

## Day 1:

The first day we had arrived, at around 9am we landed at Nagoya Airport, tired from the layover in Singapore from which we left at 1am (Singapore time), the sudden humidity that my body slowly yet steadily coped with as well as the fact that I couldn't sleep on planes.

Before actually meeting our host families, it was planned we go to Nagoya Aquarium and engage in some sightseeing (whilst trying to remain awake). I'm not complaining, it was quite interesting to see, in fact it was the abundance of vending machines that got me through the day.

The first meal I had to have in Japan was a favourite, Katsu-don. Luckily within the 'Jetty' shopping complex nearby, one of the first restaurants visible specialised in Katsu-don, at my luck.

Within this particular tourist spot complex, there were three main attractions to visit, yet due to my tiredness and jetlag, only visiting one still sufficed, which was the aquarium of course. Orangina and Pocari Sweat can only get you so far. At the aquarium, the main event was the 'Dolphin Show', a show that I did not think existed until then; a series of choreographed routines and tricks performed by dolphins and 3-4 trainers in time with an upbeat tune, making the audience engaged for the 15 minutes it lasted.

After our time at the aquarium ended, it was time to depart Nagoya for the next one and a half hours to our sister school in Japan, Takada High School, where we were finally able to meet our host and their families after emails being sent back and forth in our respective countries. I had finally met my host, Shoma, who was into baseball as much as the average Aussie was into footy and who had just won his match before meeting me. Despite learning Japanese in High School, finally being able to integrate it within my everyday life was at first a bit difficult, yet exciting to an extent; thus why at first I may have stumbled many sentences and said something completely different to what I intended.

We went back to his home and settled, and from there I began to learn and adopt Japanese mannerisms and customs (which I still do today, even in Australia).

Even though it was only 7pm, had dinner and I only chatted with my host, his mother and grandmother for just under an hour and a half, I was excused to take a rest, the tiredness in my eyes were clearly visible. It was a tiring, yet good start.

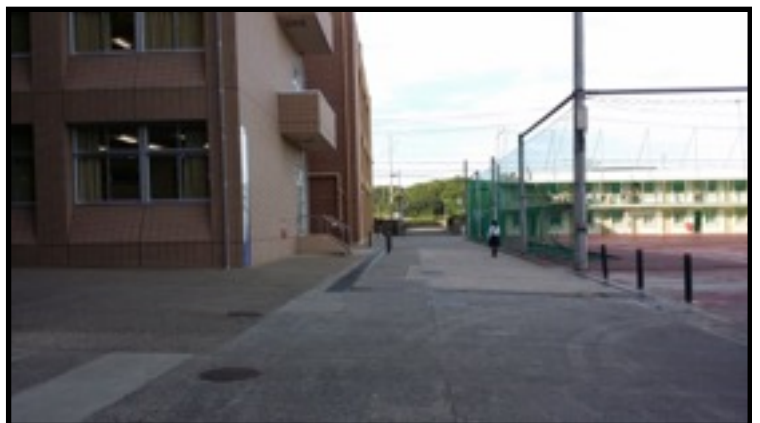


Nagoya Aquarium

## Day 2:

My ability to use what I learnt in Japanese class into everyday life was gradually improving. I was able to hold conversations with my host family and including others I had met at Takada High School to where my lack of various vocabulary took me to. One thing before I continue though, it is quite clear that the Japanese Public Transport system is substantially better than Australia's. Not a moment where a train or bus was ever late.

At Takada High School, the students from Parade and St. Monica's were taken on a school tour as well as a nearby temple (Honzan Temple) and had to introduce ourselves in front of the entire school during a



Entrance of Takada High School

brief assembly before they commenced third period; for around 30 minutes, a number of us were teaching those that don't study Japanese at all how to say the basic "Hi, My Name is \_\_\_\_, nice to meet you". It went mostly smooth, a few bumps here and there but it was all good in the end. When lunchtime came around, we were picked up by our hosts at the 'Exchange Student Room' in Takada High School to go have lunch with them in their respective classrooms. I had met many people during that time, particularly Shoma's best friend, Ryo, who actually taught me how to properly use chopsticks in a span of five minutes. From there on, there was no more awkward asking of others to use a fork, I became a professional, oh yeah.

After lunch ended, we all assembled back into the Exchange Student Room and were split up into two different groups to visit a music class. Within the music class, we were taught how to sing the traditional Japanese song 'Furusato/Hometown' as well as watched the Sound of Music, a film I had not heard of for a while.

When the 'end of the day' bell came around, I suspected only a tiny bit that I was going home, considering some of my friends were yet I was handed a pair of spare sports uniform from my host and was offered to join the baseball club activity for the day, to which I gladly accepted. My friends that joined me in the club were all treated as if we were a part of the team, which felt good considering that not a lot of people if not all want to feel like the 'outsider'. We engaged in the typical catching, batting and practising for a match until around 5:30pm and proceeded to return home. There I met so many more friendly faces from the baseball club, particularly Yuuzo, Ezumi, 'Goro', Kanami and lastly, Saho, who was actually my assigned 'language partner' for an organised program at another day to come at Takada. It was quite the pleasant surprise meeting her this early already.

#### Day 3:

Another day at Takada High School meant it was another good day, it honestly felt good to want to go school again; the atmosphere, the people and the range of activities one could engage in did not feel like the typical schooling environment (from an Australian standpoint).

All of the exchange students were taken to various classrooms of different subjects and learning what it was like to be in a Japanese classroom. There weren't much differences to an Australian school I would say, but regardless there was a little that made it all the more interesting. We engaged in helping out an English class and helped them practise for an oral assignment by conversing with them in just English; they all did their best to refrain using Japanese words or even their translating devices which I was grateful and impressed by.

We then engaged in subjects not commonly found (and most likely, not at all) in Australia, Calligraphy and Judo. Prior to this, I had done Calligraphy once but I did very poorly, although I had applied the principles from before and now, it's looks only half-decent! Go me.

After school had ended, of course there were club activities again, probably the most interesting aspect of Japanese school life. However, instead of joining a club today, my friend and I decided to take a little tour of the variety of clubs present, such as tennis, soccer, baton twirling, swimming, horse-riding (surprising), cricket (even more surprising) and kendo. Whilst walking around, we had ran into some old friends, other Takada students that came to



Basketball Club after school at Takada

Australia this year and who we and our friends hosted. Even though we had seen and talked to each other briefly, it was good to finally catch up in person. The definite highlight throughout the whole day.

Day 4:

After two days at Takada High School, we were taken on an excursion to the Ise Shrine and the nearby traditional shopping and restaurant district, Okage Street. This was the only day throughout our whole trip that it rained, although it didn't make it worse or spoil anything.

Ise Shrine was an old Shinto site where approximately every twenty years, the entrance gate had to be replaced due to the lack of durability in the natural materials it was composed of. We were taught the old tradition of self-cleansing before entering a holy site as well as other rituals and customs such as throwing coins and praying for good luck. We were only there for a short while so there isn't much I could talk about, more so what I can remember clearly.



Okage Street

But after Ise Shrine, we went straight to

Okage Street, a traditional-Japanese style district and walked around for two and a half hours. A group of 4 of my friends went around and settled on an Unagi/ Eel Restaurant, which we didn't know at the time, but Unagi is not the cheapest of all delicacies in Japan. Delicious, but not cheap. In order to save spending money for later ventures, we shared one meal among two people. Although despite the price tag, it was worth it, it gave us more of an experience to do so.

We did have another activity planned, which was visiting the Ise Shima Sky-line Road, but due to weather conditions it was cancelled and what ended up happening was going to a local shopping centre and buying snacks for the two hour trip home. Still not a dull moment though.

Day 5:

Once again, we were at Takada High School, and once again, it was a good day.

Today we were assigned to our 'language partners' for the day and once again I was reunited with Saho from the baseball club, as well as Riku, my other language partner although I only shared two classes with him, which was English and Japanese (National Language) in the first two periods. In English class, all the Takada students had to interview their partners first and then introduce their language partners in English, it was a bit amusing since a couple of them decided to break halfway and proceed more comfortably in Japanese, which broke others in the



Inside a Takada Classroom (Art class)

classroom into laughter as well.

After those two classes, with the aid of other Takada Students, we began writing our farewell letters to our host families already, which felt a bit weird considering we were only halfway through the trip and writing a letter this early would not have felt as sincere as if I were to do the day before I left.

However, the Takada students were able to help us clearly translate what we felt at the time more fluently than we ever could, so for that we were grateful for.

When school had finished, again a group of us and our hosts decided to walk around the club activities and show us even more, beyond what was visible on the outside. A couple of buildings and few flight of stairs later, we found ourselves wandering into the music, volleyball, basketball and table tennis, but primarily staying at table tennis because we found a free table and decided to have a game of our own.

When all the club activities were coming to an end, we all took the train home to Ryo's house (the one who taught me how to use chopsticks) and he threw some of us a pizza party, although the pizza was quite a pleasant surprise; never have I ever thought Teriyaki Chicken would ever make it on a pizza. But it did.

And it was so good.

By this time I had begun utilising my Japanese much more, I had learnt so much more useful phrases and words to help sustain a conversation and expand my knowledge for when I come back to school. I had also learnt that there is Teriyaki Chicken pizza and I still cannot get over it.

Day 6:

It's Day 6 and we found ourselves going on an excursion to Kyoto, one of the highlights of this trip (along with Osaka) considering it's one of the most famous cities in Japan.

After being in a semi-rural area for the majority of the time (Tsu, Mie, where Takada is based at), we were able to finally get a taste of the urban environment (not that being in a semi-rural area was bad, it's still really good, it's just that we finally got to see what was fed to us through the media and photos that circulate widely through the internet).



Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto

We first visited Kiyomizu Temple and were able to get a good view of the city of Kyoto, as well as engage in more of the traditional rituals and sites, such as cleansing yourself in one of the three water streams that grant either love, health or success. The atmosphere surrounding the Kiyomizu Temple was amazing, the temple itself, the surrounding sites and those traditionally dressed in Kimonos were all huge factors to this.

We then embarked into the closely shopping centre nearby, where the majority of all my souvenirs were bought as well as the first time in a while where I ate vanilla ice cream, that wasn't bland. A group of my friends settled at a Udon restaurant for lunch and that's where I had udon for the first time (I never really expanded my palette back in Australia until this trip).

Afterwards, we took another bus ride to go to Kinkakuji Temple/Golden Pavillion. I may be stating the obvious here, but photos do not do the Golden Pavillion justice, at all; it's a site that can only be truly appreciated if you can directly see it.

Day 7:

Back at Takada High School again, it's actually our last day here, which is a shame because I thoroughly enjoyed every moment at this school, even when we entered a maths classroom, surprisingly. On this annual exchange program, this would not have been our last opportunity to go to the school, but since from this day to the day we leave is a weekend followed by a series of public holidays, this unfortunately marked the last day. Which also meant the farewell tea party was being held today, it all seemed too soon to having a party commemorating our goodbyes, but then again, it was the only chance to do so.

Since it was a Saturday, it was only a half-day at school with a 12:40pm finish. So from then to the time the Farewell Party started at 3, a number of us exchange students and our hosts decided to hang around, use the sports areas and muck around together, playing dodgeball or basketball.

When the time for the dinner party came around, we settled into our seats, socialised with the other hosts and their families and enjoyed some performances prepared for us, particularly the Michael



Farewell Party at Takada High School

Jackson 'Dangerous' performance which a good friend of mine from Takada, Genki did. As a group, all the Australian students had gotten up and sang the national treasure that is "Waltzing Matilda", with only a brief practise a couple days earlier. Then we were all presented with certificates for partaking in the 22nd year this program has been conducted. It was great last opportunity to see those

who have come to Australia for the last time (for a while of course, I'm definitely going back) and to properly see those coming to Australia next year one last time before they do.

Day 8:

Today marked the mark of the series of public holidays that were to come. Apparently, according to one of our tour guides from before, this only happens around once every seven years so in a way, I guess we were blessed to have all this free time to ourselves and our host families, on top of that having more freedom to do what we wanted. Although a lot of the time, I didn't really know what I wanted to do; I didn't want to feel like I was forcing my ever-so hospitable host-family to take me here or there in accordance to my desire, but wanted to see if they were okay with it or if they wanted to go too, doing so seemed a bit greedy to an extent.



Horyu-ji Temple

So then my host father as well as the older brother and sister took me out to Asuka Temple; where I was able to indulge myself in ancient buddhist traditions and learn more of the historical side of Japan rather than keeping my head inside the 'modern world'. On top of that, to travel around the whole estate of which this particular tourist spot covers, we were travelling by bike, which was one of the most fun parts of the trip yet quite the work out, particularly in around a 30 degree celsius heat.

Then after having lunch at a very westernised restaurant (which bought me back to Australia for a little bit), we had ventured out to Hōryū-ji, a UNESCO World Heritage Site containing many of Japan's national treasures and later, Nara Park, where we saw quite an abundance of deers nonchalantly roaming the streets as well as one of the biggest temples and Buddha Statues within Japan.

It was quite the adventurous day with a lot of learning and immersion, but when I thought the day had ended (at 9pm), my host family decided to take to a Sushi-Train restaurant nearby the house called "Sushiro", and from there on my palette just kept on expanding; I've only been to a Sushi-Train once before, but the memories are quite foggy.

The whole day in general was very exhausting, yet more exciting than anticipated.

Day 9:

On this particular day, my host Shoma and the Takada baseball team had a baseball match to attend to, and since baseball is not the most popular of all sports in Australia, I decide to go out of curiosity and genuine interest. It was lucky I did go though, because Takada won 8-2 against the opposing team. It was quite the moment, witnessing such a win yet knowing it was the last time I would see them as a whole, at least it ended on a successful note.



Takada Baseball Game

Later that day, after the match and the celebration came to an end, we had visited another aquarium, the “Futami Sea Paradise”, but this time it was much more ‘hands-on’ and more engaging than the aquarium from the first day. The animals were in closer proximity to the audience and we had to liberty to pat them if we wanted to. Although I did feel a little out of place considering the kids were all from the 4-7 age range, I’m still a bit of a kid at heart, so there was really no shame at all. After the aquarium, my host family offered to take me to the mall and allow to do some shopping for others, which I gladly accepted considering I didn’t buy all the gifts my friends and family wanted yet. We went to CD rental stores, a UNIQLO branch and various souvenir shops and I almost ended up with not enough money left for the later excursion for Osaka and Dotonbori. One thing I will take away from this day though is that from now on, any clothes I purchase, will be from UNIQLO, definitely. As well as the fact that if you pay \$50AUD for a music CD, you’re getting so ripped off it’s not funny.

Day 10:

Today was a day of both reuniting and farewells. Reuniting in the sense that I spent the day with all the friends I made from Takada who came to Australia earlier in the year (including the one I hosted), yet goodbye in the sense that it was my second last day in Japan and it’s going to be a while before I see any of them in the future; although they did promise me that upon their graduation, they would come Australia again and visit me and the others who hosted them, which I am definitely looking forward to.



Karaoke at Round 1 with some old friends

We spent 8 hours at an entertainment complex called “Round 1”, where we went around doing karaoke, bowling and wandering around the arcade and surprisingly, an all-ages gambling area. Even though I have quite the monotone voice and the others could sing substantially better, I was still able to enjoy myself at the karaoke without any awkward feelings. I was essentially bad at everything that I could’ve done at Round 1; 40% of the time at bowling I hit the gutter whilst the remaining 60% I got a minimum of 4 pins each time, (although I did hit the strike once though and win a ‘lei’ during the ‘Random Strike Round’) and I lost nearly all the tokens I could have afforded trying to win a little Doraemon plush key-chain. It had been more than 6 months since we had done something as a group, so it was great to catch up with all of them again in person. Hopefully by the end of next year they can keep their promise and visit us once again upon graduating.

Day 11:

The long-awaited yet dreaded day had come, our trip to Osaka, but our ‘last’ day in Japan. Many mixed emotions were felt throughout the whole course of the day. A lot of us on the trip had been

wanting to go Osaka ever since we were told we had the opportunity to go on this particular year and so, obviously we were ecstatic, yet disappointed that the trip was already reaching its end. We had first visited the Osaka Museum of History and briefly looked at the floors of which our tickets granted us, but we were only there for a short while considering the long bus ride as well as the fact we had to fit in other activities as well.

After the museum, we went to a little restaurant and were taught how to make Takoyaki/Octopus Balls. Prior to doing so, I had heard from many people including my host family that making Takoyaki is much harder than it seems, but when we got around to doing it, I wouldn't say it was the most difficult task of all, but my group found it rather simple and straightforward to do. On top of that it was probably one of the most delicious food I thought Japan had to offer (along with Sukiyaki and Sushi, of course).

Commencing my group's successes at Takoyaki-making, we were set off to roam freely around the famous Dōtonbori as well as at the Nipponbashi Bridge, which was followed by shopping as well as an impromptu hunt for Green Tea Kit Kats., and Green Tea Kit Kats only. Yet this too was relatively short considering we had to make the trip back to Tsu, which took more than two and a half hours.

That night, a number of the hosts and the exchange students all gathered to eat at a restaurant, to commemorate our last moments together in Japan. Tears were already falling before we got to the restaurant but quickly followed by a lot of smiles and laughter due to the socialising that was taking place as well as the number of selfies going around. It almost felt too late to get to know the others I didn't, yet I was still able to do so in the short amount of time left I had with all of them.

That night was probably one of the best of all, being able to squeeze in that last memory with each other before the early morning of our departure. Doing this made the departure process even more painful, speaking frankly.



Dotonbori: Nipponbashi Bridge in Osaka

Day 12 - The Official "Last" Day:

I was about to not include this day, considering we were only Japan for about 4 hours before we had to leave, and there was not much happening except for saying goodbyes, tears and sorrow. I only had a solid 4 hours sleep, yet throughout the whole day, I did not feel tired at all. I woke up at 4:30am, had breakfast for the last time in Japan and got ready to leave with my host and his mother. By this day, the older siblings had moved back to Osaka and Nagoya to study at university, and the dad was a doctor and worked early and late, so officially saying goodbye was not as sorrowful.

Before we even reached Takada High School to leave, we picked up our good friend Ryo, who woke up early to see me and some others off. On the car ride to Takada, he gave me a collection of photos, capturing the memories we made together as a whole group.

By the time we had reached Takada, a good number of us had already spilled tears. We all exchanged goodbyes, hugs and last minute gifts and letters to one another. It felt a bit like ripping off a bandaid, as we were there for only a short time and by all means, had to leave for our flight almost 15 minutes after we arrived, prolonging it would have made it much worse. 15 minutes wasn't really long enough to say goodbye to everyone.

I really didn't want to leave. I really didn't want to go back to Australia and I still don't want to be here. I never thought in the course of my primarily home-bodied life, that I dreaded going back home and sleeping in the comfort of my own bed. It was and still is pretty ironic.

Before this trip, I had three passions in life and three different careers I wanted to pursue, Japanese being one of them of course. Despite knowing what I wanted to do, I was very

indecisive. But after this trip, it is quite clear, Japanese had become my clear number one priority and moving to Japan and working there, hopefully teaching English in a school or doing business there whilst travelling at the same time had become my ultimate life goal. In a span of two weeks, I felt much more comfortable being able to speak Japanese as well as improving, I felt so much more accustomed to the lifestyle here and I now have a number of friends to contact with whenever I come back. As I am writing this, I am saving every little penny, to get back whenever the chance occurs.

Despite the “Post-Japan Depression” and sorrow many of us are experiencing right now, this was the greatest experience of my life, to date. This was a trip that led to personal growth, learning and was a chance to immerse myself in a culture I have had great interest in for a while.

Before I end this journal, I sincerely thank Mitsubishi Australia for giving me the funds to go on this trip after a few mishaps with finances within my home, as well as a huge thank-you to the Australian Japan Society Victoria, particularly Shane, Melissa and D’arcy for reading my application more than 3 months ago, moving me on to the Interview Rounds and ultimately selecting as one of the winners of this scholarship.

Words are really not enough to express my gratitude towards everyone that helped me get to where I was.

Thank you once again,

Alec