

Here's my Study Abroad Story

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Program: I started out with six weeks of intensive Japanese language training. Placed in a class alongside proficient and native speakers, I learned to debate, write a report, and even draft a resume in Japanese. Then there was a two week break, the first part of which was spent relaxing in public baths with a view of Mount Fuji in Hakone and afterward exploring the coastal city of Kamakura. For the second part of the break, we all headed up to Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, for a ten-day homestay program that included students from China, Singapore and even Saudi Arabia. Once the homestay was over, it was a quick flight back down to Tokyo and an almost immediate move in to the next homestay family for the fall term at ICU, where I took courses in Japanese-English translation, Japanese economy, and the politics and international relations of China, among others. Due to a conflict in scheduling, I actually had to switch into another homestay in the middle of the fall term, which was stressful at first but was ultimately the best thing that could have happened to me.



Typical Day: Since there were so many different phases in my program it is difficult to pinpoint a "typical" day. The fall term, however, was the most uniform in terms of schedules. I would usually wake up around 8:30 am and eat breakfast with my host mom while we watched the morning news. Then I would commute to school either on a bike through a wonderfully scenic park, or, in the case of rain, on the bus. Class times differed depending on the day, but sometimes I had afternoons to hop on the train and explore the various parts of urban Tokyo, or simply buy food from the local bakery and do homework. In the evening, I would make my way home to the host family and my host mom and I would eat dinner, which included everything from *udon* noodles to salted fish and rice. In the evenings I would either finish up my

homework and sleep or go out with friends. We always had to be careful of time, though, because once the last train left at around 12:15 am you were stuck in the city with no transportation except for taxis (which were expensive).

Highlights: Japan's elementary schools hold a team-based sporting event every year, so my host family took me to see their little kids participate in it. It was adorable watching them, the potluck food was spectacular, and I felt like I was truly part of the family. Tokyo itself is just too amazing. The owl cafe, nestled in the middle of the city, where for a small fee an owl would sit on your hand and then on your shoulder. The convenience stores, where you could purchase rice balls stuffed with salmon or sour plum, various flavors of ice cream and even adult magazines. Shark fin ramen ice cream, which actually had real pieces of shark fin and ramen in it. The ability to take a train just about anywhere because the public transportation was that efficient. And nothing says Japan like the public bathhouses, known as *onsen*. During the fall they have seasonally scented baths like pumpkin, but the one we liked a lot was the "collagen" bath that was dyed pink and smelled like heaven.



Challenges: The biggest challenge for me was (and will remain forever) mastering Japanese. The difficult system of formalities, the English words that have been incorporated into the language but with distorted meanings and the never-ending list of *kanji* characters (Chinese characters that have been modified into Japanese) ensured that most of my academic time was devoted solely to language learning. Not getting run over in the streets of Tokyo was also a challenge. Japan has this unique quality in that its sidewalks will suddenly run out, forcing pedestrians and bikers to squeeze onto the already narrow roads and hope that they don't get clipped by a passing car, which I had the misfortune of experiencing on more than one occasion. Finally, I struggled a bit with the pop culture of Japan, which could be both juvenile and incredibly demeaning toward women and foreigners.

Advice: 1) Go out and explore. Japan is one of the safest countries in the world, and while I avoided some areas I also felt comfortable venturing out by myself, which turned out to be one of the most interesting and self-reflective parts of my trip. 2) Eat the food you want to eat. Studying abroad gets expensive, and sometimes people will cut out food that they want to eat but think is too costly for their budget. I'm not saying go out and get \$300 worth of sushi, but if there's something in the window that you've always wanted to try and is just a bit more expensive than normal, just go for it. As we often said during the semester, "for the *keiken!*" (*Keiken* meaning experience) 3) Keep smiling. Sometimes life gets rough in the new country. It's not easy living away from your friends and family and attempting to establish yourself in a place where everyone knows you as the *gai-jin* (foreigner). But then you will step outside and the sun will be shining, or you will walk past a bakery and inhale the aromas of fresh baked bread and pastries, and everything will get better. Carry on, my friends. Carry on.