

留学の経験

“Wow, going to a foreign country, aren't you scared?”

I could not understand why almost everyone I knew asked this question when they heard about my plan to study in Japan for a year. It was not until I hopped onto the plane that the fact I was heading to Japan began to feel real. Indeed, going to a foreign country with limited knowledge of the language perhaps was not the world's greatest idea. However, I was far too excited to feel any anxiety. To study in Japan for a year, how wonderful that would be – a dream, that seemed too good, was to come true.

Two days later, I arrived at my designated university, Hiroshima University, in a little town called Saijo. I fell in love with countryside-ness straightaway. I was simply fascinated by the natural, traditional-looking houses hidden amongst modern apartments. Oh, and the abundant rice fields, in addition to air that was as fresh and clean as that in New Zealand! Looking at the trees, rice fields and houses while feeling the soft breeze on my face on my daily trip by bike to university always brought a smile to my face.

One thing I had difficulty understanding in the beginning was the whole onsen (hot spring) culture. I was rather determined not to try it out despite all the recommendations. The concept of bathing with a bunch of naked people just sounded too bizarre to me. Strangely enough, the habit grew on me after having made use of public baths on a trip to Hokkaido. Onsen is so much more than a merely extra large bath tub – it is a recreation, a culture. And a very contagious one, I might add.

I also fell in love with the traditional art of tea ceremony during my stay. I joined a university tea ceremony club in order to make friends and gain further understanding of the Japanese culture. To be honest, I, too, could not understand why anyone would want to sit kneeling down for an hour for a cup of tea! Through interactions with fellow members, I came to the realisation that it is not about the action of drinking tea, but appreciating this art form while immersed in a harmonious atmosphere. I treasured every moment spent talking and making tea with fellow members in the Japanese-styled tatami room.

Similarly, hanami (flower viewing) goes far beyond simply admiring beautiful flowers or eating yummy food; the essence of it lies within the company that one enjoys it with. Being my first and perhaps last spring in Japan, I went on hanami as many as five times within one week! Sitting under sakura trees, chatting cheerfully away while munching on delicious food with my friends, it was daunting to think that I was to part from everyone and everything at the end of my one-year stay. I was not ready to say goodbye to my tiny apartment which had become my home, and Hiroshima University which was like my home away from home. Furthermore, my classmates had become close friends...Oh and the teachers! So full of enthusiasm, patience and kindness, they were like aunts and uncles to me. I am forever grateful to all these lovely people who treated me like family, and also to Monbukagakusho that granted me the opportunity to have the experience of my life.

The short phrase 「散る桜 残る桜も 散る桜」(fallen cherry blossoms, remaining cherry blossoms too, are fallen cherry blossoms) reflects my one-year in Japan perfectly – short, yet splendid. Now, a year after returning to New Zealand, everything seems like a sweet, sweet dream. There is not a single day that I do not think about my stay in Japan. While cherry blossoms may have already fallen, cherry blossoms will always cherry blossoms be – bloom, sakura, bloom.