

### Marta de Andres - A Valencian in Tokyo

At the end of four years at Cambridge, I was exhausted. I needed a break before heading for the working world or remaining in the academic one. I wanted to travel the world, live elsewhere, experience a culture so completely different from my own. The JLSP program offered by Pembroke gave me such an opportunity. In my last year at Cambridge, I had taken additional Japanese lessons because it's always been a culture that fascinated me. However, studying Japanese alongside a Chemistry Master's inevitably meant it had to be sidelined for my degree.

My interest in Japan began in two ways, the main one being Japanese anime. "Deathnote" got me through my second year exams at University and "Attack on Titan" got me through third year. I hated watching the episode in English as I felt the dubbed versions often missed out the subtleties of Japanese as is often the case with anything that's been dubbed. Yet, it was exhausting having to constantly read subtitles. I longed to go to Akihabara, the electrical district of Tokyo, to see the giant anime lights and the book tower with over ten floors, filled with anime. In my summer holiday of third year I decided to read "Memoirs of a Geisha" and "Hokkaido Highway Blues: Hitchhiking Japan" which made me realise how desperately I wanted to experience Japan for myself and not simply as a tourist. Both books showed me the intricate nature of the Japanese culture and the difficulty foreigners have understanding it.

The course at Nihon University offered through this program was fantastic. It combined both learning the Japanese language, an essential instrument in any foreign country, and also had additional classes for learning about Japanese culture. The timetable was incredibly flexible meaning I was able to keep most of my afternoons free to explore the country and experience the culture for myself.

Part of this flexibility meant I was given days off to be able to travel to Kyoto and Hiroshima. I had read a lot about Kyoto as it is where "Memoirs of a Geisha" takes place but seeing Gion for myself and imagining what it must have been like 100 years ago in the height of the Geisha period was incredible. Kyoto is filled with beautiful temples, my favourite of which was Fushimi Inarii which contains red towers that weave their way up a mountain to the temple on the top. Atop that mountain was the most peaceful I have ever felt in my life. The stark contrast between this traditional ancient capital and the modern capital of Tokyo, coexisting in the same country reflected Japan as a whole. It's the first country I have visited that was able to interweave so much tradition with modernity.

Later that same weekend, I took the bullet train to Hiroshima and saw the atom bomb dome, memorial and museum. At school we all study the Second World War and learn about how bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki but there's no way of truly comprehending the extent of destruction until you find yourself in one of those towns that has had to be built back up again and you see the extent of damage those bombs did. The Children's Memorial was truly touching. It was erected because Sadako Sasaki, a child affected by the bombs, believed that if she made 1000 origami cranes she would recover from her leukaemia. Sadly, she died

before she was able to complete the cranes but every year, children from across Japan make and send cranes to her memorial, remembering all the children that died as a result of those atomic bombs. It is a place that makes you think long and hard about the past and makes you hope for a brighter future where atomic bombs will never have to be used again.

When I headed out to Japan back in September I didn't know how this move would turn out. I worried that I would get lonely or struggle getting around without the language but my trip to Japan turned out to be much more than I could ever have expected. I met amazing people from all over the world, learnt a language that was so marvellously different from any other language I've learnt before and experienced a rich culture full of surprises. Three months was not enough time to truly understand the Japanese and their customs but it gave me a glimpse into their world and it was a fascinating world indeed.