it to believe it.