

I consider myself incredibly fortunate to be able to study abroad at Akita International University (AIU) during the first semester of my senior year. I was drawn to AIU's international focus, allowing a wide variety of people from all over the world to gather in one place and create a multicultural experience to broaden one's perspectives. It was my first time living in a country outside the US, my first time going to Japan, and my first time living in a rural area. Bracing myself for the usual gamut of study abroad maladies— culture shock and homesickness— I was surprised that they didn't come to bother me.

On my first day in Akita, I immediately made a friend while taking the shuttle from Akita Station to AIU— we struck up an easy conversation due to our matching dinosaur socks! Eager to familiarize myself with the local area, I headed to AEON mall later that week; to my surprise, at least ten other students were planning to catch the noon bus as well. On the third Saturday, eleven of us exchange students went to the beach. After enough saltwater got into our eyes, we assessed our first few weeks as we sat on the sand. Only when hearing about other people's struggles did I notice the lack of culture shock that I had experienced. I felt thankful that I was able to adapt quickly to the newness around me, make wonderful friends at AIU, and have supportive friends back home.

With AIU's small student population of around 900, 130 of which were international students, running into familiar faces was inevitable, no matter what I had planned for myself. For the first two weeks before classes started, all international students had a mandatory cafeteria meal plan. Without much else to do, the cafeteria was a highly effective vector for friendship. I joined a variety of clubs: Kyudo (Japanese archery), Kendo (Japanese fencing), Musical Theatre, and the Environmental Club. In the end, I committed to the Diversity Club— I would've never expected that I would gain the most exposure to discourse about the LGBTQ+ community in Japan! When I spontaneously went on a weekend solo trip to Morioka in late October, I chance-encountered a Japanese girl with a distinct polka-dotted headband several times over the course of the weekend. Turns out that she was also an AIU student and we were in the same anthropology class! And when I was staying in Ueno during my final days in Japan, I realized that I had booked the same capsule hotel as my friend. We spent New Year's Eve together before she left for Osaka.

While the nonacademic features, social environment, and local attractions left me incredibly fulfilled, I quickly noticed the differences between GWU's and AIU's academic settings. AIU teaches its courses almost exclusively in English, attracting Japanese students

who want to improve their English proficiency. There are no majors at AIU. Instead, students choose to enroll in one of three departments: the Global Business Program, the Global Studies Program, or the Global Connectivity Program. With classes following a breadth over depth approach, the classes were less intensive than I was accustomed to. Nonetheless, I still enjoyed taking my four courses: Upper Elementary Japanese, Personhood– Anthropology and the Self, Japan-China Relations, and Akita Rural Studies. While I learned the most through my intensive Japanese class, Akita Rural Studies was the most unique and memorable. Our class learned about Akita local culture and we had two fieldwork days: one to Mount Takao and the Memeki Community, the other to Mount Shinzan and the Oga Peninsula. In addition to learning course material, these classes also offered a chance for me to reflect on what I valued the most in an academic setting.

Through academics and cultural experiences, I learned a lot about myself. Having only lived in the suburbs of Dallas until attending The George Washington University in downtown Washington DC, this was my first time living in a rural area. The combination of nature and ample free time vastly contributed to my personal growth. Perhaps my biggest learning of all was that I prefer a slower lifestyle outside of the city.

During my second weekend, three friends and I went to an onsen– a totally new experience. Without my laptop, phone, or a book, it felt strange not to do anything “productive.” Later in the semester, this restlessness gradually subsided. Perhaps my watershed moment was observing a spider weaving its web in front of my dorm. Methodically spinning clockwise, vigilantly waiting in the web’s center, crawling to reach its prey, using a skein of thread as a bungee cord to return to the web’s center after eating– half an hour passed as I craned my neck up to observe. And as the semester continued, until it became too cold, I had a spectacular time observing the numerous Jorou spiders, Japanese silk moths, and ants around campus. By observing Akita’s bugs, developing an appreciation and respect for my surroundings, I had finally understood a slower way of life.

My experience in Japan has solidified my desire to return to and live there in the near future– perhaps as soon as 2024! Inspired by my friends and colleagues who secured work at lodges during the ski season, I hope to work at a rental shop in a Japanese ski town for the upcoming season.

I would like to thank the Tanaka-Green Scholarship for offering me the opportunity to enjoy this truly enlightening and memorable experience. Its cross-cultural influences and the exchange of ideas has impacted me in a way that has shaped my trajectory as an International Affairs student. Having become friends with Japanese students and fellow exchange students

from around the world, it sparks joy in me whenever I think back to my study abroad experience in Japan.



AIU: Winter facade (12.18.2022)



Solo trip to Sendai: Having breakfast with ryokan guests (12.04.2022)



Program trip: After Kobiratai Harvest Festival (11.27.2022)



Program trip: Kobiratai Harvest Festival (11.27.2022)





Akita Rural Studies class fieldwork day: Namahage Museum (11.20.2022)



Hachimantai Onsen (10.22.2022)



AIU: Fall facade (10.19.2022)



AIU Festival (10.09.2022)



Akita Rural Studies class fieldwork day: Mount Takao and the Memeki Community (10.01.2022)



AIU bus trip: Matching socks (9.23.2022)





AIU bus trip: Hike to Furushiyama Castle Ruins at Kakunodate (9.23.2022)



AIU: Nakajima Library