

My Semester in Tokyo

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Unlike many of my program peers, my college study abroad was actually not my first time in Japan. When I was 15, I decided that I was going to Japan. I had been studying Japanese since I was in eighth grade and was determined to see Tokyo. I didn't have the means of doing so, so it took two years of summer jobs to save up enough to send myself abroad. I had found a one-month summer language immersion program for high school students that helped facilitate my trip. Needless to say, I fell in love with the city and the sights. I knew I would be coming back.

Now, at 20, I've just finished a semester abroad at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. My study abroad program was primarily focused on language acquisition. Because I have been studying Japanese for so long, it has always been a huge goal of mine to become fluent in Japanese, so I was thrilled that my university offered a language-focused program. I took the Intensive Japanese course at my host university, which had almost 17 contact hours per week! I had class every day from Monday through Friday with grammar, vocabulary, and kanji homework every single day. That doesn't even include self-study!

As difficult as it was, I'm so thankful for the opportunity to take such a course. The teachers I had were incredibly talented, and my language ability improved at an unbelievable pace. Due to the hard work of my instructors and the opportunity to learn in an immersive environment, I can understand *keigo* to a far greater degree than before, as well as read almost 500 kanji. The joy of looking at a poster you see every day on your morning commute and realizing you understand every kanji is immeasurable. I hope that every Japanese language learner is able to feel the moment when something just clicks in your head, and you *understand* without translating, without even thinking.

Before this course, my Japanese language ability was variable. My vocabulary was significantly lacking, and I often found that while I could understand various grammar points or conjugations, I didn't know how to employ them myself. At the beginning of the course, I could only hold a simple exchange. However, by the end, I was able to maintain an engaging conversation with peers even with my imperfect Japanese.

Despite my heavy coursework, I was still able to find time to travel the country. I of course visited Kyoto and Osaka, and I was even able to go to Hokkaido to see the Sapporo Snow Festival! Some smaller but still amazing destinations include Hakone, Enoshima, and Kawagoe. Japan is known for its rich culture and history, and throughout my travels it never once disappointed me. Japan has an eye for detail and values the beauty of everything. Everything around you feels cohesive and placed with intention.

Politeness culture runs far deeper than you can understand from just observing through social media; people don't talk on trains during the morning rush so that others can sleep just a little bit longer. Store clerks go above and beyond to ensure that you receive the best possible service. Trains are kept pristine so that everyone may enjoy them. Tokyo is truly an amazing city with amazing people, and I know I'll be coming back.

While my initial plans for my time abroad differed from what I was able to accomplish, I still want to keep Japan in my future. My goal is to have a career at an international company that has strong ties with Japan. Finding an internship opportunity that has business with Japan within the U.S. is incredibly difficult, but I worked hard to secure a co-op at a large-scale international company that has a bit of business all around the world- even Japan! In the long-term, with enough experience under my belt, I plan to begin my own entrepreneurial dreams in Japan.