

My Exchange Experience in Japan

By Aaron L.

I was on my way to San Jose for the Youth for Understanding (YFU) orientation for Japan two days after school ended. I was sad to say goodbye to all my friends knowing I would not see them for six weeks but I was excited about my visit to Japan.

When I arrived at the dorm where the orientation was held, I felt like an outsider because I did not know anyone. I made a few friends during the orientation. I learned a few helpful things, but most of it was just pointless and stressful. I was very happy when the day came around for us to hop on the bus and head to the San Francisco airport.



Our YFU group to Japan arrived somewhat late in the afternoon so we had to stay in a hotel for a night. The next morning we got up and went to the train station. I took the train for 2 hours where I was going to be united with my host family, the Yamashitas.

My host mother, Akemi, host sisters, Chisato and Yuki were there to greet me at the station. It was a little awkward at first, but after couple of days went by, we became a real family. We visited many places and ate many different types of food. I got to see the Kinkaku-ji. The scenery was spectacular and the temple was magnificent. I also went to the Nagoya Castle. The architecture of the castle was beautiful and the exhibits were very interesting.

One of the most interesting festivals that I had the privilege to participate in was the Tai Matsuri Festival (Sea Bream Festival). The sea bream, which measures 18 meters long and 6 meters high, is made of cloth and bamboo. Various sea breams of red and black parade the street with young men hoisting bamboo poles built under the sea bream. I was

one of the youths carrying the sea bream in the parade. The fish weighed a ton; at least it felt like it.

Towards the end of the parade, there is a clash of the red and black fish where injuries can occur to the people carrying the fish. The festival was for offering prayers to catch abundant fish and for maritime safety.

My host family wanted me to have the best experience possible. They would always ask me what I wanted to do or what I wanted to eat. My host mom was one of the most generous persons I have ever met. Whenever friends stopped by to say hi, she would get something to give them as gifts even if they had stopped by just for five minutes. She did not speak English, but we somehow communicated with each other. The language barrier forced me to learn Japanese so that I could communicate somewhat with my host mother.

My oldest host sister, Chisato, spoke English and took me places while my other host sister was at school and my host mom was at work. She was the person I would talk to when there was a problem or if I wanted help. She made sure that whatever I wanted to do, I got to do it. She would always make me breakfast every morning. I feel like I connected with her the most out of the entire family.

Yuki, my eighteen-year-old host sister, was the sister that I played with most of the time. We always played some type of game or lit fireworks outside. She did not speak much English when I arrived, but I taught her and now she is almost fluent. Whenever we had a chance, we would watch a scary movie late at night. While I was in Japan, we probably watched about ten movies together.

I am so lucky to have been matched up with this family because it was like a match made in heaven. We considered ourselves as a real family. I got to meet my host mom's brothers and parents. They were very nice to me. I also got to meet family friends and their children. The family took me fishing at midnight. I had not done this before and it was fun.

For some reason, Minami-Chita-Cho schools did not have programs to accommodate visiting foreign exchange students. My host sister, Chisato managed to make arrangements for me to attend their local high school for three days, the middle school and the elementary school for one day each. I met many students in high school who were of my age group. They were very curious about my school life in the United States. They asked me many questions and they also taught me various Japanese words.

My experience in the middle school and elementary school was different as the students were much younger and I could not relate to them. One of the elementary school teachers gave me a warm-up suit that belonged to his relative when he found out that I was a big fan of soccer. I felt very welcome in all the schools and the students were very friendly. They all greeted me with the universal peace sign with their fingers.

About a month after I got home, my host sisters came to visit us. They were only staying for ten days so my family and I were going to make their stay the best ten days possible. We wanted them to experience the way we live and treat them the same way they treated me— loving members of their family. To me they are my sisters.

When they arrived at my house, we had a barbeque with all my friends and a few of my parent's friends. I wanted them to meet my friends early so that they would be able to get to know them during their short stay in the United States. My sisters wanted to buy many things and so we took them shopping in San Francisco. They spent a lot of money on stuff that I didn't think was possible. They had to get two more bags just so they could take with them everything they bought. In total, they had four big suit cases. I think that they had a good time, but I wish they could have had more time at my house. They seemed to bond with my parents.

I look back on my experience in Japan and I am firmly convinced that it was not just coincidence that brought the Yamashita family and my family together. I was a total stranger placed with the Yamashita family in the eleventh hour. I did not specify any particular preferences as to the kind of family I wanted to be placed in. My host family

informed me that I am the seventh and the last foreign exchange student to stay with them because they will not be able to host any more students due to changes in their schedules. This is their first time having a male foreign exchange student and they did not know what to expect. Little did they know that we would develop this amazing bond. Having come from a family with an older brother, and coming into to family of girls was definitely a different but great experience for me. It was so cool to have older sisters to spoil me. The dynamic is so different.

For the Yamashita family, it was very different having a male child around the house. They welcomed the change and loved having a new younger brother around the house. We laughed and clowned around a lot at the house just like real siblings would. The love and acceptance I felt from this family is indescribable. It takes a very generous and loving family to make me feel like a part of their family.

Leaving Japan was a very painful experience for me. On the one hand, I was looking forward to returning to my girlfriend and friends whom I missed so much while on the other hand, I was so sad to leave this family behind. There were a lot of tears when we said our good-byes even though I knew I was going to see my host sisters in a few weeks.

So that was my experience with the Yamashita family. I was not sure what to expect when the sisters arrived at our house. My parents seemed to get along with them very well and they felt very much at home. They addressed my parents as mom and dad. We went to Lake Tahoe, Reno, Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Francisco. They tried different foods like Indian, Mexican, American and Chinese food while they were here.

Since the sisters' dad passed away many years ago, I could tell that they really missed their dad. In couple of days, they were just like one of the kids in the household. My parents bonded with them instantaneously even though they were total strangers in our home. From my parents' perspectives, I could see that having two instant daughters in the family really completed the family. We had so much fun traveling and doing different activities together. We had wonderful times sight-seeing, shopping and visiting the

aquarium in Monterey Bay. They know that they are welcome in our home any time and likewise, they have opened their home to us. It has been about a week or so since their departure from the United States, and I already miss them terribly. We keep in touch via email. Our lives are not the same any more.

I would like to thank Mitsubishi Electric for their generosity in providing me with this great opportunity to visit Japan. I would also like to thank YFU for all their arrangements and placement efforts. At first, I was reluctant to apply for the exchange program but I am so glad that I did. My Japan trip has changed my life forever. It has brought two families together who would have never known each other if it weren't because of my visit to Japan. I feel very fortunate that I was able to be immersed in a totally new cultural experience and be exposed to a new language. It would have been a totally different experience had I gone to Japan as a tourist. I will cherish this valuable experience for the rest of my life.

Once again, Arigatou Gozaimashita!

My Trip to Japan

By Emily R.

When I left for Japan, I had absolutely no idea what was going to happen. I had nothing to compare it to, so everything I experienced was a surprise to me. One of the reasons I decided to apply for a trip to Japan was because I knew very little about Japan. I thought, “What a great way to learn and experience a completely different culture.”

This trip definitely surpassed the expectations I had. For one I became a part of the family. By the end of my trip I was so comfortable and so close with my family, which in a summer I didn’t think was going to happen but I’m so glad it did because now I feel like I have extended family in Japan.

Being thrown into a different culture is one of the most exhilarating and scary things a person can experience. Everything is new, the food, the language, the nature, the people. At first it was a hard adjustment but almost immediately my host family made me feel at home.



The food was absolutely amazing; I still miss my host mother’s cooking. The language was a barrier but my family and everyone I met was so understanding and helpful about it, and it wasn’t as big of a problem as I thought it was going to be. As a tall, blonde Caucasian I definitely stuck out like a sore thumb in Japan. I’m not used to that attention in America, especially living in New York which is known for being a melting pot. Despite standing out, everyone I met was so kind, inviting, and really made me feel welcome.

The impression I got of the Japanese people was that they are very hardworking, fun-loving people. They are also respectful of their elders, of each other, and nature. The streets of the cities are so clean, there is no litter and there are recycling containers

everywhere. Many people ride bikes instead of driving cars when possible. I really got the feeling that the Japanese people are doing their part to be eco-friendly.

I was lucky enough to stay near Mount Fuji; and although I didn't get to see it too much due to the humid weather, whenever I was lucky enough to catch a glance of Mt. Fuji it was truly beautiful. The Japanese feel pride in Mt. Fuji as well as other mountains and Japanese gardens. Everything in a Japanese garden is planned out and has a reason for being there. When I look back on Japan, some of my most wonderful memories are of its beautiful nature.

My host family was so helpful. They spoke enough English to help translate things for me; they were understandable of our different religions and feelings towards certain things. I had a wonderful time visiting shrines, temples, and museums and learning about the Japanese history and culture.

My advice for any future participants would be to not go on this trip with high expectations. Instead, go and just enjoy everything as it comes. By staying in a house with a Japanese family I got to experience a culture hands-on. It was an amazing experience and something I will most likely never experience again in my life. I'm so lucky to have had spent my summer in Japan because so few people get an opportunity like the one I had.

I recommend this program to anyone who is thinking of applying. If I ever get the chance, I will definitely visit Japan again. The Japanese country has a lot to offer and is so very beautiful and I only have good things to say about it. I leave Japan with great memories, an extended family, and an experience which changed me and made me a stronger person.

I Visited Incredible Areas

By Forrest G

I have always wanted to vacation in Japan; however, I never expected to have the opportunity to see Japan the way I did. Earlier this year I experienced things I would not have been able to without the privilege of traveling as an exchange student for six weeks in Okazaki Japan. I received a Mitsubishi scholarship to travel to Japan through a world-wide youth exchange group called Youth for Understanding (YFU). While living with a Japanese host family in June and July I attended a Japanese tech school and participated in school clubs. I visited incredible areas an such as the Golden Temple and a Miso factory. I also partook in family events and lived as a Japanese boy would.

When I arrived in Japan, I had few ideas of what to expect. Through American television programs, I could only guess what it would be like. When I got off the plane in Tokyo with all of the other YFU members, we weren't sure where we should go first. We ended up following the arrows and little cartoons to customs and baggage claim. The Japanese YFU staff later moved us to a hotel nearby for the night. Early the next morning, we ate a Japanese breakfast at the hotel. The breakfast was far from a traditional Japanese breakfast because it included home fries, bacon, a bagel, and rice. After leaving the hotel, we boarded a bullet train to meet our Japanese host families. The exchange students with host families living on separate islands, such as Okinawa, traveled by plane.

When I met my host father and mother, they were grouped with many other host families living in the area. After meeting my family and area representative, my host family and I rode a train another 30 minutes to arrive at my new Japanese home. My host family consisted of my host parents and three host brothers, ages 12, 10 and 1. My host father spoke English very well (he had spent a year here in the states many years ago on exchange), and my host mother spoke enough English that communication wasn't too hard. My host brothers spoke very little English, but it didn't turn out to be an issue since we found other ways to communicate or did activities together like playing Chess and catch, that didn't require a lot of talking.

The house was very nice and it was larger than I had expected, however train tracks sat right across the street from the house and trains would drive by every few minutes (after a few days, however, I became accustomed to the trains driving by). Just living in a busy city was new for me since I've lived in Columbia my whole life. One thing that was very different in Japan was that although there were bedrooms in the house, my host family slept together in a room on the ground floor I had my own room on the second level. The room my host family slept in was a traditional room for sleeping and it had no beds. They slept on mattresses in a small room with a soft floor.

On my first day with my host family, I was feeling a bit sick from the train ride, so my host family let me go to bed early. The area I was staying in Japan did was not much hotter than New England in the summer, however, it was much more humid. Air conditioners are used often, however the air conditioners should be shut off if that room is not being used.

The next morning, my host brothers went to school and my host father went to his work at Mitsubishi Automotive. I was feeling much better and ran some errands with my host mother, including the grocery store. It was similar to an American grocery store; however it sold a lot more fish and starch products. Most of the meats were imported and some meats and fruits were imported from America.

Within a few weeks, my host family took me to many fantastic local attractions, including the A-Bomb Dome in Hiroshima, the one hundred yen store (Japanese dollar store), shrines and temples, "Ninja Village" (where I learned to be an official ninja), the Dog Zoo, and Okazaki Castle. Since I was living with a family I attended events that most tourists would not, such as a Buddhist funeral (unfortunately my host mother's mother died shortly after I arrived) and a ritual blessing of my host family's car by some Buddhist monks after the car was deemed unlucky. Although my host family has two cars, they get around the city a lot on bicycles, which is primarily how I traveled to school and the mall on my own.

I visited many places with my host mother and my one year old host brother, Ha-Chan, while my two older host brothers, Ko-Chan (twelve years old) and So-Chan (ten years old), and my host father were at school or work.

I attended a Japanese tech school for a couple weeks with an American girl, Jennifer, who was also in the YFU exchange program. Jennifer's host sister, Yu, was the same age as us and spoke English very well since she had previously been on exchange for a one year YFU program here in the U.S. The first day was mostly an orientation for Jennifer and me. I met Jennifer and Yu the next day at the "Aeon Mall" (a local mall no more than three miles away and an easy bike ride). We walked around and I spent most of the time there following Jen and Yu around the mall because they seemed to know where everything was (apparently girls and malls is universal). Soon after, we rode our bikes to the "Daiso" (Japanese dollar store) to buy some school supplies.

My first day of Japanese school was very exciting and I was very excited to be introduced to everyone. At least seventy percent of the school was made up of girls, and only about thirty percent boys. Jen and I were very popular at the school despite our poor Japanese speaking skills. She and I decided to join the soccer club. The soccer club, however, was a club only for girls. Because I was only going to be joining the school for about two weeks, they allowed me onto the girls' soccer club.

During school, I took English classes such as English and Business English. I was interviewed a lot and I talked a lot about myself in front of the class. I was asked about my heritage and the class laughed when I told them that I was mostly Irish, German, and Polish. I also watched "High School Musical 3" in English with Japanese subtitles in my English class. Most of my classmates agree that High School Musical is a bad movie.

At the end of my two weeks of school, the school closed for their summer vacation break. Even though I had been there such a short time, my class put together a scrap-book where everyone contributed a page and wished me well. I couldn't ask for a better keepsake.

Although the clubs continue after school ends, I decided to spend the rest of the trip with my host family. My host brothers loved Pokémon and they invited me to go to watch the new Pokémon movie with them at the Aeon Mall. Anime, cartoons and Pokemon are everywhere in Japan. Of course, I didn't understand the movie very well because it was in Japanese, yet I still had a great time with my host brothers. I also went to a Japanese grill house with my host family. We ordered what seemed to be chicken and pork shish kebabs. I believe I also ate a cow's tongue without realizing it. That's OK, though...the sushi I had over there was amazing and more than made up for it.

When the day came to leave Japan, I was excited to go home and see my family but also very sad to be leaving my host family. My host family gave me an opportunity of a life time and I am very grateful for that. I could not have asked for a better host family. Each day I spent with them was unique and every day was fun. Now that I'm home, I've still kept in touch with my host family. They send me home-made cards and letters and it's nice to know the world has gotten a little smaller now that I have a family in Japan.