

Dr. & Mrs. Ushioda Scholarship Essay

Before heading on my year abroad in Japan, I spent the summer preparing.

Every day, I would revise Kanji and try to remember vocabulary that might be useful during any of the million imaginary conversations I revised in my head. Every lunch time, I would watch videos of people who had travelled to or lived in Japan, attempting to absorb all the advice they had. During my last week before leaving Ireland, I would spend every evening looking at the weather report in Osaka (where my plane would land) to know what to pack in my carry-on.

For every one thing I prepared for, there were two I could have never anticipated. Who would have thought just how many kanji would surround me once I stepped out of the plane (and how proud I would feel whenever I recognized some)? Or just how hot it would be - I knew I was not one for hot climates, but I had never experienced humidity levels this high! Had I known, a portable fan would have been the most important item in my carry-on luggage.

After two mesmerizing days in Osaka, I met up with the other exchange students from my host university, and together we travelled to Kyoto to move into the dorm rooms that would be our home for the next year.



(cherry blossoms in Osaka)



(My friends and I on a hiking trip from Kibuneguchi to Kurama)

I studied at 京都外国語大学, the Kyoto university of Foreign Studies (short: 京都外大 or KUFS). The university was small and the lessons were rather informal by Japanese standards. While general politeness rules naturally still applied, the teachers were friendly, easy to talk to, and the easy-going atmosphere reminded me of my home university DCU more than once.

However, I had a lot more lectures in Japan than I ever had in DCU and while the lesson content was never too difficult to follow, the amount of homework and preparations needed for the next lesson in form of revision, vocabulary test preparation and speeches, was impossible to stay on top of without immaculate time keeping.

Getting used to multiple 200 minute lectures in a row - after the easy 50 minute lectures I was used to from DCU - was also no easy feat and took me a few weeks.

The study program itself was well structured and enjoyable. Aside from the long lectures and the workload, it was informative and the right level of challenging. I had 400 minutes of core Japanese classes (i.e. two lectures) every day, plus optional modules most days. Aside from extra kanji, grammar and essay classes which were structured by language level, KUFS also offered cultural classes, where we exchange students were taught traditional arts such as 茶道 (sadou; tea ceremony), 花道/生け花 (kadou/Ikebana; flower arrangement) and 書道 (shodou; calligraphy).



(My final Ikebana class arrangement)



(My first time wearing a traditional Kimono)

I loved the many chances of cultural exchange that KUFS offered. From first-hand experiences with Ikebana, which I enjoyed immensely and which was a wonderful window into a part of Japanese culture that I might have otherwise never experienced, to my work with the Language Exchange Service NINJA¹. NINJA offers - among other things - conversation practice for both foreign and Japanese students and would offer part-time jobs to students as hosts of these conversation sessions. Having spent a large part of my time in secondary school and university tutoring other students in German, English and occasionally Latin, I have always enjoyed teaching and these sessions were a great opportunity to get to know more Japanese people. They were excited to ask about Ireland and I was just as enthusiastic to ask them about all the aspects of Japanese culture that I still had questions about.

NINJA also organised monthly themed events, usually centered around an international holiday that took place that month. Planning these events, decorating the university foyer and NINJA offices, and the subsequent Nomikai after an event well done, are some of my favorite memories from my year abroad!

¹ i.e. "Navigating an Independent Non-stop Journey to Autonomy", KUFS's foreign language self-directed learning support room.



(Myself and my NINJA Coworkers are setting up decorations for our Halloween Event)

Of course, it was not always easy. The feeling of being an outsider really intensified for me after the first two month. At first, I found myself laughing off any cultural missteps I accidentally took (despite all my preparations, they could not be entirely avoided), thinking to myself and knowing that everyone around me likely thought the same: "Oh, they're just a Foreigner". After a few months however, once I had settled in a bit, every small mistake, every faux pas, every thought I struggled to put into (Japanese) words correctly, started to feel frustrating. It got to a point where I feared I might never feel comfortable in the new country. Everyone else seemed to be able to chat away in what seemed to me like near-fluent Japanese, while I struggled at times to remember how to order food.

Those were a difficult few weeks, but when I finally brought myself to talk to my friends about it, I realised that every other exchange student felt the same to some extent. Even my Japanese friend, who had spent her year abroad in my home university in Dublin, told me she had gone through the same experience! And although this realisation did not keep the bad days from happening and did not stop the stress entirely, it at least helped me feel like I was not alone.



(Hiking down the Torii paths at Fushimi Inari Taisha)

I prepared for so many eventualities, and yet the most memorable moments were the ones I could have never anticipated. From the global pandemic that cut my year abroad short by

five months, to the experience of crying from laughter in the middle of Osaka central station with my friends, while dressed in gorgeous kimonos, because we had managed to lose our supervisor (who naturally was the only one who knew the way home), to my first experience with a Japanese onsen in the village of Kurama, which me and my friends reached after a six hour hike through the mountains, under the colourful spectacle that is Kansai's Momiji² and alongside some of the most spectacular views I have ever had the joy to witness. Traveling abroad for a year undoubtedly poses more challenges than anyone can prepare for, but they make the joyous moments all the more worth living.



- written by Sophia E.D. Herar

² 紅葉 : Momiji or Kouyou, describes the phenomenon of brightly coloured autumn leaves. It is celebrated in Kansai by "Autumn Leaf Viewing Parties", which are often held at temples or shrines or in areas with a particular natural beauty.