The day that I received the message informing me that I passed my interview and was able to go to Japan, I jumped up in joy, did a little victory dance and ran to the kitchen to squeal at my mum (homework forgotten). That message made my day.

Till today, I do not regret my decision and probably never will. I forged many bonds and created many memories through this trip. I learnt many things and matured. This trip has definitely made me a better person. For one, I am conscious about my punctuality issues now. Before, my friends often chided me for making them wait and I could only laugh sheepishly. Now, I would be the one waiting instead!

My first meeting with my host family. Anna was wearing the green coat and Anna’s mama was wearing the beige coat. The first thing her mother asked me in Japanese was, ‘Can you speak Japanese?’ and I replied with, ‘a little’.

Outing with my host family at Yuno Kuni No Mori
Anna’s mama insisted we took a picture like this!

At a very serene cafe after our visit to the Yuno Kuni No Mori

The Japanese are very considerate and polite which is considerably different from Singaporeans. During my stay in my host family house, they offered me my host’s room. I had the entire big room to myself. Anna had to sleep with her mother. I was really happy about their thoughtfulness however I could not help but feel guilty for intruding upon their house and causing them trouble. I apologised about it and Anna said it was fine. I was really
touched at their hospitality for a stranger they just met. Even though I was a complete stranger they still treated me like family. Granted there was a little communication barrier. Being on the receiving end of their hospitality, I really admired how the household ran. The mother wakes up the earliest but goes to bed the latest in the household. She has to cook for the family, run the bath but be the last one in the family to bathe, self sacrificing herself for the family which was an eye opener because of the extent that she can go for family. During my stay there, I never got a chance to meet the father. I had asked them about it and they said he was working in a very far place. To be able to leave the family and work away from them for the sake of them is really commendable because he is all alone out there without any kinship. Compared to my household, it’s like the opposite end of the spectrum. We bath whenever we want to, household chores are divided equally, sleep whenever we want to. My father comes home after his work and we would all have dinner together discussing about the events that happened that day. Which I am sure is a normal routine in most Singaporean household. Even though I knew about the cultural difference from research and hearsay, experiencing it first hand was refreshing and unforgettable. I really enjoyed my stay there and managed to relax after the end of exams shortly before the trip. I learnt to respect the difference in culture during my stay there by putting on my very best behaviour.

The shops in Japan are vastly different from the ones in Singapore. The main difference was the shop assistants. In Japan, the shop assistants were very respectful and elegant in carrying out their duties. Regardless of how tired they are, they still treated every customer with the same formalities, smile and service. I feel like their demeanour towards customer would never get cranky or disrespectful no matter how difficult the customer becomes. For example, at the domestic airport, a group of us were buying onigiri which is a rice ball with assorted fillings. The problem was all of us were illiterate in Japanese and we spent a lot of time staring at the different colored packaging trying to decipher what the words on the packaging meant. To the shop keeper we must have seemed suspicious and difficult because we were touching the food products here and there and seemed to have no intention of buying anything. However, she maintained her smile and explained things to us really patiently when we asked her. Her service is something you can never find in Singapore. I cannot imagine the same service provided in Singapore because most of us do not have the patience or willingness to go that far in providing service for customers. I feel like this is something Singaporeans should really adapt from Japanese. Providing good service would be good for both parties because no one would have to fight verbally or physically over misunderstandings and disagreement. I am sure this would be good for Singapore’s reputation and economy as a trading hub. A more minor difference and probably something that does not matter very much is the difference in our 7-elevens convenience stores. Their 7 elevens sold a variety of delicious food like cakes, breads, beverages and etc. In comparison, our 7 eleven is like a mini mama shop compared to theirs. Much like 7-elevens, there was also a stark difference in our vending machines. There is a wide variety of drinks a vending machine offers at a very affordable price. Often you would find an area for vending machines.
Patience was key and imbeded into everything the Japanese people did. Which I learnt through during the gold lacquer plating.

This was a baby seat holder for the mother to put her baby there while she does her business.

Another difference would be their toilets. Their toilets are so advanced that it felt like it was fit for a king. There was there flushing sound (volume can be adjusted) for privacy, toilet seats are warm so I never had to worry about the cold and the toilets are kept very clean. No suspicious wet puddles on the floor or mouldy corners or even bad smelling toilets. This shows that Japanese people are very responsible with their toilet manners and considerate about pee stains left on the toilet bowl seats.

In Kanazawa, we got to see many picturesque views that you will never find in Singapore. We even saw Mt. Fuji during the plane ride! The air was fresh and unpolluted. I never caught
sight of people smoking out in the open and tainting the environment with second hand smoke. Often I find myself daydreaming as I looked at the views, I would imagine what it would be like to live on those mountains or live in those houses. In a way it brought me closer to Mother Nature.

One of the shop display in Yuno kuni no mori

Along the paths of yuno kuni no mori
Attempts to warm my hands and legs because of the freezing temperature in Shirakawago. When the sun came out it became a lot warmer and we went for ice cream!
The spread of dishes we had at Shirakawago. The beef was bomb! I had 3 servings of rice that day!

The Japanese seem to substitute tea for water. I never once saw my host family drinking plain water but assorted teas. Even in restaurants they serve a variety of teas. While in Singapore, you find people drinking carbonated drinks or sweetened tea. This is probably why Type 2 diabetes mellitus and obesity is rising in Singapore. We should swap our coke and pepsi for japanese green tea.

Shoe racks in Japan. Everything is arranged neatly and orderly. Students had to change to indoor shoes before entering the school grounds.

The junior high school in Japan was everything I had ever imagined. From the shoe racks to the school uniform to the students, it seemed like everything came alive from an anime. The students there were very lovable and polite. They were also welcoming and spontaneous
because they were more open and curious about us. Even though I only spent a short time there, I really enjoyed the company of the students there. I had a lot of fun interacting with them. It was easy to blend into their conversations because I had been around that age just recently. (HAHA) I even managed to push one of them to say ‘Hi’ to Alvin because she thought he was good looking. They asked me questions and for the first time I felt like a proper older sister.

Going to the mass games area. I still remember the stares from everyone in the room.
The students were teaching me how to play a kendama which was the traditional Japanese game. People who cannot manage to make the ball enter the stick were said to be unable to marry in the future!

Not forgetting the Wako nursery. I thought I was not good with kids but I was wrong. I thought I was not going to enjoy the visit but I was gravely wrong. I had so much fun. It felt like someone built a time machine and I went back in time as I played with them. The kids were so lovable. They even asked me to pat their heads! This was something very different from Singapore and in Cambodia. In Singapore, most kids would be too fixated on their phones to even acknowledge your presence and in Cambodia, patting their heads was considered as a sign of disrespect whereas in Japan, it was a way to show affection. The games we played were all very nostalgic as were the laughers that echoed in the playroom. During the lunchtime, I sat together with a group of children and answered all the questions they had. It was hard to entertain everyone because all of them was speaking at the same time. Nevertheless, it was very enjoyable as it felt like talking to 8 younger siblings I never had. I even sang ‘ari no mama de’ with them! I learnt the importance of early childhood education there. By mixing kids of different background together, the kids are able to learn to communicate and handle situations that may arise.
Being hugged by the girls after we won the boys after a tough game. The other SP students all joked about them being my very own fan club!

The only thing stressful about the entire trip was the Sayonara Party and the planning phases for it. The Sayonara Party was the perfect opportunity to convey our gratefulness
and thankfulness for the hospitality of the KTC staffs and host families.

The first challenge was the language barrier. It was a tremendous challenge for a first timer like me to help with the planning for this type of event much less programmes that can cross the language barrier. This was a problem that none of us would have to face if we were to be planning for an event in Singapore. In order to convey our feelings, I felt that the event should be hosted in both Japanese and English. In addition to that, the thankful speech should be entirely in Japanese. It almost seemed like an impossible feat because all of us were barely able to speak a proper sentence of the native language! Thankfully, we had the sensei there to help with the translation. From there I tried my very best to ensure my pronunciation and enunciation of words are proper to avoid any misunderstanding. I practiced over and over again until I could read the script smoothly and then asked Ohara sensei to help me check my pronunciation. She corrected a few of my mistakes. I was elated to find out my hard work paid off. I received quite a few compliments about my pronunciation from the sensei there and Mr Barksdale!
Hosting the event in Japanese while Bradley did the English version
Through this event, I realised the importance of teamwork, good communication skills and patience here. I remember how we were getting chased by the sensei to hand in our event flow and all of us had to squeeze our brain juice dry to make it in time. It took 13 brains’ teamwork for the success of the party. Without teamwork, none of this would have been possible. Looking back, it all seemed like a perfect dream.
Bonding over the delicious food from the buffet

After we successfully completed our plating with tedious processes. It was all worth it :)
Right in front of Oyama Jinja after we went to the Omicho Market. The weather was really cold that day and the wind was merciless!
Teamwork summarised in a picture!

After our first time decorating a Christmas tree with the help of the Japanese students and the teachers there!
The next challenge was the singing. This was because the only singing I did was in the bathroom with my solo concert which my sister would ‘compliment’ on my destructive voice without fail. I practiced really hard for the singing portion from the moment the songs were decided to singing (softly) to myself in the host family bathroom to the practice rehearsals before the actual party. I remembered tasting blood in my throat and having a fever after returning to Singapore. The only comforting fact was that my group mates said my singing had improved right before the actual party started. It was not my first time performing in front of people but it was still a nerve wrecking experience. I managed to pull through with the support from my friends there.

Even though this picture was taken at the junior high school, it reminded me of the hair flip i had to do at the last line of our Sayonara Party performance of Let it Go. I had to sing ‘The cold never bothered me anyways’ alone while flipping my hair. Which got a few laughters from the audience.
Right before the Sayonara Party started

After the Sayonara Party and food, the group of us were more bonded than ever.
I was able to bond with my host, Anna through our love for the same type of music and drawing. She spends most of her free time drawing and I could really tell her love and passion for it. I often compliment on her talent to which she would deny humbly. I would never forget the days we spent watching anime together in the cold weather and under the warm kotatsu.

After the Sayonara Party we all took a picture together

All in all, the trip to Japan had been a very humbling and eye opening experience. I learnt and experienced many things about the Japanese culture and Kanazawa will always have a special place in my heart for all the wonderful memories.
Back in Singapore safely! Couldn't contain my excitement to wear shorts again!