

Study Abroad Reflection

Victoria Dickens

I studied abroad for the summer and fall semesters of 2024. The summer program was composed of three sections: excursion (Kyoto, Nara, Kobe, Hiroshima, etc. ;) language (at Kansai University), and internship (at Fellows Creator's Agency), while my fall program consisted of studying at Meiji Gakuin. Overall, it has been a life-changing experience that opened my perspective and understanding of the world, Japan, America, and society. I am so grateful for the opportunity to gain these experiences, share my stories, and ultimately achieve my childhood dreams.

Initially, my goals before leaving for Japan were to speak Japanese daily and make many Japanese friends. I also want to experience the reality of Japanese culture and society rather than the fantasy portrayed by entertainment companies. Ultimately, I achieved some of these goals, but only some things. For example, I did speak Japanese most days, but it heavily depended on where I went when I lived in Shibuya or explored with a group of friends; I mainly spoke English unless I was speaking to an employee. As for making Japanese friends, I met and exchanged contact information with many Japanese students, but during the summer, my only friends came from my program. It took me signing up for an international buddy program at Meiji Gakuin for to make friends with Japanese people that I regularly text and hang out with. Lastly, I experienced many aspects of Japanese culture and society, such as social norms for when I ride the train, take the escalator, try on clothes while shopping, eat at restaurants, queuing in lines, and navigate the city; however, there are many aspects to Japanese society that as a foreigner - didn't necessarily apply to me or other foreigners and I could get away with not following.

For example, how people dress in Japan during the summer differs greatly from America. In Japan, citizens remain modest in how they dress or wear more clothes than most Americans deem standard to protect their skin from damage and tanning. As foreigners, especially Americans, during the summer, we are used to wearing less clothing, such as short shorts and crop tops with spaghetti straps. Traveling around the country in the summer made an obvious distinction between those who lived there and those who were tourists, as most foreigners barely wore clothes to beat the heat. At the same time, Japanese people were fashionably and modestly dressed. After studying abroad for a long time, my goals for returning to Japan are to be more confident in striking up conversations, going out to bars and izakaiya to meet more people, and improving my Japanese.

There are many differences between Japanese and American culture and society. The most noticeable difference I found was patience. Even when Japanese people are in a hurry and possibly running late or are excited about something, queuing in line is very important to Japanese society. From lining up for the escalator to the bus/train cars, exhibits in museums, and more, no one is trying to cut the line or beg to skip people and from my experience. Because everyone follows the order, the queues move faster and are often more efficient even in overpopulated/crowded areas.

Instead of just saying the difference is in waiting, I chose patience as many foreigners are not self-aware nor aware of the world around them and often do what they can to “get somewhere faster” even though they will arrive simultaneously. When I was in Kyoto and sightseeing, my friend and I patiently waited in line to take photos in front of Kinkaku-ji (The Golden Temple); however, when it was our time for photos, even though we were being

conscientious of not taking up too much time, my friend was elbowed out of the way by another foreigner who was too impatient.

After leaving the temple and going to the nearest bus stop to head to our next destination, many Japanese people were queued behind a group of older ladies waiting for the bus. While my friend and I joined the queue, there was this family, and a few smaller groups of couples and friends (mostly Americans from their accents) proceeded to attempt to walk around the front of the bus stop, not even noticing everyone lined up until they felt and saw the daggers being stared at them. In Japan, Japanese people are not likely to speak up and correct someone out of fear of being rude; however, they are not afraid to stare and impart judgment via eye contact and body language. This was a hectic bus stop that had multiple buses running that were more than able to handle the number of people. Still, it was the fact that these tourists had the audacity and impatience to not only try to skip the entire line but even the little old ladies who had been waiting in the summer heat. Even where I am from (south Mississippi), we were raised to at least respect our elders. Once the American tourists audibly noticed that the queue of people existed, they said something along the lines of “Oh? There’s a line?” They proceeded not to get in line; instead, when the bus came, they stood at the side of the queue until they could merge into the line. I saw and experienced many instances of this during my stay abroad, and over time, I felt more and more Japanese as I empathized with the Japanese people, feeling annoyed at their social structure being ignored. Also, I began to appreciate the Japanese culture of queuing and having order even when there are many people.

One of the most memorable and meaningful experiences was when I visited Hōryū-ji temple in Nara, one of the oldest temples once a part of the Seven Great Temples across Nara. This temple held multiple areas that contained some of the oldest sculptures and iron works that

are centuries old, and a few have been preserved from when Prince Shōtoku originally commissioned the temple to be built. The site also contains a Buddhist museum with more artwork done on scrolls telling the history of the imperial family and Prince Shōtoku's dedication to his father and Buddhism even at such a young age. I remember walking up to each sight and leaning close to the chicken-wire, separating people from the sculptures and peering into the dark exhibits. Taking in the history before me and the reality of how natural history can be and how long art can persist. I remember stepping out of the museum and taking a walk off the concrete path and under one of the giant trees, looking around me at the children on field trips to the elderly couples exploring each part of the temple, to the tree above me, and the temple towering even higher. I began to cry. I was utterly overwhelmed by the realization and the awe of everything I was experiencing and what it all meant. Coming from a young country, it is unimaginable to experience and behold something that has stood the test for thousands of years, for stories of people and their lives and creations to be known. I know that this experience will stay with me forever and continue to impact my perspective of life and the time we have here on this earth.

As for overcoming challenges in Japan, I found it hard to strike up conversations and found an uncanny way to solve this. I was initially nervous about the idea, but going out to clubs in the city and drinking with the other club-goers allowed me to speak with Japanese people I did not know. Japanese people tend to "not bother" or talk to strangers and people they do not know in public; however, the Japanese drinking culture allows people to open up and want to have conversations. Another challenge I experienced was xenophobia, surprisingly, in the large cities within Tokyo. Before coming to Japan, I had heard of this, yet living in Osaka for a month, I had not experienced this. However, when I moved to Shibuya, I found more Japanese employees or

servers who refused to speak to me in Japanese and only in English, even though I would talk and respond in Japanese. There wasn't exactly a way to overcome this challenge outside of accepting the attitude towards me in temporary situations while continuing to speak Japanese regardless in daily-life situations (local 7-11 employees, frequented restaurants, etc. ;).

It took living in Japan for around three weeks to a month to notice the impact of how I was perceived in Japan and how it altered how I viewed myself, especially within Japanese society. The biggest thing was my body image. In America, I am average height for a woman and relatively small in size/weight as I'm not super thin but have some muscle to my body - average for most girls my age, but not average for the general American population.

In Japan, I felt huge. My body looks pretty good, and I like the way I look, but Japanese women are skinny with almost zero muscle. It's tough to forget the experience of being able to fit in similar-sized shirts I was used to, but suddenly going from a small in pants/jeans to a large and even then, feeling uncomfortable in the jeans after eating because they became too tight. Another example was shopping for business clothes for my internship and suddenly being a size LL (Large-Large or XL). One day, I was at a mall with my friends, who were all guys besides me. My closest friend commented on a girl ordering coffee and noticed how tiny her waist was. For him, it was an off-handed comment/observation that shocked him. For me, it suddenly made me feel uncomfortable and terrible about myself and my body. I remember calling my best friend back home and talking to her about it and kept trying to remind myself that I'm genetically different, that I work a physically demanding job, that I've played sports all my life, that I exercised and lost 20 pounds the year before and have managed to keep it off. This reinforced Japan's sense of fashion, as most people wear baggy clothes that hide their silhouettes. Baggy-styled jeans have been popular in the last couple of years in America, but I didn't quite

like them - now all my jeans are baggy or long free-form skirts, and most of my shirts are oversized now. I still have some more form-fitting shirts, but I don't wear them as often. Even though, as a foreigner and in terms of fashion norms, I can be considered "above the norm" because I am very obviously not Japanese, the way Japanese society perceives women, in general, makes me feel like the way people would look at me (Japanese people tend to stare at foreigners anyway, especially older people) was more judgmental than it more than likely was. Eventually, I was able to overcome this train of thought when I saw other foreigners who were more significant than me in size or were poorly dressed, as it reminded me that there are many people, Japanese or otherwise, who don't care or let it bother them how they look or how others look. I also came to accept that I will be looked/stared at no matter where I am in the country due to my uniqueness and that it won't change any time soon.

Overall, my experience abroad has been one of a kind and enriched my academics by allowing me to have real-life practice and day-to-day application, growing my skills and putting them to the test. I have improved massively in understanding Japanese through reading, writing, and speaking to a degree I couldn't have achieved without going abroad and being put in a situation that allows me to be surrounded entirely and sometimes forced into only being able to use Japanese. There were also ample opportunities to use my business knowledge and improve my ability to network, negotiate, and market myself throughout my time abroad. I am grateful for the memories, experiences, and knowledge I have gained by going abroad and exploring Japan and my life here. My academics have significantly been impacted and improved in a way that would not otherwise be possible without this opportunity. I hope to continue to experience and grow after graduation by coming to work and continuing my adventures in Japan. Now that I

know I can do anything I put my mind to and accomplish my dreams, the world has become more prominent than I ever could have realized. I won't be able to keep myself from wanting to experience as much as possible.