

Trip to Japan

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Step-3

As an avid fan of Japanese pop culture and as a Japanese language student for more than a year, I was pleased to learn I had been selected as one of the representatives for the JENESYS 2.0 Programme from Pakistan. The Programme was the perfect opportunity for me to explore the country I am planning to live in for the next four years while I pursue my undergraduate studies. From the night we landed at Narita International Airport, I could sense the trip would be beyond anything I had imagined. We received a very warm welcome by our travel agency representative, who escorted us to “N’s Court”, a wonderful café located within the premises of the Airport. After a quick dinner, the representative took us to Narita Tobu Hotel, where we were welcomed by Ishibashi-san, one of the two ladies who coordinated our stay in Japan. Following a brief introduction of the trip, the coordinator assigned us rooms and provided an overview of the following day’s schedule. Although we were to report at 7a.m. the next morning for breakfast, I was so excited that I could barely sleep that night.

The next morning, at breakfast, I experienced Japanese food for the very first time. Despite the existence of very good Japanese restaurants in Karachi, I had never been able to pluck up enough courage to dine at one. First, I tried the miso-soup, and I enjoyed it so much that I made sure to have miso-soup every single morning for the next six days. Getting acquainted with using chopsticks was also a challenge, but with some practice, I slowly became accustomed.

Following breakfast, we left for Tokyo Station, where we were given time to explore the expansive station before taking a much anticipated bullet train, or “Shinkansen,” ride. At the station, we met our second coordinator, Junko san.

As a movie buff, I recognized the sleek design of the bullet train at first sight and I began to feel as if I was on the set of a science fiction movie. However, with a few taps on the shoulder by one of my teammates, I was quickly brought back to reality. Our trip on the Shinkansen was just enough time to take a short nap and eat lunch before we arrived at Shinshirakawa station, from where we took a bus ride to our resort in Minami-aizu.

Initially, I was disappointed to be in the middle of a small town. As a pop culture fan, the Japan I imagine is supposed to be filled with bustling, busy cities, shopping, gadgets and anime; in sum, a concrete jungle where people lead fast lives. The tiny town of Minami-aizu was nothing close to the Japan I pictured in my mind. Little did I know what the next few days had in store for me.

The first surprise came when I entered my room, which I was to share with four other girls from Pakistan’s delegation. There were three beds and a ‘Washitsu’, complete with Tatami mats. Instead of getting my own room, we were presented with a portrayal of how Japan, despite being technologically advanced beyond limits, was still clinging to its roots through traditional sleeping quarters. For me, the very presence of the room demonstrated that many people loved to stay close to their traditions and values, and were proud of their customs. Once we settled in, we took a short hike up one of the hills behind our resort and returned in time for dinner. After a hearty feast, we were given two orientations- one for all of the country delegations present and a group orientation. This was the second sleepless night I had in Japan; however, unlike the first, this one was out of distress for being “stuck” in the middle of nowhere.

Day two began with a wake-up call at 6 AM, a quick dressing up, a temperature check, and another

breakfast. Next, we were taken to the Town Hall for a courtesy call on the Town Mayor, who gave a short talk on Minami-aizu. The Mayor told a story of how the people of Fukushima worked together to stay strong after The Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima Nuclear disaster. His tale of strength and collaboration greatly inspired me. Before this, I had just watched videos and heard stories, but on that day, I was there, present in a place which had experienced it all. The feeling was intense and it took a lot of effort to keep myself from shedding tears. Here, we were also introduced to the term “さすけ (ね)!” which, in the local dialect means “no worries,” and has a usage similar to that of the famous “Hakuna Matata” . From that moment on, I fell in love with the spirit of the people of Fukushima, and Japan began to mean much more to me than pop culture, to which I had solely associated it with through music, fashion and animation.

The subsequent days were action-packed; we visited an optical glass factory, an elementary school, saw harmonica performances by nursery school children, learned how to play Taiko drums, saw Taiko performances, gave a cultural performance, facilitated an “Action-Plan” workshop and ate some of the best food in the world. Each experience was hands-on and one of a kind.

Observing the culture, I was amazed at the efficiency of the optical glass factory and the discipline of the school children. I was particularly awed by the school-children because I teach at elementary school level and can greatly relate to educational environments. The energy of the nursery school children and the Taiko performers left me ecstatic. Learning to play the Taiko drums was an experience in itself; I had never witnessed so much joy with music in a long time. To top it all off, everything we were served for breakfast, lunch and dinner was “おいしいかった!” - there honestly is no other word for it.

Finally, the day I had looked forward to the most arrived: the return to Tokyo. I was still excited about experiencing Tokyo, but not as much as before I gained an appreciation for the beauty of Minami-aizu. The town had cast a spell on me, and going to Tokyo meant leaving behind the scenic beauty of this magical town. Moving to Tokyo also meant the time to go home was near and I hadn’ t had enough of Japan yet. With heavy hearts, we packed our luggage again, exchanged souvenirs with all our new-found friends and acquaintances, and set off, first to Kinugawa Onsen-Station by bus, and then to Asakusa via the Skytree Train. It felt special to have an entire train chartered just for us.

Upon reaching Asakusa, I was dazed because I finally was in a place I understood - all of the Japanese websites, fashion blogs, music videos and dramas I had watched had shown me a glimpse of this side of Japan. More importantly, Asakusa was another portrayal of culture preservation. Amidst contemporary architecture, packed with tourists, stood the majestic Sensoji Temple. A briefing on the history of the Temple was followed by some shopping for souvenirs, after which we were taken to Akihabara, another one of the most-awaited trips on my list.

Akihabara, the hub of electronic and anime merchandise, lived up to its reputation. High school students, people returning from work and more than a few tourists were spotted all over the place. Anime buffs could be seen swarming in and out of the “Gundam Café,” which was the most remarkable sight of the day for me. Once I got my hands on a few anime figurines, I felt like my trip to Japan was complete. With a quick dinner at an Indian restaurant in Ginza, some photographs with passersby, and a long bus ride to the Airport Hotel in Narita, the day came to an end. Final goodbyes were exchanged with fellows from other countries before we went to bed, only to spend another sleepless night - saddened this time, for it was our last night - in Japan.