

2016 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Alice Liu

My Japanese trip was amazing, all thanks to the Heart of America Japan-America Society for helping sponsoring our trip, Patty, Jan, and Hiroko who worked tirelessly for hours buying tickets, informing us about our host families, and meeting with us. I also want to thank the members of the Kurashiki City Hall, especially James Benson, Tomoaki Fujii, Nobu-san, and Yumiki-san who helped us make our Japan stay as comfortable as it was. Along with these gracious people, I would like an extra thanks to my host families that I know spent a lot of time to make my Japanese trip perfect, and all amazing people I meet in Japan, who despite the language barrier, were all wonderful and friendly to me.

After the long process of waiting, emailing host families, packing, and stressing, our ambassador group was ready to head to Japan. When we arrived at Osaka, a smiling James Benson greeted us at the airport. This was quite a relief, since I was nervous about getting off an airport in a foreign country. Riding the Shinkansen, we watched thousands of cute, compact houses from the train on our way to the hotel in Kyoto. Once there, we checked into a hotel and had dinner at a nice okonomiyaki place. It was a refreshing taste from the airplane food I ate previously. Japanese mayonnaise is very sweet!

The following day, our group proceeded to go to Kurashiki to meet our host families. Waiting for us was a huge welcome sign, followed by a group picture. My first host family was the Suto family. We broke the ice by ramen at the mall connected to the train station. My host mom Narumi and dad Kentaro had three children: Kanto (10), Lisa (7) and Kota (5). They lived in the small town of Kojima, in the countryside. Nayumi-san planned my trip beforehand, and everything created a broad experience for Japan,

which included visiting family friends, elementary schools and eating Japanese hotpot. The first day, proceeding breakfast, I went to a school girl museum with my host mom. Everything inside was like an anime – beautiful forms of fabric laid hung throughout, nostalgia from my childhood shows I watched. The owner of the shop, because he was friends with the Suto family, allowed me to keep a uniform. This was only one of the many fun times we had. We went to the children's elementary school, dabbled in calligraphy and visited a variety of stores around the area. One of the highlights of the trip was trying on my host mother's yukata and going to a local small festival. Ando, a photographer and one of the Suto family's close friends, helped take nice photos for us. I even received an album. With all these cameras and modern forms of photos, it was nice to have something physical. The stay with the Suto family ended with a bang as we got to enjoy Okayama Castle. Detective Conan, a very popular Japanese anime, went to Okayama Castle. I got to take pictures with him!

Towards the end of my Suto family stay, I had the opportunity to go to Okayama castle. It was nice to see the contrast between the city and the countryside.

Between all of this, we had the opportunity to go to Miyajima, a small island near Hiroshima. Greeted by adorable deer as we got off the island, it was truly a new experience. They constantly tried to eat at people's food and clothing. It was almost as if we entertained them as much as they entertained us. It seems that every city has a reputation for their form of cute desserts and tiny shops filled with goodies to choose from. Here, we had a bunch of cute mini cheesecakes.

My home of my second host family, the Fukui family, was in the countryside. The family consisted of the mom (Hiroko), dad (Daisuke), grandpa (Kazuo), daughter (Mizuki, who was my age), her younger brother (Daichi), and her older sister (Chisato) in college.

They were extremely friendly and it was a nice to have a friend my age. Their house reminded me of one of Studio Ghibli's classic movies such as *Totoro*. They lived in a traditional old, comfy house, encircled by rice fields with very clean air. We had to drive 40 minutes from the city to the house. Driving up the mountain, there were peach trees everywhere. Each peach was delicately placed in the trees.

The Fukui family was very easy to get along with. Pokemon GO came out around this time, July 22, to be exact, and Taichi and I went crazy trying to catch pokemon around the countryside. The dad even joined our pursuits and we drove around and visited a playground for Pokemon GO.

I also went to Mizuki's school. It was a long day. My host mom woke up at 6 just to make our homemade bento boxes! This is definitely a pleasant change from the school food I am used to. After a long train ride, we walked to the school from Kurashiki Station. Students flooded the school from all directions. Most of them were walking or on bicycle, and I rarely saw any cars near the school.

One of the gracious things my second host family did for me was take me to Okayama to help my mom buy a special Japanese bag. We all wanted to go to the island of Shikoku, but we ran out of time, but going to the mall was fun. From there, we proceeded to the farewell party. Everyone had a joint family buffet and slideshows of our adventures in Japan were presented. Everyone was lively and ecstatic; children were chasing each other, families wishing their goodbyes, tears passing from one person to the next.

Fujii-san took us back to Osaka by bullet train, and we stayed in a cozy hotel. The next day, we had a few hours to sightsee before boarding the plane. There was an

instant contrast between the bustling, always exciting city life and the calm, tranquil life of the country. There was a second hand flea market in what seemed to be a random part of the city. It felt like a bunch of garage sales clustered in a single area. After, we all asked Fujii-san to take us to a maid café. None of us had ever been, and it's always one of those cool Japanese places people hear about. Walking from one small market to the next, Fujii-san had to ask around many times, as none of us knew where they were located. We ended up in Otaku Road. The streets were surrounded by cute gachapuns, restaurants and anime posters. Luckily, a maid advertising a café approached us. It was 100 percent worth the hype. All the food was extremely cute and small, and there was singing and dancing around. We ended the day at the airport.

My Japanese trip exceeded all expectations of an exchange trip. I was greeted by all kinds of amazing people. Not only did I make 2 more families, I owe them a lifetime of debt. Every meal they cooked, every trip we took and every experience we shared will last a lifetime. I currently still email Mizuki and Snapchat the Sutos. I learned patience, not only with myself, but communication with people around me. It also taught me more respect for moms and housewives. Both moms worked outside the home, and woke up early to make breakfast and spent a tremendous amount of time cleaning, cooking and keeping the family together. Although neither of my host moms were housewives only, I was inspired by the how the Japanese take such integrity with everything they do, so now I try to act in the same way. Japan is a country of friendship, kindness and integrity.