

Kansai University, Japan, 2012

I have started writing and re-writing this a number of times now. I thought perhaps it might be due to the fact that writing in English feels a little awkward nowadays, but then I realised that each time I started writing I was writing about a different thing. There are so many things I could say about my experience in Japan so far, but perhaps the first thing I should mention is that coming to Japan has without a doubt been the best decision I have ever made.

I have been interested in Asia (specifically Japan) since before beginning High School and consequently I have always dreamed of going on a long-term exchange to Japan. Yet despite plenty of enthusiasm and seven years of studying the language and culture, I was unsure of what to expect from such an experience. Being uncertain was certainly a little nerve-wracking; however it also meant I was open to any possibility. I think this open-mindedness was incredibly important for settling into a new way of life here in Japan.



Perhaps one of the most challenging periods of my exchange so far was during the first couple of months I spent here. Most other exchange students had opted to stay in one of the student dorms run by the university. From the beginning I was determined to stay in an apartment. This



decision has certainly had its ups and downs and I do not believe it is for everyone, but it has had a huge influence on the way I have experienced my exchange in Japan. The university had arranged an orientation week before university started in which the exchange students could get their lives set up in Japan. This included things like opening a bank account and registering for an alien registration card and health insurance. However, because I live in an area slightly separated from

my university I had to do many of these things on my own through my local ward office. As well as the things I mentioned above, during my first few months living in Japan I also had to figure out how to pay my rent, learn the way from my apartment to university (a one and a half hour walk or a 35-45 minute bike-ride), navigate the area I live in, buy a bike, and the list goes on. Many of these experiences took me completely out of my comfort zone, but afterwards I would always feel an exhilarating sense of achievement.



After these first challenging months, I finally managed to settle into life here in Japan. Aside from studying and classes, I have had the opportunity to go on a number of trips, meet a number of people and try a number of different things. I joined the Sweets Circle and the Swimming Circle, both of which were good ways of meeting people and socialising, as the Club/Circle culture in Japanese universities is quite strong. The Circles I

participate in and most others have regular events or practices, and are a great way to meet people with similar interests.

The things I have enjoyed the most being in Japan however tend to be seemingly mundane parts of everyday life. Living slightly separated from my university and consequently separated from the other exchange students, I have been able to gain a real sense of independence and as I mentioned before, this has really influenced the way I have experienced Japan. The staff at my local supermarket all smile and wave to me if I see them biking to work or start a conversation as I buy my groceries. The elderly man who works at the futon shop always says greets me with 'ohayo gozaimasu' or 'okaeri nasai' as I am making my way to or from the train station. Often when I go into a new shop or café or restaurant, the owner or a worker will be interested in my foreignness and initiate a conversation, for example as the owner of the cat café tells me about her daughter who is currently abroad, or about how she deals with foreign customers who don't understand Japanese. Feeling a part of a community and meeting and learning about different people have been incredibly interesting and enjoyable experiences.



My experiences in Japan have taught me so much more than the Japanese language. I have learnt much about myself and about the type of person I want to become. I have gained independence and a real sense of confidence in myself and in my actions. Every day I wake up ready and rearing to go, and every moment I am thankful for this opportunity. Going on an exchange is about so much more than living in another country and perhaps learning another language. I believe it is about developing as an individual, and opening your mind to the diversity of the world. An exchange is my no means a perfect experience – I have come across many challenges and obstacles

on the way (particularly giant bugs and spiders finding their way into my apartment...), but the experience has been well worth my while. To anyone considering on going on an exchange to Japan, I would definitely recommend taking the plunge, provided that you are open to any possibility whilst on exchange and willing to push yourself out of your comfort zone and try new things. I believe that regardless of personality, these things are key factors in a successful and enjoyable experience ☺