

Essay
by
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“The Opportunity of a Lifetime”

During the summer of 2000, the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City Foundation gave me a chance to visit the Kansai area for three weeks. In that period of time, I stayed with three different families, who all lived in different parts of the Kansai prefecture. Because these environments were all so different, I developed an in-depth view of the many different sides of Japan. Throughout my stay, from my first home stay family in Nara (which was classic and traditional) to the modern high-rise apartments in Ashiya to my final home right in the middle of Osaka City, my families treated me with an admirable aspect of Japanese culture: their courtesy and kindness. I will never forget their gracious hospitality toward this foreigner that they had never met.

Though I had only taken one year of high school Japanese (and a supplemental class at City College only a few weeks before the trip), I have always been interested in the Japanese culture. The timeless perfection of Japan's artistic side and the precision of their technology set this culture apart from many others in our world. Needless to say, Japan has flooded much of our American culture with its reliable technology and colorful anime; however, actually embracing the culture through a three-week home stay visit has given me a deeper look at how and why this country runs so efficiently.

My first host family lived in Koriyama City, in Nara. Being one of the oldest cities in Japan, Mr. and Mrs. Fujii's house and surroundings were very traditional. I especially appreciated being in this setting for my first home stay experience. It almost seemed like a storybook -- narrow streets filled with bicycles, traditional 2-story wooden houses, all in the old capital of Japan. However, even though I enjoyed being in this environment, those first few days were particularly nerve racking. I understood how to say hello, and thank you -- but for the first week in Japan, I could not convey much else. If food was brought - "Arigato gozaimashita!". Every morning: Ohayo! Nonetheless, in that first week, I felt as if I had learned more Japanese than an entire high school year's worth at my school. This traditional part of Japan showed me the depth of Japan's roots.

My second host family lived in Ashiya City. Contrary to the extremely traditional setting I was put into the first week, this family lived in probably the most modern of modern Japan. The 35 story high-rise they lived in was complemented by green trees and a small creek. The trees became a source of natural air conditioning on those mushiatsui (Hot and humid) days in Osaka. An ultra-convenient mini-mall stock with the most modern supermarkets and bookstores was only half a block away. The father was the retired Chief of Flight Operations for Japan Air Systems and an avid motor biker. I'll never forget Yoshikawa-san's smile and sense of humor. This type of housing probably reminded me most of an American condominium: compact and snug, almost like a skyscraper. At night, this house showed fantastic views of the ocean nearby and planes landing into Itami Airport.

Since I spent the middle part of my home stay with this family, this was the main opportunity I had at getting in depth a look at the Japanese culture. Coming from an opposite side of Kansai into City Hall gave glimpses of other aspects of Japanese life, such as Koshien's baseball team. High School Baseball, especially during summer, is one of the most popular sports that people like to see. On the way home from City Hall, the Hanshin express would be packed fuller than Muni at rush hour with spectators of all ages awaiting the game. How these trains stay on time remains a mystery to me.

My third host family exposed me to Japanese schoolchildren for the first time. Instead of being retired like the first two home stay families I had been with, this family consisted of the parents,

two children, 9 and 5, a grandfather, a grandmother, and the host father's sister. The grandfather was a merchant who traveled around the world trading fine cloths for Japanese dolls. Though there were two houses, I lived on the fifth floor of Matsu-jinn, the grandfather's shop. Although this was my third host family, this family also spoke the most English to me; but by this time, I was able to communicate in Japanese much more fluently. It was really interesting to see how this family, yet again, differed greatly from the first two. They lived in Chuo-ku, adjacent to Osaka-jo. Being in the middle of Osaka made me realize how extremely hot Japan could get during the day. It was also very exciting living in the middle of all the action as opposed to a more traditional and suburban setting.

The children of the Matsumoto family were one of the highlights of this particular home stay. They took a little bit of time to warm up to me, but once they did, we remained attached to each other until I had to leave. It was ironic that understanding the children was much easier than understanding the adults that I had met. The relationship that Youuichiro and Junko had with their parents were very similar to modern American families. To top it all off, the car they drove was a Ford Escort wagon -- how much more American can one get in Japan?

My three host families gave me three different outlooks on lives that I could live in Osaka, Japan. Though this is only a small sample of the vast array of living opportunities there are in Japan, this glimpse gave me an imperceptible depth of knowledge and understanding of Japanese society. Weeks after I had already returned, I integrated the unique "Sou desu ka's" and "Hai's" so commonly used in the language into my English. I will never forget this unique experience that brought me into the lives of Japanese people.