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Visiting Japan had been a lifelong dream of mine. I remember being a young girl of primary school age, sitting in front of the tv and watching Studio Ghibli films, fascinated with the art style, the scenery, the music; and my interest began. I researched Japanese traditional and modern art, Japanese music, Japanese manga and anime, Japanese fashion, the history, the language... I was in love with the idea of Japan and was striving to know more. As the years went by and I got older, I became very serious about my fascination with Japan, and it drove me to try and try to visit Japan someday. Even though several plans to go to Japan were cancelled because of covid, and even though I was very disheartened, I persisted, and it landed me one of the biggest experiences of my life.

This was my first ever flight, and first time leaving the country. I was so nervous and kept worrying if I had made the right choice leaving my family behind for a semester. I spent my time in Hirakata-shi, which is a city in Osaka prefecture where my university was located. At first, I was too afraid to leave my room. I was so afraid because of such an unfamiliar environment, and I knew I had no way out, I had committed to my decision to be there. But after a few days of adjustment and throwing myself into social situations despite my anxiety, I made friends with some of the kindest people I have ever met. And if it weren't for living in a global commons' dormitory, I would not have met so many people from such diverse backgrounds all in the same place. Before I went to Japan, the only people I was around was exclusively people from the US, specifically Virginia. I had always had difficulty making friends before, but meeting people outside of my usual social groups made me realize my capabilities. Even with cultural differences or language differences, it made me understand how both alike and unique each person is.

I remember one of my first nights out before classes started. A friend I met during our orientation at Kansai-Gaidai invited me to karaoke with a few of her new friends one night. Well, to my

surprise, this was a massive group of over twenty people that went to karaoke. I've always been the quiet and shy one in a friend group, but this was nothing like I had expected. This was first time ever doing karaoke, and it brought me out of my shell. I met some of my greatest friends that night and stuck with some of them for the rest of the semester. That's one thing I'm really going to miss about Japan: my weekly trips to karaoke at Jankara with my group of friends.

Once I started to explore more, I experienced so many different aspects of Japanese culture. At first it was exactly as I had expected since I knew about Japan before, but that didn't remove the beauty and excitement of it. My school was in a very conveniently placed area near Kyoto, Nara, Osaka city, and Kobe. My favorite shrine, Fushimi-Inari Taisha, was only a 35-minute train ride away. I loved travelling in Japan and the unique experience of only travelling by foot and by train, watching all of the rice fields and local shrines and homes pass by the large windows of the trains. I'll never forget the announcements of the train stops, always feeling closer to home once I got back on the Keihan line, and all of the times I almost fell while standing so I had to learn to "train surf" (as my friends and I called it). I always thought I would have a panic attack in a crowded train, but it didn't take long to adjust to it. It became normal daily life.



Even though I just came back to the states less than a month ago, I have so much nostalgia for my time in Japan. My first ever temple visit was Kiyomizu-dera. I went with a large group and met so many new people. I loved the rich history of Japanese architecture, and I wanted to visit a new temple or shrine as frequently as I could. I visited the famous Ryoanji, which I learned about at my home institution in Art History. It was so amazing to see something that was once only seen on a projector screen in a classroom. It was so serene and peaceful in person. I went to Nara and made acquaintance with the deer. They were so eager to be fed their special biscuits. I went to Minoh and got to see a giant salamander. I visited the earthquake museum in Kobe and

shed so many tears. I met a maiko and geiko and got to watch a performance by them. I tried every food and beverage I wanted to try, I visited torikizoku and izakaya, I had lots of Japanese curry, gyoza, ramen, Japanese McDonald's, you name it. I loved going out to festivals and lingering around temples during rituals. But there were days of just going to class and coming back to the dorm still felt like a rich experience to me. I appreciated the spontaneity as well as the simplicity.

There were times when Hirakata started to feel a bit like home. I felt connected to the campus, and I felt attached to the area surrounding it. The early sunrise, the 4:30pm announcement telling the kids to return home, the amazing and long-lasting sunsets at the edge of the Gotenyama campus, making dinner in the shared kitchen of my dorm with hallmates socializing at the table, always bumping into a friend even at late hours of the night (because none of us really slept as much as we needed to in Japan): these moments will stick with me for a very long time. The campuses were so beautiful. I spent almost every day at a garden on Nakamiya campus. I could tell it was a special place for some people; I remember sitting on a bench and seeing another student sit and meditate near the pond of the garden. The view from my ceramics class window was always breathtaking. I watched the lunar eclipse from on top of the dorm building. I loved the balance of city and nature in Japan. I was never a city dweller until this journey, and I have always felt more connected with nature and solidarity but visiting both a cities and temples within the same day was truly a stellar experience.

I have so much to be thankful for. For all of the people I've met, the friends I have made, the sights I could see, the synesthetic experiences I took in, the beauty, the excitement, the nervousness... I am so grateful. I am still in disbelief that I had the ability to live out one of my biggest dreams. Nothing could have prepared me for the shock of this dream coming true, the cultural adjustment, the jet lag, the hard work of learning the language, and the heartbreak of saying goodbyes. Kansai-Gaidai University was definitely a threshold moment of my life that taught me so many important lessons.

I cannot say this enough: thank you so much for this opportunity.



