

## My Japan Experience

On the verge of tears, I took a deep breath, waved goodbye to my family and Japanese teacher and proceeded to leave the check-in area of the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport. My mind clouded with fear and doubt about the idea of traveling unaccompanied, while I waited in line for security screening.

Even after months of preparing for this trip, I was not the least bit ready to leave my family and spend a month in Japan, a country I have never been to. I was anxious to finally step out of my comfort zone and to make use of my limited knowledge of Japanese language and culture.

In November 2016, I submitted an essay to the Kobe College Corporation-Japan Education Exchange Program for their 2017 Essay Contest. I wrote an essay concerning the similarities and differences between Japanese and American work cultures and how I would discuss them with a Japanese host family. Five months later, I discovered that I had won the essay contest and a free trip to Kyoto, Japan to live with a host family and attend the Kyoto Japanese Language School (KJLS) for a summer course.

I was elated, nervous and afraid altogether. How would I explore Kyoto on my own?

Although I had expected that most of the learning during my trip would happen in a classroom, I learned so much more outside of school. I did not realize how difficult traveling alone was until I experienced it. Prior to leaving the Kansai International Airport in Osaka, I first waited in the Japanese passport line instead of the foreign passport line. Then, I forgot to fill out the disembarkation card followed by the declaration customs form.

Not being able to understand any of the airport announcements was a challenge. The jumbled Japanese words went through one ear and out the other like a code that I failed to decipher. The airport staff seemed annoyed by my ignorance as I failed to fill out the necessary papers in a timely manner. I frantically rushed back and forth various lines to complete my papers. The airport staff had to point out the papers for me, each, and, every, time. Also, the immigration authorities were skeptical about a 16-year-old being sent alone to Japan to learn Japanese and make friends. I was completely overwhelmed.

The day after, I stayed with Risa Ikegami, an alumna of Kobe College, in Osaka before we left for Kyoto. Fortunately, she spoke English almost fluently. We rode a train and subway before arriving at the Imadegawa Station near my school.

A crowd of Japanese eyes shifted toward me. A brown-skinned Filipino teen amid a sea of Japanese citizens in a subway car may have seemed out of place to many. It could have been my three bulky luggage pieces, but I think not.

That evening, I planned to meet my host family. I expected that they knew enough English, but I later discovered that communicating with my them was another obstacle. My host mom and I would often panic and laugh. “Muzukashii!” (It’s difficult!), she would echo when we could not understand each other.

For the first week, I mostly used gestures, like pointing downstairs when I explained that I was heading to study in my room and one-word replies in Japanese. Outside of the house, my host mom and I would use the Line messaging application to communicate. I feared that my host parents would not understand anything I said for a whole month, but I gradually improved speaking Japanese. One word replies turned into sentences with emotion and reasoning.

Almost everyday, I traveled within the Kyoto prefecture using the city bus. Unlike Hawaii, people would enter the bus from the back door and pay at the end of their ride at the front. I paid close attention to how I boarded the bus until it became a part of my daily routine. Other than traveling to and from school on weekdays, I often took the wrong bus.

I recall taking one from Nijou Castle that headed in the opposite direction from my host family's house. Taking the wrong bus in Hawaii was nothing compared to getting lost in Japan. It was a foreign country with a language I barely understood.

After five minutes with eyes anxiously glued to Google Maps, I confirmed that it was the wrong route and entered another bus to get home. In some cases, I asked people for help when I could not find my bus stop. At the front of Kyoto Station, I paced back and forth until I built the courage to ask a woman where bus 28 stopped. On Shijo Street, many tourists and residents alike asked staff near the bus stop for directions. Many people were very kind to help a lost tourist. I always felt relieved to return home before curfew.

Students that are planning to study away from Hawaii may have similar doubts and fears that I had, especially if they want to travel to a foreign country. Despite the many setbacks I faced during my Japan trip, the journey was incredibly worthwhile.

Throughout my trip, I visited some of the most famous sights in Kyoto with friends. Of course, I improved my Japanese reading, writing, speaking and listening skills tremendously within one month. The routine of meeting and talking to new people every week definitely allowed me to become more confident and outgoing.

Traveling alone for the first time opened my eyes to an experience that was beyond the tiny rock I have known for sixteen years. I developed a newfound maturity. Prior to the trip, I never thought that I would be able to capture and witness the depths of Japanese culture the way I did—all the more so because I thought that most of my trip would be spent alone. The difference is that it was not.

Developing connections with classmates from the U.S. mainland, France, Canada and Taiwan relieved the anxiety of traveling alone. The individuals I met are people that I would not have found elsewhere. I was not alone the day my host mom introduced me to my short-lived passion for ¥100 shops. I was not alone on one of the very last nights in Kyoto, when my friends and I sung our hearts out at a karaoke booth.

Traveling alone has its nerve-racking moments, but the gravity of a situation all depends on how people view it. In most cases, we are not alone even when we think we are.