

My Experience in Kumamoto, Japan on a Monbusho Scholarship

It was twenty-one years ago that I headed off to Kumamoto in Japan on a Monbusho Scholarship to study at Kumamoto University and I have many fond memories of my stay. I remember a few years later when I had a job in Tokyo over the summer holidays (winter there) a programme on Kumamoto came up on the television and it brought tears to my eyes – for me it was like my Japanese home at the time.

Kumamoto was a city of about 500,000 inhabitants and probably still is. The university had a dormitory for foreign students to stay during their first year at university. At that time there were about 110 foreign students from all over the world with only about five coming from the English-speaking West. I arrived in October and a week or two later I had to sit my final exams from Auckland University in Kumamoto. It was really difficult to get into the frame of mind to sit exams when so many exciting things were happening around me and no-one else was sitting exams so I don't remember doing too much study. The foreign students were a really great bunch of people and we had a very well-organised foreign student group. During November we had a festival for about 3 days at the university and the foreign student group rigged up some tents and we opened a restaurant which proved to be very popular – we had lots of South American food and Chinese food and we all helped with the preparation. I made about 700 afghans in my oven toaster to sell as a token contribution of New Zealand food.

Even though I called our accommodation dormitories the rooms were really mini-apartments. We had a tiny bathroom with a toilet – it was very cramped even for me and I'm quite small so I don't know how anyone of larger dimensions coped. But the apartments were very well designed and I was given some kitchen utensils to use to help with setting up my new home.

The South American group of students were very social so we often had get-togethers. One of the students was a cardiologist and I got to visit his hospital and go into theatre and witness open-heart surgery and also some new procedures for treating heart disease. I was a nurse so I found it particularly fascinating – as a student nurse in New Zealand you didn't get the opportunity to work in certain areas such as cardiac surgery.

We didn't have quite as many hours of study at university in Japan as we did in New Zealand but I found plenty to do and I realised that while I was in the process of learning a language 'play' was actually quite profitable work for me if I was working in the Japanese language. The Japanese language teacher was very good and it was good for me to be immersed in a Japanese-speaking environment at school, although I did a lot of learning through speaking with other foreign students as well. The continuing problem for me (and no doubt the other native speakers of English) was that the Japanese students would want to practise their English with us but we were there to learn Japanese. I had previously lived in Japan for six months with a Japanese family but it was quite frustrating for me because my homestay mother wanted to improve her English so she usually spoke in English to me. This made it a slower process to improve my Japanese but once I reached a certain level of competence and confidence in speaking there were increasingly more opportunities for me to speak in Japanese. Determination and patience are important qualities to have when it comes to learning a language. Some of my friends were of Asian descent but were native speakers of English (or as good as) but because they didn't look European they were often spoken to in Japanese and I would be spoken to in English. I was a little envious at times. Every week at the foreign students dormitory I would get phone calls asking me to teach English – I taught a couple of classes but I was there to learn Japanese so I had to firmly refuse because some of the Japanese businessmen who called would be quite persistent in their requests. It was a great pity that one of the students from England actually ended up skipping most classes at university because he had taken on so many English classes which could be quite well-paid depending on who you worked for. We didn't have the pressure of passing exams in Japan which was nice. I took the opportunity to take some other classes. I joined the nursing classes for a while because I thought it would be easier to understand the Japanese if I already had a good grasp of the content but I found I got bored. It was actually better to learn something new and in that process learn Japanese sometimes without realising it. I also took a psychology class which I found quite interesting. The university also put on special history and cultural classes for the foreign students which were quite fascinating for me. I attended a newspaper Japanese class and we would study and discuss articles from the newspaper. My spoken Japanese was pretty much on a par with the other students so in class I was able to contribute well. But when it came to kanji, all the other students in that class were Chinese speakers and so they had a huge head-start on me when it came to understanding written Japanese, even though they didn't know how to pronounce the words all the time. In class I could look up the kanji but I failed the test we had (as I had expected) but the class was still very worthwhile for me.

One day as I was walking home from university a Japanese girl came and spoke to me in Japanese and I was so impressed that someone was speaking to me in Japanese that I gave her my phone number and invited her to visit. We ended up becoming good friends and she came to New Zealand eventually and while she was in New Zealand of course we always spoke in English. She actually ended up becoming a very good speaker of English and this led to her working in various interesting places around the world, like Vietnam. I also became friends with the florist in the local market – her shop was located opposite the supermarket and I would often stop and chat to her in Japanese. Originally I had bought some artificial flowers from her to cheer up my room. Some foreign friends and I joined the university basketball club which was a lot of fun. In New Zealand I am comparatively short so it was good to play in a team where I was average height. It was also good to meet

people. As it started to warm up some of us started playing tennis together early in the morning before classes started.

The student dormitories for both the Japanese and the foreigners were located on the fringe of the city and there was a lot of bush behind us so we used to meet and go jogging on occasions – however we gave that up when our Japanese teacher found out and warned us that ‘mamushi’ snakes might be lurking in the long grass and they were deadly poisonous. The foreign students also ate together quite frequently. Even though our rooms were quite small I could have up to eight for dinner – we’d take turns in preparing meals so I got to try a lot of foreign foods. We’d also get together to watch movies. There were larger rooms downstairs where we could hold larger parties – some of the students put on a lovely birthday party for me there.

A number of trips and events were put on for the foreign students and I really appreciate the effort the local community made on our behalf. We did overnight trips and homestays with families out on the Amakusa peninsula. I had difficulty trying to decipher what grandma was saying at times because she spoke in the local dialect but we got there. She bought a piece of steak for both her and I to eat. She didn’t get very far with hers because she was trying to eat it with chopsticks – she was a fish and chopsticks lady. She also loved to make ‘ozooni’ for me because I really appreciated the taste.

I was also part of a group of Japanese students at school and we would meet together in the lecturer’s office for coffee – it was very nice the way the students could use the lecturer’s office even when he was not there. When they graduated we went on a ‘Graduation Trip’ together to the hot springs in the Mt. Aso area. It was the first time the hot springs were just too hot for me to get into. One of the female students actually collapsed in the heat. I also previously remember going on a trip to some hot springs with some of the South Americans. The rotenburo (outside hot springs) overlooked the majestic mountains – it was a great experience to be there. However I am embarrassed to say that with my conservative upbringing I could not bring myself to go naked in a pool with other women so I wore my togs – these ‘liberated’ South American women were very understanding. I am glad to say that that was the only time I wore my togs and I have been many times to hot springs since.

My mother and sister came over to visit for seventeen days so I planned a very full visit of many places between Tokyo and Kumamoto – in just about every photo my mother looked absolutely exhausted! I also travelled to Korea by boat with three other students. We stayed in a hotel and saw the sights around Seoul but because we didn’t meet Koreans outside of shops and the hotel we couldn’t really appreciate the culture of the people.

I have lived in Japan four times now but my time in Kumamoto was the time when my Japanese really improved because the lecturers at university spoke to us in Japanese and it was the common means of communication between the foreign students and we were beginning to make Japanese friends who would speak to us in Japanese. Suddenly I was even interested in watching TV in Japanese because I was beginning to understand. I feel very grateful to the Japanese Ministry of Education for giving me the opportunity to study in Japan. After my experience there I returned to New Zealand and completed a Masters in Japanese, I worked for Japanese companies and for the Japanese Church and I also had the opportunity to work in a foreign affairs office for 2 years in Japan on the JET Programme, which was just the most amazing job. I returned to New Zealand in 1994 and trained as a teacher and have been teaching Japanese (along with French more recently) at secondary school since. Presently I am in Belgium for one year improving my French. Today my host family have invited about 6 guests over to learn to make sushi. We have done this a number of times – my homestay mother loves sushi but it is not all that readily available in the city where I am living and I love teaching people how to make it. I am also in the process of organising a Japanese cooking evening for a group of about 12 Belgians (who love to cook) and we will prepare chawan mushi, yakitori, okonomiyaki, sushi, Japanese cheesecake and funnily enough, pavlova. Actually I have bought some yokan (red bean jelly) for the Belgians to try so that they can have an authentic expression of Japanese sweets. I will also be giving a lesson on Japanese calligraphy to some of the secondary school students here. The Belgians do not come across Japanese or Japanese culture to the same extent as we do in New Zealand. My experience in learning the Japanese language and appreciating the Japanese culture has really developed me as a person and has in fact changed the way I am – sometimes I feel like I am a little Japanese – and wherever I go I take that with me.