

Fall 2019 Semester Abroad Reflection

All of a sudden, after 7 years of studying Japanese, you find yourself in a study abroad program in Japan. You have waited most of your life patiently for this moment. You have studied your kanji and mastered your *jikoshookai*, but as you are greeted, seated, and waited on in a restaurant near campus, you can't help but notice you cannot understand anything the waitress is saying. You have the same realization while listening to a speech made by a third-year student in the cooking club who is "graduating" from the club to start *Shuukatsu*. Why can't you understand? Because you barely studied keigo.

This was my experience and countless others experience while studying abroad in Japan. No matter how hard we studied before coming to Japan, nothing could fully prepare us for life in Japan. During my semester abroad, I kept myself busy with several extracurricular activities. I participated in a cooking club where I learned how to make Japanese food that suited my taste palette. I also volunteered at a basketball club for elementary school students in the countryside (I have my Nigerian friend who I met to thank for that opportunity). I also took it upon myself to explore the local cuisine of Nagoya. I received a "Nagoya Food Map" about mid-semester, so I made it my goal to check off as many local foods as I could taste. As for my classes, it was amazing to see the things we learned about in class in real life. Seeing the various rites of passage at shines and the mundane mannerisms of Japanese people was fascinating. Japanese tea ceremony helped me realize just how nuanced Japanese culture is and how most things in daily life are very intentional, even if you don't think they are.

Study abroad has allowed me to grow in ways I am not sure I would have otherwise. I take personal growth very seriously, so I was able to do some real self-reflection and pinpoint problem

areas in my personality that I needed to work on. There were points when I reflected on my childhood and the deposition of family members who have shaped my personality and how I interact with the world. Since I lived a sheltered life growing up, there are some social situations in which I have a hard time navigating. All of these things were front and center while I was in Japan and honestly, it was a little frightening. But I crave self-growth and enhancement, so I pushed forward with self-improvement as my goal. I know going into my last semester in America that I have changed on a fundamental level, and these changes have strengthened my leadership abilities, tested my patience, and introduced me to alternative problem-solving strategies.

There were many things I did not expect to do while in Japan. One thing I had a chance to do that I never expected was having the opportunity to volunteer and participate in a conference specifically for black women in Japan. Words cannot begin to describe the incredible experiences I had that weekend in Kobe. I was surrounded by phenomenal black women doing phenomenal things in Japan. I am inspired to do equally phenomenal things in my future. Each panel I went to filled me with wisdom, and every woman I met graced me with her positive energy. It was also encouraging to know that when I return to Japan, there is a community waiting for me with open arms.

This winter holiday I am spending time with family and reconnecting with friends. I am also preparing for my last semester at university and for my first job after school. For my first job after graduation I plan to teach English in Japan. To prepare for that Job, I have signed up for a volunteer position teaching adult learners English at an immigrant assistance center. I am certain with the cultural knowledge I gained from my semester abroad I will have a better time in Japan next time around.