



“If You Ever Go to Japan, Don’t Arrive During a Typhoon”

That was observation number one: typhoons make for a bumpy landing, let me tell you. Once we got past the Kansai International Airport (everything was in Japanese! Imagine that!), we 32 American high school students entered the country that we’d all been fascinated with for years.

Observation number two? For me, it would definitely have to be the sudden thrust into a new language. I discovered this new situation at the Institute. Sure, we all know conversational Japanese. But unfortunately, I was particularly shocked at the certain need to actually use Japanese. It sounds silly, I know. In Japan, you’re kind of supposed to use the native language, which is obviously Japanese. It was my first instance that made me realize, “Whoa, not in the States anymore. We speak Japanese here. Now how do I say ‘internet cable’?” Nonetheless, it became a pleasure, and even a comfort towards the end, to use Japanese as the principal language. I know I certainly left thinking in Japanese.

Using Japanese was also quite necessary in the Japanese high school that we visited, Senboku High School. I had chosen to take a calligraphy class, and I absolutely loved it. Turns out, stroke order is important! Thankfully, the students were extremely helpful and friendly towards the verbally incapacitated. Being in their classroom, where everyone was having fun and got along, and everyone cleaned up together, made me both miss high school and wish I had gone to a Japanese high school. I know it’s impossible to make a true judgment based on 3 hours of class split between calligraphy and a Senior English class, but even without understanding half of my Japanese classmates’ conversation, I felt completely at home and had a great time.

One of the things I had been looking forward to since I knew I’d be Japan-bound was the opportunity to go to Kyoto. I had heard so much about it through historical fiction, through lessons my teacher had taught us, and of course I have seen beautiful pictures of the most popular temples. I was so excited, but I never expected it to be more than I’d hoped. Our first stop was Kiyomizu Temple, and it completely took my breath away. It sounds cheesy, but I mean it completely. Yes, the street leading up the mountain was lined with tourist shops. Yes, there were a lot of tourists at the temple itself, both Japanese and foreign. But what truly grabbed me was the number of people I saw praying there as well. Even though this temple, which is centuries old, is now a place for photographs and peace-signs and there are still people who come to put their hands together and pray for a moment. Kinkaku Temple was also beautiful, of course. While you could still see the city of Kyoto from Kiyomizu Temple, Kinkaku-ji is secluded in the forest, where you can neither see nor hear city sounds. It was even more breathtaking than Kiyomizu. I particularly liked it because it was quiet. There were people talking to each other, naturally, but if you just walked along the paths, it was peaceful, and all you could hear was the small streams running through the forest, the trees moving in the wind, and the gravel crunching under your feet. There is no question in my mind that if I’d been given the option, I would have spent nearly the whole trip in Kyoto.

But if I’d spent the whole time in Kyoto, then how would I have gotten to meet my host family? There could not have been a better family to stay with. (Although, I’m sure everyone else thinks that about their families, too) As instructed, I did my best to be polite, by using the most respectful Japanese I know, even going so far as to call my adorable 8-year-old sister “Sora-san”. My host family eventually corrected me, saying that I was part of the family now, and there was no need to call my sisters “san”. After the first hour or so, I felt completely at home. We made takoyaki on their own takoyaki maker, and practiced piano together (my youngest sisters were learning!), and they were completely accommodating to anything I didn’t understand (the shower/bath scenario, for one thing). One of my sisters, the one who had taken me around Osaka the day we went to Senboku High School, had told my host family that I like Ferris Wheels. So what did we do? We went to the biggest FerrisWheel in Western Japan. Was it cool? Oh yes, yes it was. Did we ride in a see-through cabin? Yes we did. When it came time to leave them the next day, I’m not ashamed to say that I actually cried. I wonder how you can become so close to people you’ve known for 24 hours, but I’m still sending them e-mails and we are still talking all the time. The next time I go to Japan, they’re the first people I’m going to visit.

After the home-stay, nothing seemed to compare. Kobe was a great trip, and by far the most solidly “educational.” We visited museums, and learned about both the devastation of the Kobe earthquake in 1995 and enjoyed the art of the new movie The Borrower: Arietty. That day flew by, and so did the next, until we returned to America. It was such an odd sensation! We drove on the right side of the road! You had to hunt down vending machines! People spoke English! And yet I find myself in college now, missing the opportunity to speak Japanese every day and being able to walk down the street and see a shrine on any road. America and Japan are different, there is no question. But I’d like to go back soon, and stay for a lot longer than a life-changing 10 days.