

From the 17th of September to the 30th, I participated in my school's Japanese Sister School exchange program. Our program involved a period of homestay followed by days touring Japan. My homestay experience was certainly an unforgettable one, with the opportunity to attend school in Japan and develop a wonderful relationship with my host family.

After travelling over 20 hours from Melbourne, we finally arrived at Tokyo International airport and made our way to our sister school, Fuji Junior High School in Fuji City, Shizuoka.

During my time at Fuji Junior High School, I was fortunate enough to create many wonderful memories and friendships. The school had showed their immense hospitality through an incredible welcoming assembly, with touching speeches and performances impossible to fault, including a very moving performance by the school brass band. By the end of the assembly, we were left in awe and felt very special to have been invited to the school.

Thereafter, we returned to the school and attend classes with our hosts. Despite the language barrier, I found class to be very enjoyable, making new friends and practicing my Japanese conversation skills. We even had the chance to demonstrate and teach some AFL skills which made for a fun class. We were also lucky enough to be invited to observe a traditional tea ceremony and I was amazed by the intricate and yet simple style of the ceremony. Our last class of the day was a music lesson, learning about and how to play the koto, a traditional Japanese instrument. With much patience, the friendly students and teacher taught us to play a song called 'Sakura, Sakura'.

During our stay, we also visited the City Hall where the office of the Mayor and Superintendent of Education of Fuji City was located. Here we received another warm welcome and a token gift of Japanese toilet paper! We exchanged questions about our respective cultures and learnt more about Fuji City and its history. Then we were invited to the observatory deck atop the building for a spectacular view of Mount Fuji, the pride and joy of Fuji City. It was a breathtaking view one does not easily forget.

Each year every junior and senior high school hold a student directed Sports Day and Fuji Junior High School had decided to hold theirs during our stay. I was astounded by the phenomenal effort the student body had put in for the day – they had directed themselves to setting up tents, marshalling, and organising races just to name a few. Signs of class participation and teamwork were evident everywhere along with an intense vibe of team moral and pride of each team. We were lucky enough to have front row seats in a marquee beside the track to watch the events of the day unfold.

We watched as each student participated in at least one event from, sprints, to hurdles, to skipping competitions, obstacle relays, baton relays and a team cheering competition. The atmosphere was almost electric with excitement and teamwork. The school had also prepared an event for us to participate in – the UFO relay. Neither of us had participated in anything like it before. The idea was to form a circle (like the shape of a UFO) and tie our

legs together. As a team, we would have to 'jump' from one end to the other and tag our team, which would have to do as we did. It was certainly a challenge trying to coordinate our jumps together without falling... and then trying to figure out how to untangle ourselves in order to get back up when we did. Coming into fourth place, my team and I certainly had a newfound respect for our sister school students' cooperation and determination.

What was also really astounding were the performances the students had previously spent months rehearsing and perfecting down to the last detail. There was a traditional drum and dance performance and an outstanding display of acrobatics by the boys of Fuji JHS where we saw a team of male students involved in building human pyramids and various other tricks that involved strength and agility. What a sight! Not a single person wasn't awestruck at the day's display of teamwork, friendship, skill and discipline.

After the weekend, the school had organised an excursion to a traditional Japanese township called 'Iyashi Village' where we had a really great opportunity to see the old Japanese style houses and traditional style clothing, pottery and craft making. We participated in a craft class where we made a key ring and then spent some time walking around the town looking at the traditional Japanese way of life. It was very interesting to see how a country as modern as Japan still keeps in touch with their cultural roots.

Afterwards, we visited an old underground ice cave that was formed by an eruption of Mt Fuji many years ago, as well as driving around the largest lake at Fuji GoKo. The weather had been blue skies and sunshine that day, which was perfect for taking in the beautiful view of the lake and the surrounding nature. Afterwards, we went underground again, this time to Saiko Bat Cave. We didn't find any bats but instead found ourselves in crevices at squatting hats crawling through tunnels. Although the paths were narrow and the temperature was a chilling 3 degrees (a big difference from the 30 degree day outside!), I soon forgot about it after seeing the natural beauty of the lava stalactites and lava domes.

Soon, it had inevitably come to our last day in Fuji. I attended usual classes with my host sister, assisting in English class and along with a teacher on the exchange trip, taught the class about Australian animals and slang (some of which I had never even heard of!). The day flew by us and before long, the closing ceremony had concluded and it was time for good byes. Teary farewells were said and before I knew it, we were headed towards Shizuoka Station to catch the shinkansen to Kyoto.

One of the many things I had looked forward to seeing on the exchange trip was the famous shinkansen. Whilst waiting for our shinkansen, one flew by the platform we stood on and I was completely amazed by the sight of it. The bullet train whizzed past us and then it was our turn and everyone was left stunned by just how fast the shinkansen was. We arrived in Kyoto and settled in our rooms at Matsubaya Ryokan, a traditional Japanese style inn and prepared ourselves for our time in Japan as tourists.

Kyoto was our first place of interest. I had always had an interest in Japan's first capital city Kyoto and believed it to be a beautiful city enriched with centuries of cultural history and incredible gardens, temples and shrines. Sightseeing around this beautiful city confirmed this and left me mesmerised more than ever.

Of all the students participating on the exchange trip, I was one of two of the eldest students and along with my friend, we were given the responsibility to plan our first day's adventure with the help of a travel guide.

Our sightseeing adventure of Kyoto began at the Imperial Palace and Gardens. Although the palace itself was not open to the public, the gardens were picturesque and a good start to our adventure. Our next destination was Katano Tenman Temple and as luck would have it, on the 25th of every month (which happened to be so), the temple was the venue of the local flea market. Food, crafts and clothes were abundant and temple grounds were a sight themselves. We were also fortunate enough to observe a monk performing a blessing ritual.

After a quick lunch, we set off towards Kinkuji Temple, home of the famous Golden Pavilion. Even from a distance the sight of the pavilion was as stunning as it was exquisite. The nature and surrounding scenery only added to the magical atmosphere of the temple and left an impression I'm not likely to forget. Following our visit to the Golden Pavilion, our last stop for the day was Ryoanji. After walking close to 20km around Kyoto, we spent the afternoon taking a well – deserved break in the temple gardens , relaxing and taking in our surroundings.

Next on our itinerary was Hiroshima and Miyajima Island. Although we had a very early start, we made up for lost hours on the ride to Hiroshima via the Shinkansen express and then caught a ferry across to Miyajima Island. The ferry ride provided a great landscape of the city and surrounding coastline. Passing the iconic Itsukushima Temple or 'Tori Gate' marked the beginning of our time on this world heritage site. Once we arrived at the island, we were approached by several of the many herds of cute deer that casually wander around the island. Thereafter, we took a gondola ride up to the highest peak of the island, Mt. Minsen. The view was wonderful; we had an almost 360 degree view of Hiroshima and its neighbouring islands and suburbs.

After having lunch out looking the natural beauty of Miyajima Island, we returned to mainland Hiroshima and made our way towards the Genbaku Dome, Hiroshima Memorial Peace Park and Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. At the Peace Park and museum, we saw many personal accounts and artefacts of the atomic bombing during World War II. I was very moved by what I saw and the stories I read and left humbled and had a greater appreciation of life and understanding of the importance of peace.

After a previous 18 hour day in Hiroshima, we were lucky enough to have a later start to the day and headed to our next destination, Nara. Here we visited the world's biggest wooden

temple and had the chance to see one of the world's biggest Buddha statues. We also attempted to squeeze ourselves through one of the building's structural columns, which according to locals, if you could fit your entire body through the column; you would be blessed with good luck. We all had quite a laugh watching each other twist and squeeze through the column, especially when the teachers gave it a try. Thereafter we returned to Kyoto for some shopping and further sightseeing of the marvellous city. Our day concluded with a night walk around Gion, and were lucky enough to spot a Geisha amidst Kyoto's bustling night life.

Our last day of touring Japan involved a last minute decision to take a trip to Tokyo, even if this meant losing a few hours of sleep for an early start. First, we went to the lively Ameyokocho Market, set up through the back streets of Ueno, home to the sellers of fresh produce, fish, clothing, food stalls and many more! Next, after a trip on the subway, we arrived at the Government Municipal Building, South Tower Observation Deck that overlooked Tokyo city. From there we took in the enormity of one of the world's leading cities and could even just make out the outline of Mt Fuji in the far distance.

Then, we headed down to Harajuku. Here we witnessed the quirky fashion trends and pop culture of Japanese youth teeming amongst the huge crowds of people. I was astounded as a normal day in the streets of Tokyo resembled Melbourne when there might be a festival on. From there we made our way through to Shibuya, weaving between a sea of people; we had to stop several times to ensure no one had separated from the group! At Shibuya, we came across the famous crossing where thousands of people walk every day. Here, we did a little bit of people watching, occasionally seeing some awkward encounters and crashes amidst the chaos. After a tiring day wandering the streets of Tokyo, we finally caught the shinkansen back to Kyoto.

The highlight of my trip would indisputably have to be the time I spent with my host family. When I first arrived at the school, it was very late but our host families were eagerly awaiting to greet us, with our names on cards, just like at an airport! I found my name and my host sister, Ririko. We happily greeted each other and she introduced me to her host mother, who although spoke very limited English, was just as welcoming. My host family included Ririko, her younger sister Momoko, father, mother and her grandparents. Ririko lived with her mother in Fuji City, whereas her father lived in Hiroshima due to his job and her sister lived with her grandparents in Kamakura as she attended a different school. However, during my stay, her father took leave from his work to come back to Fuji City and Ririko's sister, Momoko, visited often. The effort my host father and sister made to visit during my stay didn't go unnoticed and I was moved by their efforts.

At first, I found that the language barrier created a somewhat awkward atmosphere at times however, to my surprise, I found that Ririko's English was very extensive and to their surprise (especially to Ririko's grandparents), I could speak some Japanese! Before long, we overcame that as well as our shyness and became good friends. They ensured that every

need I had was met and their limitless hospitality left me feeling very moved and honoured, even to this day, I still feel the same way whenever I think about them.

Even though the family led a busy lifestyle, they were kind enough to take the time and show me around their hometown and go sightseeing. During the evenings, Ririko and I would go for a walk around her suburb, sometimes with some of her school friends and we would talk about anything and everything we walked past (for instance, shops, housing, cars), comparing the differences between our two cultures whilst learning more about one another's hobbies, likes and dislikes. From these evening strolls, Ririko and I became closer and over time I felt like I had gained another sister.

One of Ririko's favourite places to visit was the aquarium and she had a great love for dolphins. During my stay, we went to one of her favourite museums in Enoshima with her father, Momoko and her grandfather. Enoshima Aquarium was a little far away from Fuji City which was no hindrance except that we had an early start to the day. We first drove to Kamakura, to meet Momoko and her grandfather. The drive was just over two hours, however it didn't feel lengthy at all, as our car ride involved Ririko explaining various things that we saw along the way such as how next to the highway there were many tea farms, the different radio stations in Japan and Japanese pop music and a brief history of the highway we were travelling on. I found this all to be very interesting and also enjoyed the scenic view of the coastline that we were driving along.

We arrived in Nakamura midday and had a homely lunch at their grandparent's house. Then, we walked a short distance to the train station and took a train to Enoshima. The train ride was much shorter than the drive and before long we made it to Enoshima Aquarium. And to our luck, we had also made it just in time for the dolphin show. What a sight! To say the dolphins had been well trained would have been an understatement, the tricks they could do were infallible! It was definitely the highlight of the day. We then visited the different exhibits at the aquarium including a 'petting zoo' where I was able to touch a sea urchin and a baby shark! Before we left, we took a commemorative photo and my host family was kind enough to gift me with a copy, which I still fondly look at.

The greatest gift my host family gave me however was their generosity, another place to call home and last but certainly not least, another family. My host family had welcomed me with open arms and treated me like I was a part of their family. The memories we made and the time we spent together are invaluable to me and always will be. Saying goodbye to my host family that day was one of the hardest tasks I had ever had to do. I tried my hardest to not cry when it was time for us to say our last farewells and gave each other a last, warm embrace. However, before boarding the bus, Ririko handed me several envelopes. On the bus, I opened them and inside each envelope was a letter from each family member, Ririko and her father had even gone to the extent of writing them in English. I was moved beyond words not only by this action but also by their words. They had thought as much of me as I had of them – they had accepted me as a part of their family and had enjoyed hosting me as

much as I had enjoyed being a part of their homestay. At that moment, tears were shed and I was grateful for the opportunity to have been able to experience such a wonderful homestay.

That was among one of the many things I have benefited from my trip to Japan. From my trip to Japan, I have benefitted not only in terms of education but also personally.

During the exchange program, because I was for the large majority in a non-English speaking environment, it allowed me to utilise my Japanese language skills as well as further develop them. I was able to learn a wide range of new vocabulary and grammar which I have been able to apply to my Japanese language education, especially my listening and conversational skills. I now find it easier to comprehend spoken Japanese and respond in Japanese. It was also a chance for me to learn more about Japanese culture and I subsequently gained a better understanding of the impressive culture.

In addition, my trip to Japan has also helped me undergo personal growth. I often had to use Japanese to communicate during my stay and before the trip, I was doubtful about my skills and hence was reluctant to use them. However, when Japanese was the only means of communicating with my host family, there was no alternative but to speak it. Slowly but surely, I became more confident in my skills and by the end of the trip, I felt that my self-confidence, not only in regards to my Japanese ability but also in general had increased. I feel that I am now more outspoken and can communicate easier with others.

Furthermore, outside of the homestay, whilst travelling as a group with my school and being one of the senior students on the trip, I was given the task to lead and mentor other students which was a very rewarding experience. This provided a chance for me to apply the leadership skills I had attained through the extracurricular activities I participated in at school as well as gaining new responsibilities, allowing me to tackle challenges in different environments such as finding directions in the busy streets of Kyoto or planning which trains to ride to get to our destinations the quickest.

I believe that the skills I learnt during my trip will greatly assist me in the future, whether it be in the school scene (such as in my Japanese studies and leadership activities) or in everyday life. Moreover, the relationship I came to have with my host family will, I believe, continue to flourish as we still keep in touch. In summary, this scholarship has enabled me to encounter a range of unforgettable experiences and develop skills and relationships that I will indefinitely value. Hence, I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to the Australia-Japan Society of Victoria and Mitsubishi Australia for providing and sponsoring this incredible opportunity that made all this possible. Thank you.