



USHIODA SCHOLARSHIP 2021

Japan Report by Francis Donnelly

I studied at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies during my time in Japan. Nagoya is quite a large city compared to anywhere in Ireland, but the university itself is in a smaller town just outside the city, called Takenoyama. Coming from Ireland, I think it would have been a rather big change to study in a place as bustling as Nagoya, but thankfully Takenoyama was oftentimes a very quiet area.

I spent much of my time there studying Japanese, as well as Japanese literature, culture, and history. What I liked most about the study programme was that although I learned a lot, it wasn't as terribly intensive as I was expecting. I wasn't forced to spend the majority of my time in Japan studying for exams, rather the university encouraged exchange students to explore Japan for ourselves by giving us every Friday off. This meant that I got to do a good deal of travelling while still being able to keep up with the coursework. My classes were for the most part specially for exchange students, and it was easy to make friends bonding over the new experiences we were having in Japan. As well as that, the lecturers were all extremely friendly, in spite of our classroom shenanigans. It is a fantastic thing to be able to learn a language in the country where that language is spoken, and I learned a lot from my Japanese teachers, who were both great at making the classes fun for us.



Kinkakuji, Kyoto

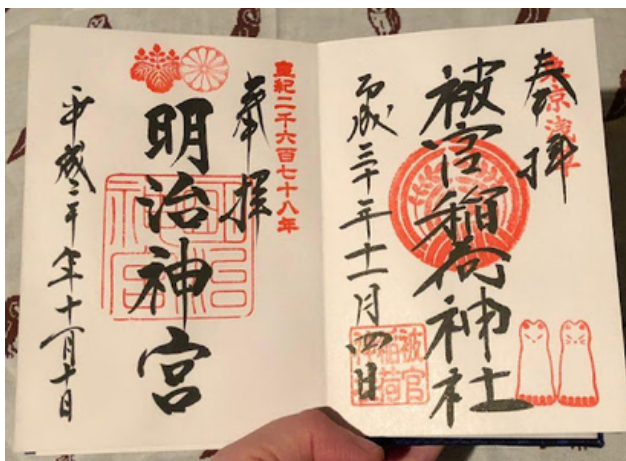


Asakusa, Tokyo

As I mentioned, I spent a decent amount of time travelling in Japan. This began with long excursions to nearby shrines, where I would collect *goshuin* (御朱印), loosely translated as “shrine stamps”. I became slightly obsessed with these during my time there, and I would often spend entire weekends travelling as far afield as possible in order to visit particularly appealing shrines or temples. This did allow me to see many wonderful places in Japan, and I managed to collect over 100 *goshuin* in total. I would highly recommend this activity for anyone interested in Japanese culture. Not only do the *goshuin* allow for a personal and unique souvenir that can be looked back on after your time in Japan is over, but it also encourages you to learn about Japanese customs and traditions surrounding shrines, temples, and religion in general. I felt a deep respect for and connection to Japan while visiting shrines, surrounded by nature and history.



A shrine in Gifu, famous for being the inspiration for a shrine in *Kimi no Na Wa*



Two examples of Tokyo *goshuin*



Example of a special, limited-edition autumn *goshuin*

I look back on the vast majority of my time in Japan as being positive. Perhaps the biggest challenge I had was the language barrier, but even that wasn't a huge difficulty to me in getting around, as there was always a way to convey my message. Due to the amount of places I visited, I got to interact with lots of Japanese people outside of the university setting, many of whom could not speak English, and I still managed to have very pleasant interactions with them. Overall, I felt very welcomed. Whether it was in the city of Osaka or the Nagoya countryside, people were friendly and patient with me.



The entrance to a shrine in Takayama

This is not to say I didn't experience any culture shock, of course. Perhaps the term "culture shock" is an exaggeration, but I certainly experienced "culture surprise" when I saw just how quiet people on the buses and trains are in Japan compared with Ireland. In Ireland, people (myself included) have loud conversations on public transport, and sometimes you'll even hear people playing music on their phones. In Japan, everyone is silent, which is something I never knew I would appreciate until I experienced it myself. It can be difficult to reign yourself in from talking loudly on a train when you're with your friends, but it's an important part of respecting the culture you're now in.

One of the best pieces of advice I could give is also in relation to public transport: getting an IC card saves a lot of time by allowing you to easily tap on and off buses and the subway without having to buy paper tickets all the time. These can be purchased at large subway stations.

Another useful tip is to learn common, everyday phrases in Japanese. This sounds very obvious, but for the first few weeks I didn't understand what the convenience shop worker was asking me at the end of every transaction until I realised they were enquiring if I wanted a plastic bag or not. Compiling a list of phrases that you're bound to hear in shops, restaurants, etc. is a good way to make sure you don't end up flustered in otherwise ordinary situations. On the note of shops, it's important to carry around cash wherever possible, as it's not always guaranteed that certain establishments will take card (especially if you're using a foreign card). Many convenience shops, such as 7-Eleven, Family Mart, and Lawson have ATMs that will accept VISA cards so that you can take out cash. As well as ATMs, convenience stores often have free toilets, sinks, hot food, and general necessities. Some also have seating areas and printers for public use. This knowledge came in handy for me on my travels, as I knew there was always a convenience store around the corner, which meant access to these amenities if I was ever stuck. In Ireland, free, clean public toilets are often not available, so I found this to be a nice change.

Overall, I was hugely reluctant to even leave Japan when the time came. Once I graduate from college, I have plans to apply for the JET program so that I can return to Japan in a teaching capacity, and depending on how well that goes, I may even want to live out there long-term. All I can say is, for anyone going to Japan on exchange, make the most of your time there and treasure each moment, as truly there is nothing like experiencing Japan (or a Japanese cat café) for the first time. Try as many new things as possible and explore as much as you can. I would certainly do it all again if I could.



My first visit to a cat café (I love cats)