

My Sunny Experience in Osaka

When I applied for the SFOSCA scholarship, I had no idea what was about to happen to me and that would change my life forever. Before applying, my biggest anxiety was my family and how they would react when I told them I wanted to go to Osaka. The tensions between the older generations of Chinese and Japanese have died down with time, but I was not sure about my family. I debated for a long time but decided I wanted to experience Japan for myself and bring back memories to my family and friends. When I was told that I had won the scholarship, I was excited and happy, but I also felt pressure and fear; the feelings that naturally come with stepping into new and uncharted territory.

Speaking little Japanese and traveling for the first time out of the country, I was terrified and felt as if we'd never get to Osaka. My fellow student ambassador Gabrielle was my savior because she was quite fluent in Japanese and knew her way around a Japanese airport. Arriving in Japan, the whole scene with rushing people, security lines, white skies, looming storm clouds, and cotton candy humidity overwhelmed me. It was pure confusion, but I joined the frenzy, determined to arrive in Osaka on time. The airport staff was very helpful and most of them knew English. I was impressed with their mannerisms and seemingly 24/7 stunning smiles. I felt that Osaka was going to be an even friendlier place. We arrived at Itami Airport (Osaka), with luggage and dripping in sweat after 14 long hours of travel, we were greeted by the friendly faces of I-House staff members Hyun-soo and Keiko-san. My night in Osaka was spent at a hotel, where I was up nearly all night, rolling in frustration and excitement, due to the extreme heat and the fact that I had actually landed in Osaka.

Upon meeting my host family, I was nervous about how well I would fare as a guest and as an ambassador. I was tense and sat up straight for a long time. Quickly, I fell asleep in the room kindly provided by my family. When I got accustomed to the family, I discovered they had tea rooms on the first floor. Despite the stereotype that the Japanese live in houses with sliding paper doors, it occurred to me that most houses are modern. Living with the Tachibana family, my host mother and father, I learned the life of a regular Japanese teenager. As the days went by, I went to school and visited important places in Osaka that changed my mind drastically about the Japanese. I learned many things about Osaka itself, the culture, and the people.

Every few days I was to show up at the I-House building to visit places such as the Osaka Castle or the Ageless Center with the staff and Gabrielle. Going to I-House for the first time on the bus was the first experience on my own in Osaka, and I was terrified! My host father tried his best to explain to me on paper and in English. I arrived safely and learned a new thing about Osaka: almost all their transportation had air-conditioning, cushioned seats, window shades, and reasonable systems of getting on and off. It struck me most when I realized when I paid my fare after I got off and not when I got on. I felt that Osaka had a very trusting way of dealing with transportation and it made me feel that I was in a safe and respectful country.

My most memorable trip in the I-House itinerary was the trip we took to Dotonburi. I can still see vivid imagery when I think of Dotonburi. When I applied for the scholarship, I wanted to taste Japanese cuisine at Dotonburi. When I saw the streets filled with restaurants, street vendors, and spotted the giant moving crab, I was close to heaven. Going to crowded places such as Dotonburi taught me another thing, watch out for

traffic, bicycle traffic! Although Dotonburi had a huge selection of food, I was surprised when I went to a hidden away shopping center near my house. I had forgotten that the food comes from the people first, before they bring it out onto the tables of the customers. When I walked around the shops, there were very small shops opened in garage like rooms. Each sold different things such as fish, variety of gifts, clothes, or *wagashi*, and had one grocery store. It reminded me of San Francisco's Chinatown, and made me pay attention to what and how they were selling. The small business owners were very honest and friendly, and gave me all the time I needed to browse or study. I could tell almost everything was hand-made because of the sellers knowledge on every item asked about. The *wagashi* stunned me the most, every one unique in their own way. I noticed how the *anko* tasted more genuine, unlike the ones available back home, with more red beans than there was sugar. Although the *wagashi* makers please the modern consumer's expectations, they still preserve the taste by not forgetting tradition must be priority. This is why they are respected and able to keep in business for as long as the existence of *wagashi*.

As my days ended, I often rode the 63-Abeno Bashi home. I waited at Tennoji-Mae almost everyday for my bus. Surprisingly throughout my three week stay in Osaka, I only saw about five sunsets. I don't know if it was the timing or the weather, but I definitely remember one especially golden sunset in Osaka. It was hot and humid, as usual, with hoards of people on the streets chattering away about things that I did not understand, cars honking in the afternoon traffic jam going home, Tennoji-Mae illuminated by billboards and colorful signs, and street musicians singing their hearts out for pure enjoyment. It made me feel like an outsider for a second, but I looked across the street and saw a gorgeous sunset; a giant, round, warm sun that made me feel as if one of these days I will be part of this. For me the sun unifies all corners of the world. No matter when, where, and who you are, the sun still rises and sets above us. I pay special attention to the sun and in my travels these last two summers I've become aware of the sun's unique appearance in each place. Osaka's sun remains victorious.

When I wasn't distracted by Osaka's golden sun, I spent my days at home. My host father and mother made my trip the most heartfelt. My host dad often prayed at 7 in the morning and I joined him because I am also Buddhist. His devotion made me feel I should stick to my traditional ways and not lose them. He was a very friendly man whose laugh still echoes in my head when I think of him. He watched out for me and we joked about me learning Japanese. Tachibana-san made me feel like his granddaughter, which was very important to me. At times I felt inferior because I couldn't learn Japanese as fast as others in OJLEC, the school Gabrielle and I attended for a few days during our stay.

At school, we were in a classroom with international students learning Japanese and I was worried because my Japanese was near level zero. It frustrated and confused me when I went home every day after school, depressed because I couldn't understand a single thing that had been said. My host mother came in and I told her this, and thank goodness she listened, because after her advice the vice principal of the school taught me one on one and made my learning much easier.

I remember the night that my host mother and I bonded. She had to stay up to study Korean because she teaches tea ceremony at a Korean University and I had to stay up for Japanese. I was told to just look over the *hiragana* and it was alright if I couldn't pick them all up in a day, but I felt the need to learn as much as I could, so my host

mother stayed up with me until I mastered almost all of them. Going to school to learn Japanese and bonding and learning at home was another.

The days that I stayed home, my host family and I relaxed in the living room and often had guests because of my host mother's tea ceremony lessons. I met a girl named Chiaki who was in the same grade as me. She and I became great friends and we exchanged information about ourselves and our countries. She had been a foreign exchange student in Florida, so we easily conversed. She explained to me the cultural differences when I had trouble communicating or understanding the things my host family did. She was my companion who supported me when I felt down and had no where to go. It was an unusual but comforting feeling knowing that I could make friends as easily as if in my own country; that the world wasn't as intimidating as it seemed.

My host mother's generous gift, a *yukata*, came in handy when she suggested I go to the near-by festival with Chiaki. I was excited to go to my first festival in Japan. The streets were filled with people wearing adorable and extremely beautiful *yukatas*. It reminded me of a manga I read a few years ago, a scene where it was summer in Osaka and everyone was on their way to a festival. I remember the time I saw a toddler in a *yukata* and her mother walking ahead of her. She looked determined to get to the festival and ran after her mother. The rush going to the festival gave me chills, because it felt like I was part of this whole, a wonderful and thriving tradition.

The recognizable *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki* were everywhere. My host mother made me my first ever *okonomiyaki*, and it was delicious! I noticed how almost everything my host mother incorporated vegetables, and even I, a person with a history of hating vegetables enjoyed them, except maybe the all bitter and popular *goya*. The presentation of food and the taste of Osaka was evident in everything I ate. From the *okonomiyaki* to the *wagashi* at the tea ceremony, hints of Osaka were hidden in each one of them. All the dishes used local fresh ingredients and I barely saw imported artificial products. I know because my host mother brought me to Kintetsu one day and I saw the entire floor filled with females shopping feverishly for the freshest ingredients. I stared at the bamboo shoots, and I had a silly thought of bringing them home to San Francisco. In San Francisco, I'd be staring at a bag of chips, but in Osaka, bamboo shoots. Another misunderstanding that people have about Japan is that everything is overpriced, but I found that only the lazy thought that way, whereas the street smart citizens survive quite well off the normal salary.

My host mother emphasized presentation at every meal, regardless of the size or occasion. I saw this myself, as I often prepared meals and clean with her. The *inarizushi* had to be plated over long leaves from her back garden. Her pumpkin puree soup had to be garnished with *shiso* leaves from her front garden for presentation and taste. It astonished me how much effort and time she spent to make her meals pleasing to the eye and palate.

As my days in Japan were coming to an end, my mind began to overflow with warm memories, and my heart began to ache at the thought of leaving my host family and welcoming Osaka. My host family had their daughters and families visit for the last week and I also got to go to Wakayama and Nara to visit them. I understood more about my host family when I was in Wakayama because it was the place where they lived before moving to Osaka. I learned about my host father's old occupation and how he makes stain glass as a hobby now. I met the man that makes utensils from Japanese bamboo and

learned from my host mother that because imported Korean and Chinese bamboo is cheaper, people buy them instead. She taught me that if you want to do something wholeheartedly, you have to invest in the finest materials, like she does for her tea ceremonies. I also experienced the Song Bridge in Wakayama. To me it was unusual to see a collaboration of four countries; Japan, Germany, South Africa, and China come together and sing a song everyone knew. The song reminded me of my trip and my being in Osaka, the way I was connecting my family and friends to another culture.

My final day in Osaka, I remember the last sunset at Tennoji-Mae: clear skies, blue, gray, white, yellow, and the recognizable golden rays of Osaka's sun. The air was surprisingly crisp and there was a small but pleasant breeze coming from the right. I left Osaka without a tear. This may sound heartless, but I felt I had formed such a strong attachment to Osaka and its people, that there was no doubt I would be back to see everyone and everything once again. I even met Sadayosi-san, a friend of my host family and will be greeting him in San Francisco in October when he comes to visit. The connections I have formed will never be severed, due to my growing interest in Japanese culture as a result of this trip.

When I arrived in San Francisco, I plopped down on my bed. I knew what was going to come. The questions, the demand for answers, and the quest for souvenirs. I fell asleep and the next day, I answered all questions, cleared misunderstandings, and showed pictures of Osaka. Most importantly my return home was the beginning of my mission instead of the end. I still share with my friends daily the memories I have from the trip and continue to verbally correct the misunderstandings my family and peers have about the Japanese. Physically, I would say it started with the introduction of *matcha* to my friends on my birthday, and the 386 photos I eagerly took in Osaka.

I have come back from a trip that has forever changed the course of my life, my views, and my knowledge of the Japanese culture and people. Not only did I change myself, I changed how many people around me think of the Japanese. Through this trip, generously provided by the SFOSCA, more people will now want to visit Osaka to see for themselves. Hopefully, one day I will bring my parents so they will be able to see for themselves what a vibrant, friendly, and thriving place Osaka is.