

Japan Exchange Programme to Kanazawa Technical College Reflection - 27th Mile Programme (Ryan Lau)

During this programme, we got to stay with a Japanese host family while visiting the college. Coming here to Japan and staying in a hotel is completely different from staying in a Japanese household. The hotels in the city were very globalised, thus it was the same as hotels commonly found in all countries. In a Japanese household, I got to experience how it was like to be part of a family living in Japan. My family's lifestyle was a mix of modern and cultural. During meals, we would sit on the floor at a table and eat together, and bedrooms had tatami mats and sliding doors. The family also had a dog, and as I liked dogs, I was comfortable to sit by it and have meals.

My buddy was extremely fluent at English as he had studied overseas, and came back to ace his English tests. He was also working part-time at a junior high-school to earn some extra income as an English teacher, which was admirable. We walked home from school twice, and as our house was really far, we had lots of time to talk, and really got to know each other. We also went karaoke together, and we had a great night singing out hearts out.

Every day, my host mum would cook dinner for us, and some examples were yakisoba, hamburg, sukiyaki and takoyaki. Each meal was delicious, and I found some differences between those dishes and the variants found in Singapore. I think both variants taste good, but just different. She was also working at a bakery, and she brought back some of her delicious cakes for me to try. My host dad worked at a bus constructing company, and told me that his company works night shifts as well, similar to the chemical industry in Singapore. I accompanied them once to a local bookstore, and i was surprised at the size of it. Their shelves were almost two storeys high, and ladders were provided to reach the top. I was tempted to purchase a book or two, but I decided against it as I was unable to read. Now i regret not buying one anyway and trying to.

The trip to Kanazawa was in wintertime, thus the temperature there was around 3 to 12 degrees Celsius, although it might have went negative at one point as I had seen

ice while walking from place to place. It my first time experiencing the weather snowing, and it was as if it was raining, but the rain was more solid and cold. The snow was really cool at first, but was a little annoying to walk through at times. Surprisingly, I adapted to the weather quickly, half-expecting myself to fall sick due to Singapore's weather being over 20 degrees hotter. I still found myself attracted to heat sources though. My buddy had told me that in the past, maybe a century or 2 ago, the snow was lots more, and would pile up. However, due to global warming, it doesn't become as cold and/or snow anymore, which made me a little sad. Still, experiencing wintertime was a new and interesting experience for me.

Before the trip, we were told that the Japanese were very punctual and systematic people, and we had to respect that. When we arrived late we would be reprimanded harshly, and for good reason. From our events that we attended and carried out, I noticed that they were, indeed punctual and systematic people. Buses and trains would arrive and leave by the minute, and set timings would be followed closely. In Singapore, punctuality is also important, but in Japan it's almost expected. If a person arrives late for something, everybody else is delayed, which affects everything after the event, something like a butterfly effect.

Being representatives from SP to KTC, I felt like an ambassador in a foreign country, except I didn't do the talking. The KTC campus was big and had many facilities, we had meals in their cafeteria and visited their library, project realisation lab and music room. Their cafeteria was interesting as we took our meal before proceeding to a counter to pay for it, similar to those counters at a supermarket. Their library had soundproof studios, allowing students to possibly record their projects in proper facilities. There was also a females-only floor, as KTC had mainly male students. It was also surprising for me to hear that newspapers from every province were supplied for reading, and were changed every day for the students to be aware of their hometown's happenings. What was most surprising was the music room, which contained donated albums of famous artists in the past. The discs were those large discs used for old music players. It also had a music-chair contraption which allowed us to sit inside and listen to

music of our choice. Old jukeboxes and music players were commonplace, and I felt that along with the old discs, gave off an antique feeling. It was also really nice to hear that the students had a place to listen to music and let off steam in their downtime.

We were able to attend and participate in some of their classes, mainly one English and one global business class. In the English class, we had an activity where the class was taught how to express what they could and could not do, as well as compare two things, for example Japan and Singapore. In the business class, we played a game where we were split into teams, and we had to communicate with other teams with resource cards to finish 'projects', to obtain more resources to complete more. It was enjoyable to play with the local students there, although I would have wanted to just watch a class take place, even though I probably wouldn't understand most of it.

As I am taking the Japanese Language modules in SP, I had a small grip of the language. However, as I started speaking to the locals there, I realised that my command of the language was not good at all. We were paired up with buddies who could speak English, however, my host's parents spoke mainly Japanese, so I had to speak to them with my limited knowledge. From the first few days, I quickly learned that the language is really difficult to learn through a textbook. I had learned to speak formal Japanese, which was suitable for all occasions. However, when speaking to a friend or in my case, my host parents, the formality of my speaking sounded really awkward to them, although it not being wrong at all. It was an eye-opener as I was unaware of the casual tone to speak with, so I went there sounding like a textbook. It just made me feel as if I had lots more to learn, and I was only scratching the surface of the language.

The public transport in Japan had some noticeable differences from Singapore. In Singapore, we enter the bus from the front and tap our ez-link card when we enter and exit through the side door. In Japan, we enter through the side door and exit through the front. We also take a paper slip when we enter, and we toss it away in front of the driver along with the ticket we purchased. Entering through the side door seems to be more space efficient as people move in, however I suspect that Singapore has the entry point at the front as the bus driver has to see the passenger pay the fee. The locals there

push through people to get on the bus, and do the same when they have to leave. In Singapore, this would be seen as rude, but there it's deemed as normal, possibly due to their really fast-paced lifestyle.

Japan also has 3 types of trains - the Electric Train, the Subway, and the Bullet Train. For majority of the trip we took the electric train, as we weren't travelling across provinces for long distances. The subway is an underground train system, and is more common in the major cities like Tokyo or Nagoya, so I didn't take one. Same goes for the bullet train, which is an extremely fast train used to travel across provinces swiftly. The trains were quiet. If there was a conversation, they were almost whispers. The Japanese people value silence, and to be honest, it was nice to sit in a quiet ride to and from the college. Sometimes I even took out a book to read as the silence helped me to relax and enjoy.

I enjoyed the cultural immersion from the places we visited. Professor Mukai from KTC gave us an introduction to some of Japan's culture and history, and some facts were quite surprising to most of us. We also went to many places in Kanazawa, namely the Lacquer Ware Experience, 21st Century Museum, Omicho Market, Oyama Shrine, the World Heritage Site Shirakawago and Kanazawa souvenir stores at Forus. At the lacquer ware museum, we were allowed to paint our own lacquer plate and keep it, and although I am not good at art, I'm still happy with how my plate turned out. We then visited the 21st Century Museum, but it was a little disappointing as we had little time to look at the art. Over the trip, we went shopping at Omicho Market and Forus, and I bought many things for myself and my family, although I have to mention that Japan's items are not cheap. Oyama shrine was a really old shrine dating back a few centuries ago, which was amazing considering how good it still looked. I bought some charms for my parents from the shrine maiden there.

I had actually visited Shirakawago before with my parents, however it was in spring, so this time I was able to see the snow-covered straw houses, which were really beautiful. Going through the exhibits there made me think about how difficult it must have been to live there, no matter how beautiful the location. The closest school was

probably 1 to 2 hours away, I don't quite remember, however it was terribly inconvenient. The exhibits also showed many tools and equipment they used in the past, and most of them performed tasks which we now do with machines. Although this was my second time visiting the place, I believe seeing the place once more with snow was worth it.

On the final day, we had to plan a 1.5 hr farewell programme for the students and our host families. We had planned many activities from before the trip till the day itself, however at the end we only went through with some of them due to timing changes. I was in charge of the songs for our singing performance, and although we did not use the Japanese lyrics I prepared, it was still a learning experience to see how changes in schedules can affect our plans. It was fulfilling to sing along with everyone for the school, our buddies and host families as a thank you as well as a goodbye. We also gave out some snacks commonly found in Singapore, and played some charades with them. At the end of the programme, we had a buffet for everyone to take their final photos on the final night at the school.

Through this experience, I was able to make many new friends, from both SP and KTC. Being a representative from SP also showed me how close SP was with KTC, and it was nice to contribute to that relationship. I feel that living in a Japanese home is a very rare chance to experience, and I am glad that I decided to sign up. If I ever go to Japan for any reasons in the future, I might decide to drop by my host family to say hello and maybe have a drink and chat.