



JAPAN FOUNDATION

When I left Honolulu for the JET Memorial Invitation Program, I knew it would be an adventure. In preparation for this trip, I asked friends about Japan, researched Japanese customs and etiquette, and explored the Kansai area through the internet. With this knowledge and that from my Japanese heritage, I perceived Japan to be a land where tradition met technology. It was a clean safe country, where vibrant modern pop culture came to life. There, I found many of my expectations to be true, but, of course, I learned that Japan offered so much more.

When we first arrived in Japan, many of us students were tired from the long flight across the Pacific Ocean. However, we all were excited to be in Japan after many years of studying Japanese language and culture. In the first couple of days, we enjoyed delectable meals at the institute cafeteria, made quick trips to a nearby convenience store, and learned about the abundant resources at the institute and Japanese living through orientation. With this knowledge, we were ready to adventure through the land of the rising sun.

Our first major experience in Japanese culture was our trip to Senboku High School. There, we took classes and met with our hosts. I was fortunate enough to take a class in calligraphy, and I learned to make ink, brush out the character yume, meaning “dream,” and interact with other students. The students in the class were helpful and accommodating as they brought out the calligraphy supplies and gave helpful tips to show me how to write the character. This calligraphy class confirmed my understanding that Japan embraced its traditional culture, but it also showed me that Japan was a nation of hospitality.

Following the calligraphy lesson, we all attended an English class, where we broke up into groups and held “speed date” sessions in English. We talked about various cultural topics, including technology, culture, and careers. In this way, the American students could share their culture with the Japanese students while learning about Japanese culture. Afterward, we met with our hosts for a bento lunch.

We departed Senboku High School with our hosts for Osaka Castle and downtown Osaka. My host sister was Chisato Iwatou, a kind energetic girl with two younger siblings, Komachi and Issei. As we toured around, I realized that many of my expectations were true with holographic videos in Osaka Castle and no trash to be found. However, what I came to understand was that Chisato treated me not only as a guest, but also as a brother. We took sibling photos at the various sites, and she made sure that I had the chance to see and do what I wanted. She helped me find souvenirs for my friends and family and showed me around the city with what time that we had. Two days later, I would have the chance to meet my whole host family. I was a little nervous but excited.

The next day, we headed to Kyoto to eat at a buffet and see Kiyomizudera and Kinkakuji. The buffet had a number of different dishes unique to Japanese culture and finished with delicious desserts like matcha and chocolate cake. Kiyomizudera and Kinkakuji were both beautiful temples, where we were able to buy omamori, cleanse ourselves with water, and take a plethora of photographs. Many of us bought souvenirs near the temples like fortunes and snacks. Seeing these famous temples gave me a glimpse of some of the traditions of Japan, further proving my expectations true.

The following morning, we bussed back to Senboku High School to meet our host families. I was relieved to see my host mother carrying baby Issei with Komachi and Chisato by her side. They looked like any friendly family that I would see here in Hawaii. We sat down, and I gave my host mother the Kona coffee, macadamia nuts, and tea that I brought from Hawaii. After a short introduction, we headed out to my family’s Hummer and drove to an elementary school where my host sisters had kenpo class. There, instructors offered to teach me some kenpo moves. I struggled a bit, but it was a fun experience that further showed me the friendly hospitality of Japan. After a while, I sat down with my host mother and other mothers and talked about different things like college. In the meantime, cute baby Issei played with a pencil case.

After the kenpo class, we went out to eat ramen. My host family always made sure that I had enough to eat. The paitan ramen and gyoza I ate was warm and flavorful. That night, after another trip to downtown Osaka, my host mother prepared maguro, hamachi, ebi, and ika for the family to make handrolls. The fish was the freshest I have ever eaten. Some of my host family’s relatives and friends came over that night for dinner. We all ate together, and I had great practice speaking in Japanese about Hawaii. I showed them pictures of my family, and my host mother brought out a scrapbook of my host family’s trip to Hawaii twenty years ago. I enjoyed speaking with my host family who so generously let me stay in their washitsu or Japanese-style room. Following dinner, I went to the public bath with my host father, where we soaked and entered a couple of saunas. In one sauna, we rubbed salt on ourselves. The public bath was an interesting cultural experience that I would not have otherwise had the chance to do.

The next day, we had a delicious breakfast of eggplant parmesan, fried fish, and miso soup. I will never forget the quality of food that we had in Japan. My host grandmother cut a sweet, juicy melon. After breakfast, my host father took me to a huge electronics store, and then we ate our final meal together at a yakiniku. The meat was tender unlike that in the United States. Again, my host father made sure that I had enough to eat. I will never forget the warm hospitality of my host family, who gave me the full home stay experience in just two days. I would like to thank them again for their selfless efforts to ensure that I could see Japan as the great country it is. They gave me a connection to Japan on a personal level, and I hope to see them again one day.

After a restful night back at the institute, we shared our home stay experiences, learned about Japanese language in manga and anime, discovered online resources, and took cultural classes. I signed up for taiko and even had the chance to try it myself. The taiko teachers showed us exactly how to hold the drumsticks and how to hit the wadaiko. By the end of the lesson, all of the American students in the class could drum out a beat together. We performed for those who chose to try on yukata and had a great time. Through classes like these, the institute became a gateway to real Japan. We learned much beyond the usual tourist activities, and I am thankful for being given such opportunities.

Near the end of our trip, some of us had the opportunity to go to Kobe. There, we made our own okonomiyaki, visited an art museum, and toured an earthquake museum. The okonomiyaki was difficult to make but delicious. At the art museum, we walked through an Arrietty exhibit, which was like entering the world as a person the size of an ant. These experiences were fun and very worthwhile, but it was the earthquake museum that made a great impression on me.

First, we entered a theater that showed computer-generated graphics of the Kobe earthquake that occurred in 1995. I felt helpless. There was nowhere to go and destruction all around. Afterward, our group walked through a hall that illustrated the damage and destruction of an earthquake through sound effects and props. Then, we entered a second theater where we watched a gloomy story of a girl who survived the Kobe earthquake. Everything shook. Although the girl in the story managed to escape, her sister was trapped and yelled, “Just run!” A catastrophic fire overtook the city. This movie made a strong impression on me and the other students who walked gloomily out of the theater.

Following the second movie, we saw some artifacts from the earthquake, including coins melted together and other broken or morphed items. Then, we passed exhibits about rebuilding. These made me think about all the honorable things I have heard about the Japanese people. They persevere together and cooperate even during hard times. I remember the headmaster of my school speaking about how the Japanese people waited patiently and acted for the common good before putting their own interests ahead following the Great East Earthquake. This selflessness impressed upon me the true nobility of the Japanese people. I do not know if the same could be said for Americans.

Experiences and lessons like these built upon my prior image of Japan. It is true that Japan is clean, high-tech, traditional, and safe, but Japan is also a nation of great hospitality and cooperation. After learning about how the Japanese people work together, I thought about what I would do in the same situations. I now know Japan as an amazing place for its people. The dignity and hard work of the Japanese people make it the wonderful place it is. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to go to Japan on the JET Memorial Invitation Program because it has given me an understanding of Japan on a deep personal level. Therefore, I hope many others will have the opportunity to visit at least one time to see Japan’s amazing mix of hospitality, honor, and cooperative spirit.