

**Essay
by
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“My Time in Osaka”

When I first met my Japanese friend in elementary school, I knew what I wanted to do--become Japanese; but because that wasn't possible, I decided I would try to learn the language and culture from her. I learned origami, hiragana, katakana, and how to draw sailor moon. I was fascinated.

Then, in middle school, she went to Roosevelt, and I went to Presidio. My progress paused for two years until I took up Japanese in eighth grade. I had the greatest time -- flash card games, making crafts, rigging the seating chart. I was at the top of my class and passed with flying colors.

Once I got to high school, I began to realize how much learning was ahead of me; but seeing the verb conjugation, kanji and cultural events on paper is so different than actually using and experiencing it.

One day, my teacher presented us with the opportunity to go to Japan for free -- who doesn't like that number? But that offer came with a small price: writing an essay, filling out some forms, and going through an interview. Then, most of the students whose ears were still ringing free put their hands back down, but not me. After having gone through a similar process with summer search, I felt that I had nothing to lose. So I did it, and got in.

When I was asked what I wanted to get out of the experience and why I wanted to go, I gave my answers, but didn't really know what to expect, so I kept my eyes and options open when I got there.

I must admit my first impression wasn't very positive. Our first flight was delayed, and due to that, we missed our connecting flight. This one ticket clerk was very helpful though. She not only rebooked our flight, but escorted us and our luggage to the bus stop, and guided us through the steps of even making a phone call to explain our plight. I guess my travel book was right-- Japanese people are not only brought up to be genuinely polite, but would go the distance to avoid the humiliation of themselves, but for that of others as well. What my sources didn't make an analogy for was how incredibly hot and humid it was going to be; it was like a sweat lodge the moment I stepped out of the airport!

My first host family made me feel like I got the shorter end of the deal, but when I thought about it, everything went to my best advantage! Both of my host parents worked, so I wasn't quite privileged to live the life of a tourist, but that allowed me to soak up the reality of my environment by the practical things that occurred. My host-mom worked by delivering these wheels with revolutionary cleaning brushes to other people's houses, so my Australian-host sister and I got to help.

My Japanese teacher teaches us what he calls "survival Japanese," so that in a case like mine, I'd be able to get away with being able to communicate my most fundamental needs. That was true in some sense, but I felt so alienated when I realized how much more Japanese my host-sister understood and how my host-father spoke close to no English at all. He'd tell me stories and give a few parent-to-child talks where I'd occasionally just nod and smile, even when I didn't pick up more than a few words of what he said. Again, of this turned out to teach me so much more, whether it was by adaption or an actual lesson, which put me to the test when I got lost jogging.

When I first arrived, I was quick to notice the differences, but soon found out that there was actually so much in common with what we had and learned here. Sure, they drive in the right seat on the left lane, that scared me half to death, but their supermarkets, post offices, malls, amusement parks, train system, and even their food, is similar to our local Safeway, or post office or Stonestown or Great America or BART system or Japanese restaurant.

Then I was shipped to my next host family from the countryside of Wakayama to the more downtown-related Hirakata. I was so excited to meet them because they had two daughters, one who was 18 and the other 21. We were immediately eager to know about each other's lives and general culture and demeanor.

Contrary from Koyasan and the various temples we visited in Wakayama, being in Hirakata was geographically more convenient and the time that my family had allowed us to do more things and go to more places, such as the History Museum of Osaka, the Osaka Castle, the Jintai Chuman Exhibition Museum, and Hirakata Park. My favorite though was the "Horror House" at Hirakata Park because it was so realistic, and to tell you the truth, I didn't sleep for a few days after that.

The Sister City Association itself planned a few events as well: the International NFL Game, watching Noh, a boat tour of the Port of Osaka, and the fireworks show. It really opened my eyes to what the city had to offer.

Although Japan is on the other side the Pacific ocean, it seems as though many aspects of their lifestyle is westernized. One distinct difference is their community togetherness. They made an event out of everything; everyone was involved, whether it be making dinner or getting ready for the O-Bon Festival. Everything is celebrated and to its respective degree. Everyone does a task to the best of their ability, so I think they value and appreciate what they have and do.

I had a joyous living experience, discovering what it's like to be part of a Japanese family, culture, and society. It was amazing to see how Japan and America differ from each other, but was a greater epiphany to learn of their similarities. It's an experience that couldn't be replicated; one where you'd have to had been there to know how wonderful it was, and I'm still ecstatic that I got the chance to do it.