

Shahzeb Khan

Step-3

The tour of Japan began on the morning of 20th May 2013. We left early morning in a bus for Tokyo station. On our way we saw many famous sites, such as Tokyo Disneyland. We arrived a little early so we used the time to take photos of the bustling city. When our coordinators ushered us to the gates, we all hurriedly boarded the Shinkansen. It was my first experience in a highspeed train, we were all very excited. The train was so fast, we had moved across the country in a matter of hours.

After the arrival at Shinshirakawa, we boarded the chartered bus to Minamiaizu town. This was a really long trip and we could notice how the urbanization was gradually reducing, until we arrived at the Aizu Highland Resort Inn Daikura. It was very beautiful and scenic, there was barely anyone in sight. Only the quiet chirping of the birds could be heard. We woke up next morning at 6:00 to a wakeup call by the front desk, this came in handy since we needed to be on schedule and it made us punctual. At breakfast we were greeted by our coordinators with hand sanitizer and thermometers for a quick checkup. I lined up for the breakfast and chose from a variety of foods although uncertain about some being halal or not. I became used to this practice at mealtimes.

After Breakfast they took us to the town hall for a briefing by the mayor of Minamiaizu town. There we learnt that the town used to be much more lively than it is now. Due to the reactor meltdown in Fukushima Daiichi the rumors about radiation had made people worry about living in Minamiaizu town. He told us that the situation had been contained, and the tour was designed to show us more reasons for people to come to their town. We were then escorted to the Aizu Tajima Gion Kaikan, where they introduced us to the Gion festival and the famous Taiko drums. Then they took us to the Sumita Optical Glass, Inc. where we learnt about the various glass products and how glass is manufactured. With this our first day ended.

The second day was the most exciting of all, first we visited the elementary school. The school children were at once shy and eager to meet the foreigners, they shook hands with us and laughed. We spent half an hour learning origami from fourth graders, and then competed with our frogs in jumping competitions. Then another half hour we spent in fifth grade practicing calligraphy with the children. They took us on a quick tour around the school since we were short on time, we saw the labs, the art room, the music room, and the gymnasium. It was really hard to say goodbye to the children afterwards. Then after lunch we went to the community center where each country presented their culture. We saw a performance by the kindergarteners which was very fun to watch and also got to play the Taiko drums under a master. Then we saw the professionals play, it was the most breathtaking performance ever.

On the third day we went back to the community center, this time for the action plan workshop. After lunch all four countries presented their action plan in alphabetical order. Most of the points were about what we plan to take home from this experience in Japan, and what we plan to do to promote Minamiaizu town in our own country.

The next day was the day we were all looking forward to, the trip to Tokyo. First was the visit to the temples in Asakusa. It was such a huge place that I feared someone might become lost. It was full of school children on their fieldtrips and foreigners going about shopping for souvenirs. We were taken upon popular request to the Hyaku-en shop where we unfortunately overstayed our welcome. After that, as a surprise our coordinators took us to the Yodobashi Akiba shopping mall in Akihabara. I was very delighted to see all the bright colors everywhere, and we did a little bit of shopping there as well. We returned to the Narita Tobu Hotel where we rested for the early departure next morning.

The people we met throughout were very generous and welcoming. This was a refreshing and healthy experience; I have become more punctual and proactive due to the interaction with the JENESYS team. I would like to take part in more such events, and would suggest they prolong the stay for at least two weeks as there is so much more to experience in Japan as I found.