

My Trip to Japan: Report

Elin Murray

Late last year, in November 2017, I went to Japan on my school's exchange program trip. It was my first time overseas and so very exciting for me. I have wanted to travel to Japan since I started learning Japanese which was at the start of primary school. Many things about Japan fascinate me including the culture, language, atmosphere and just the country itself.

In Japan I found out that it is quite different from how people generally think of it and that it is very interesting and extremely different from Australia. One thing I found was that it is very clean, even in Tokyo. There do not appear to be many bins but there is no rubbish on the ground, while here in Melbourne there is a lot of rubbish and many people litter. I think my whole time in Japan I only saw about 4 pieces of rubbish on the ground! It is surprising that there is not much rubbish because there are many, many vending machines. They're everywhere! Especially in Tokyo, there are vending machines everywhere you look. But the strange thing is that they only sell drinks most of the time and no snacks (although some do sell soup). The most interesting thing about them is that they sell both hot and cold drinks.

Firstly, we stayed in Tokyo for two nights and a day. We arrived there at night and then the next day we went on a tour of Tokyo. We went to Akihabara and Harajuku. I found the atmosphere and scene of Akihabara very interesting, but a little strange as in Australia you would never find such attention on technology. We also went on a bus tour where we visited some temples and the Tokyo Skytree. I loved Harajuku because it was full of atmosphere and very unique. It also had a lot of things there that I'd heard about before going to Japan (shops, food etc.). With everyone else from my school exchange group I enjoyed the famous Harajuku crepes. They were delicious.



A crepe shop in Harajuku. Very busy!

After we spent a short while in Tokyo, the next day we travelled on the shinkansen to Osaka and then onto the small country town of Sasayama where our Japanese exchange students lived. In Sasayama there is a population of around 42 thousand people. There is an elementary school, a middle school and two senior secondary schools there. My student (whose name was Yumi) and her fellow students, whom other people from my school were staying with, all attend Sasayama Homei Senior High School.

We all have gained a strong connection with each other throughout this exchange program, even if it was only for a mere two weeks in Japan and two weeks of them visiting Australia. It has been amazing, and we still are in contact via social media and internet messaging.



A photo of all the students involved in the exchange on the last day in front of the school

Back row (from left to right): Our teacher who went with us, Mrs Atsuko Brown; Yuna; Erin; James; Yumi; Fuka.

Front row (from left to right): Tomoya; Thang Pi; Sora; Anjali; Elin (me); Sanjala; Noa; Nao.

Once in Sasayama we attended school in Japan at Sasayama Homei High School. One of the many things that I found interesting about Japanese school life was that they use near to no technology while learning. At Sasayama Homei there was only one computer room in the whole school! Students don't have their own personal devices for classwork like in Australia. The teachers all write on blackboards with chalk and everything is on paper. Also the students do almost all their work with a mechanical pencil, while in Australia the teachers make you do your work in pen (except for Japanese class!) To be honest my favourite thing about Japanese school life was lunch. This wasn't because I didn't find their classes interesting or enjoyable it was because the school lunches packed by their parent or from the school cafeteria are so awesome! My host mother packed for me amazing yummy bento every day. And one day when we went to the canteen for lunch we had hot ramen and it was only ¥350!



One of my bento lunches from my host mother and eating lunch together at school

The classes in school were very interesting although I couldn't understand much except for English class. The teacher asked me to read out vocabulary words and everyone had to repeat after me.



Helping in English class



P.E. class was hard work!

I found it interesting that in school if a student is sick they wear a face mask, so they don't infect anyone else. I thought this was very kind. Speaking of kindness, I found Japanese people, and everyone in Japan in general, to be very kind and polite. They also like to speak English to you if they can.



Sushi train with my host family. It was very delicious!

Many customs in Japan were different to Australia such as always taking your shoes off when going inside, and at school changing into slippers. Another thing I found interesting was how Japanese people separate their rubbish a lot, even in public places. For example, at stations and other public places there were several bins: one for PET bottles, one for newspapers and magazines, one for aluminium cans and one for other rubbish. This is very interesting as in Australia we usually only have general rubbish, and possibly a recycling in public areas. Japanese people appear to be very environmentally conscious.



Karaoke at my host family's house. It was very fun!

In Japan religion is a very big part of Japanese culture, especially Buddhist and Shinto religions. We visited Kyoto and while we were there we saw many things including the 1000 torii gates, the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine and the Tofuku-ji Temple.



The Autumn leaves in Kyoto were very beautiful

As part of my trip to Japan I also had the opportunity to participate in making some traditional Japanese pottery. It was very interesting to learn the history and culture surrounding this traditional art.

With my host family I visited a few places. I visited Takeda castle ruins with my host mother and host grandmother. On that day we also went to a town called Izushi where they were famous for their soba noodles. I got to try them, and they were very interesting. It was a very different experience. The noodles were served on 5 small plates for each person. Also, with the noodles there was raw grated yam and raw egg served along with a special dipping sauce. To eat the noodles, you had to eat the first plate sprinkled with salt then the other plates of noodles were put into the sauce with spring onions and you had to eat the noodles out of the sauce. I was delicious and a very interesting way to eat.

Staying at my host family's house was an interesting experience. There were not really very many things that I found challenging and overall it was ok. I did find a few things challenging though; such as the different way of bathing. In Australia I shower every morning, so it was strange to only shower at night. I also found it strange that you had to shower before getting in the bath. It was also different that the bath had a lid, but I liked it as that meant it stayed nice and hot for a long time.

One other thing I found challenging was having food in several small dishes rather than one large dish. It was a bit difficult, I found to go from dish to dish constantly while eating. Despite this, I didn't mind it too much and it was an interesting new experience.

The last thing that I found challenging was communication as the only person who could speak English was my host sister Yumi. Although she couldn't speak English my host grandmother did try and make an effort to speak English which I thought was very nice and considerate.

I did not speak very much to my host sister as she had a bit of an introvert personality I think. Although I didn't talk to her very much she was still very kind and I communicated a lot with the other family members especially the host grandmother.

Probably the most fun part of my trip was visiting Universal Studios Japan with all the Japanese and Australian students participating in the exchange. We all travelled by train to Osaka which is about an hour from Sasayama and then caught another train to Universal Studios. At Universal Studios we had lots and lots of fun and enjoyed many of the rides there. It was good to spend time with our Japanese friends all together for a whole day while not at school.



At Universal Studios Japan in Harry Potter World. I had a great time!

In Japan I tried many new foods and experiences. Some of these were experiencing a big city like Tokyo, trying lots and lots of new foods like udon and also experiencing Japanese school life.

Japan and Australia have a significant contrast in many, almost all ways. It has a very traditional culture although I do think that young people in Japan are becoming more Westernised.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Japan and I would like to go back there one day. I didn't want to leave!! The culture, language and traditions interest me a lot and I love to learn about them. I would like to learn a lot more about Japan soon. My trip to Japan has enhanced my love for Japan and encouraged me to further continue my Japanese studies at school and hopefully beyond.



Farewell party at school. Bye bye everyone!

Thankyou very much for allowing me to have this experience in my life and giving me this opportunity to participate in this exchange program which otherwise, without your support, I would not have had. It was one of the best things I have ever done, and it was well worth it, especially to be able to experience it with some of my closest friends and make some new ones along the way! THANKYOU!!!!

