

Bryan Cheung – Japan, summer 2016

I had the opportunity to spend 3 weeks in the Kansai region of Japan this summer. I travelled around the various cities in the region including Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto, Nara and Wakayama; in particular I lived in Kobe for 2 weeks where I took a Japanese language course at a local school.

My motivation to head to Japan was mainly to experience the Japanese culture by living amongst the locals – tasting their cuisine, understanding their history and speaking their language. I had been learning Japanese as an extra option at the Cambridge University Language Unit for the past year already and would also like to take this opportunity to further improve my proficiency in the language.

During those 2 weeks, I had 5 hours of intense Japanese language lessons everyday followed by some fascinating culture sessions provided by the school (Ayatori classes, karaoke etc.). The lessons covered incredibly useful vocabulary used on a day-to-day basis and the essential grammar required to connect the words together.

While the lessons built on my limited Japanese language skills, I stayed at a homestay and my host-mother spoke no English at all – this meant that I had every chance to practice speaking Japanese. Oka-san (host-mother in Japanese) made a variety of delicious breakfasts every day and was very gentle during our daily conversations as I try to find the right words to describe my thoughts.

I managed to make use of the little time I had left after classes and work to travel as much as possible. Kobe is situated very close to the other cities within the Kansai area, typically within an hour's train ride. I stayed in Kobe during the week and travelled to further cities such as Osaka and Kyoto during the weekends. I really enjoyed the time spent in Osaka and Kyoto; as I walked along the hallways of the Osaka castle and gazed at the beauty of the scenic, tranquil setting of Tenryu-ji in Kyoto, I felt I was breathing in the essence of Japanese history itself.

In Wakayama, I looked out for small temples hidden away in the corners of the city, such as the steep, crude stone steps on the Wakaura Tenmangu Shrine and the Kishu Toshogu Shrine, where the founder and the first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan during the Edo period is enshrined. Wandering around some of the country's best temples in Nara was definitely one of my favourite memories this trip, glancing into almighty Todai-ji Temple which contains a 16-meter-high Buddha and feeding the passive-aggressive deer in the Nara-koen Park (they literally will bite for food) were both extremely fun activities to do.

Kobe itself is not a large city, comparable to Cambridge, but it has everything you need – from shopping centres to food alleys, from temples to onsen villages. Spending the night relaxing in the golden hot springs in Arima Onsen definitely relieves the stress accumulated during the daytime and I just wish I could've gone there every day. For food, Kobe beef is world-renowned and I have had many opportunities to test it out myself, and I can tell, it lives up to its name. There are many hidden gems in the city to be discovered if given the time.

In summary, I really enjoyed my time in Japan. I was not just a tourist; I was living the life of a local as well. It certainly has been an unforgettable experience and I look forward to the day I return.