



JAPAN FOUNDATION

Before I start, I just have to say that the 2011 JET Memorial Invitation Program for US High School Students was one of the best experiences of my life. Through it I've met some of the most amazing people in the world, and I've made memories that will stay with me forever. I wouldn't trade this experience for the world.

I was full of adrenaline from the moment I stepped onto the plane for San Francisco. This trip was full of firsts: my first time being on a plane by myself, my first time leaving the country, and my first time going on a trip for more than a week. I had been anticipating this moment for months. I couldn't believe it was actually happening.

I was so excited when I arrived at the baggage claim area in the San Francisco airport, because there was a man standing there with a sign for the program participants. I almost felt like a celebrity. I was introduced to a few of the other members who, apparently, were on the flight with me, although I had no clue.

We took the shuttle to the hotel (which was amazing), and then met some more of the group. It was really interesting, because everyone came from different areas, and I got to learn all about the US. I almost learned as much about the US as I did about Japan during this trip. Anyways, everyone was really friendly, and I enjoyed going to Japan town and eating at California Pizza Kitchen, where I made some of my closest friends.

Orientation wasn't exactly riveting, but spending all day with everyone really helped me become better friends with a majority of the group. At the end, when we had dinner with the Consulate General and various JET and Japan Foundation members, I had a great time! I was interviewed twice, and I made it onto the news that night! I also became friends with my best friend on the trip, Theresa Tran.

The next day, it was time to head to Japan, and I was more than excited! It was a pretty long flight, but we all made it there in one piece with all of our luggage. Customs was a lot easier to go through than I thought. It then hit me... I WAS IN JAPAN! This glorious moment had finally arrived, and my dream was finally coming true.

We piled onto the bus and headed to the Kansai Language Institute. As much as it was fun driving on the opposite side of the road, I was quickly realizing just how bad the humidity and heat is in Japan. I had been told it was awful, but nothing could have prepared me for that. At least there were beautiful views to distract me.

It was even hotter inside of the Kansai Center than it was outside, but everyone was very friendly. We were given our rooms, and we learned how the meal system in the cafeteria worked. It was such a culture shock. I wasn't used to not being able to read everything around me. Plus there was a large communication barrier. I was also facing some pretty bad jet lag, so I was a mixture of tired, scared, and nauseous.

Luckily, after a good night of sleep, I felt much better. We had orientation for most of that next day along with a tour of the institute. Pretty much all of orientation and the tour was in Japanese, so it was a bit intimidating. At the end of the day, we took the shuttle to the mall. I loved it! Japanese fashion is so different, and I enjoyed shopping at all of the various clothing stores.

I was super excited for the next day, because we were visiting Semboku High School, and we were meeting our host siblings for the first time. The school was a lot different from my high school! We did a "speed dating" activity with an English conversation class, and it was really fun! All of the Japanese students were friendly and excited to meet us. It was probably one of my favorite things we did the whole trip.

When we went to lunch, our host siblings were there waiting for us! I met my host sister, Ai, and she was so cool. Her English was really good, and I was very thankful for that! We had so much fun when we went around Osaka. She showed me where Taylor Swift had her concert when we were at the top of Osaka Castle. She also took me to do purikura and to get takoyaki. Overall, it was a great day!

We went to Kyoto the next day, and I loved it! It was like the old meets the new. There were traditional temples and buildings next to modern shops and houses. The temples we visited were beautiful! It was like I being in a postcard. I couldn't believe how spectacular they were. I wish we could've spent more time there.

It was then time for the homestay, and I was more than excited! We went back to Semboku to meet up with our families, and my family was so sweet! I had a host mom along with my host sister, Ai. We were like the three musketeers! We spent the next two days shopping, eating wonderful food, singing karaoke, and learning about each other's countries. It was really hard to say goodbye to my family when they dropped me off at the institute. They really had become like a second family.

I experienced a lot while doing the homestay. First, I was the only non-Asian person I saw for two days, which was really uncomfortable. I'm so used to being around people of all races, so I felt like an alien. Also, I found out that, no matter what country you go to, people are people. We may have completely different cultures, but we still feel the same emotions. High schoolers have the same interests, families interact the same way, and children are just as rambunctious and silly.

The next day I was kind of bummed, because I missed my host family. Fortunately, we learned how to play the taiko drums, and I fell in love with them! I'm on a mission to join a taiko drum group while I'm in college. Afterwards, we split into two groups for our study trips to either Iwate or Kobe. I was going to Iwate, so I went with the group to the airport in Osaka. We stayed at the hotel that was connected to the airport, and it was so much fun!

We flew to Iwate the next morning, and it was beautiful, but sad, because we were in the area that was affected by the earthquake and tsunami, but the scenery was lovely. We went to Kozukata High School, and, wow, it was amazing! The students were incredibly talented in art, music, academics, and athletics. It made my high school look bad. Not only were they talented, but they were also incredibly friendly. None of us wanted to leave, but we eventually had to fly back to Osaka.

The last days in Japan went by so quickly! We worked on our group projects, had the completion ceremony, and tried to do as much as we could before we had to leave. We were all incredibly sad when we had to say goodbye to Japan and return home to the US. We were also sad that we only had a few more days left with each other.

The farewell ceremony in San Francisco went well. We were all pretty jet-lagged, but everything went smoothly. The only rough part was the end, when we realized that we had to separate for good the next day. I had become so close with the kids on this trip, and I didn't want to leave them. It's hard to think about it while I'm typing this. I miss them so much! Thank the lord for Skype!

My flight home was fine, but I was still really upset about leaving everyone. The trip was such an amazing adventure and experience, and I couldn't believe it was over. I still can't believe it happened. It was seriously one of the greatest times of my life, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. I got to live my dream while making some of the most amazing friends in the whole world! If I could, I would do it again in a heartbeat!