
Host University: Ritsumeikan University
Country: Japan
My Major: Business (but I took mainly arts classes at Ritsumeikan)
Dates: Sept. 2015 to Jan. 2016 (Fall 2015 to the first month of Spring 2016 semester)

Preparation for the Exchange
APPLICATION
When you first apply to Ristumeikan, you need to choose the program that you want to enter. This is either the Open Study in English (OSE) program or the Intensive Japanese Language (IJL) program. When choosing the OSE Program, you get first “dibs” on the the classes taught in English (compared to the IJL students). However, one important thing to note is that if you take the OSE program, you are not allowed to take any intermediate Japanese classes. You can only take beginner classes, which is available to those who have absolutely no prior Japanese knowledge.

PACKING
Other than the basic necessities that you would normally bring when travelling, I would bring any prescriptions or other items that may be difficult to get in Japan (especially if you can’t read Japanese). Also, if you are going in the summer, I would bring mosquito repellant. The ones that you can purchase in Japan is quite weak and not as effective as the one you can buy here in Canada. The Japanese mosquitos are annoying, everywhere and it’s really terrible when they bite you. Also, I found that medicine such as Tylenol is really hard to find. The water in Japan is very drying for your skin, so if you have bad skin, I would recommend getting those prescriptions before leaving for Japan.

If you plan on living in the dorm, I would recommend bringing a router. At the dorm I stayed at (I-House Utano), Internet was quite iffy at times. Many of the other people living at the dorm often complained that the Internet did not work, but since I had a router, my Internet worked great!

TRAVEL
I personally arrived in Japan about a week early so I can have a bit of a mini vacation before the semester started, so I actually arrived in Tokyo first. However, if you were to go directly to Kyoto, I would fly to Kansai International Airport (KIX), then take the airport shuttle to Kyoto Station. I don’t remember the exact price, but I believe it was about 3000 yen. This takes about an hour. Then if you are going to the dorm from the station, you can take either the taxi or the bus.

MONEY
Japan is mainly a cash society, so I would have cash handy at all times. Many places in Japan do accept credit cards, but I found that sometimes they didn’t work. Also depending on your bank, you may have trouble withdrawing money. I am with TD and I found that I was only able to withdraw money from 7/11’s and the AEON ATM machines. So when going to Japan, I would bring at least enough money to last about a month (maybe about $400). Especially if you are

waiting on a scholarship. Also, you do have to use quite a lot of money during the first month, since you will be renting bikes, buying the school cards, etc. so be prepared.

I think the thing that helped me out the most (money-wise) is the JASSO scholarship. I highly recommend applying for that or the RUSSES Scholarship. These are 80,000 yen and 40,000 yen respectively. They essentially pay for your whole rent and a little more depending on which you get and where you stay.

During the Exchange
ARRIVAL AND ORIENTATION
When I arrived in Kyoto, I took a taxi my dormitory. As Kyoto station is pretty much in central Kyoto, finding a taxi is extremely easy. To get to I-House Utano, it costs about 3000 yen. However, one thing that I found was that most taxi drivers didn’t know where my dorm was by name, so I had to use a different landmark that was close by, such as the Utano Youth Hostel. For a cheaper option, there is the bus loop which you can easily catch the 26 bus to the same area (this is a lot cheaper, costing 230 yen, but it takes a bit longer).

The orientation was really useful for getting information on what is around Kyoto, medical information, classes and so on. It can be a bit long, as it spans over a few days, but there is a lot of useful information. You get a lot of papers during the orientation, so be prepared. Some aren’t that useful, but there are a few that is extremely useful, make sure you stay organized!

ACCOMMODATION AND LIVING
As mentioned earlier, I was living in I-House Utano. I found this dorm to be extremely comfortable. In the dorm there were two house managers and three “Japanese buddies” that can help you out when you have any questions, concerns, etc.

The dorm itself, is a bit far from central Kyoto, but it is right in front of a bus stop, which is really convenient. The rooms are really comfortable, as you get your own fridge, toilet, sink, etc. (which is the main reason I chose this dorm). One complaint that I have though is that doing laundry is quite expensive, since the machines weren’t that good. It often cost me around 500 yen (~$5) to completely wash and dry my clothes. Also, the kitchen is a bit small for the amount of people trying to cook and I guess depending on your house mates, it can get quite gross.

ACADEMIC
I found the classes were really similar to taking a language class at SFU or high school classes. There was a lot of participation and class/group discussions. Also, since I wasn’t in the language program, we had very little tests. Only 2 of my 7 classes had a final exam. However, the downside of this is that almost all (6 out of 7) had a final paper all due at pretty much the same time. If you are not good with budgeting your time, your last week of classes will be a horrible experience, so make sure you don’t procrastinate.
COUNTRY INFO
I found that Japan is a very warm country. It didn’t really become “cold” until mid-November, which was something that I wasn’t really used to. However, it does get quite cold, so if you are going in the winter, bring a winter jacket.

One thing that I found in Kyoto is that if you don’t know any Japanese, it is very hard to get around. I would make sure that you know some basic Japanese, such as numbers, food, etc. In restaurants, you can get away with just pointing at things, but it is always better to know what you are ordering (especially if you have allergies).

In Japan, bicycles seem to be a very popular and convenient method of transportation. Also, you are able to rent one at the dorm (Utano) for 5000 yen for half a year. They make it very easy to get to school and the grocery store. As it is a really popular method of transportation, drivers in Japan are very used to cyclists (even for those who are not so good at it). They can, however, get quite close to you when you’re cycling, which can be a bit intimidating.
If you go into Shijo Kawaramachi, there are many things to do around there, such as shopping, karaoke, bowling and so on. Also around that area there is a place called “Nishiki market” which is basically a bunch of food stalls, where you can try many different unique Japanese foods. Definitely try it out at least once!

As Kyoto is the old capital of Japan, there is many different historical/cultural places to visit. Kyoto actually has over 100 different temples and shrines that you can visit. Some that I recommend is Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kiyomizu Dera, and Kinkakuji. Near Ritsumeikan there are actually three shrines that are also really nice to visit.

Another thing that is kind of cool in Kyoto is their monthly flea markets. Here you can purchase things like kimonos, pottery, Japanese street food and so on. It is a really cool experience! Also, where else are you going to get a kimono for $10?
Gudetama Café – It is super cute, there are a lot of these kind of character cafes in Japan, I recommend trying one!

**After the Exchange**

Personally, I don’t think I really ran into too many challenges when in Japan. Most of my “major” challenges occurred when I first got to Japan. When I first arrived in Japan, the main challenge that I had was the language barrier. However, as you talk to more people and experience living in Japan, you naturally pick up on what to say and what to do in certain situations. Also, during the first month in the dorm and at school students need to pay a lot of different fees. It was a little scary seeing how fast your money disappears when you are on your own.
ADVICE
One thing that all the advisors kept mentioning was that no matter what, you will experience culture shock. However, myself and few of my other friends never really experience that feeling. I think that the main reason is that we knew what to expect when in Japan. My advice to people planning to go to Japan, or any country is to do their research on the country. For example, make sure you know what you can and cannot get in the country. This way you know what you need to bring with you on your exchange.

There isn’t that much more advice that I can give that hasn’t been mentioned in some other section of this report, but to summarize:

• Make sure you can ride a bicycle – it will make your life a lot easier in Kyoto.
• Learn some basic Japanese phrases, such as ordering, what to say in the taxi, and so on.
• If you have food allergies, make sure you learn how to say those as well, especially if it is seafood, buckwheat, and nuts.
• Make sure you research well before you go.
• Get prescriptions or anything else that you can’t live without before going to Japan.
• Last but not least, make sure you have fun and do accomplish everything that you want to in Japan. You don’t want to leave Japan feeling that you weren’t able to experience everything that you wanted to. However, don’t skip class. If you miss 3 classes, it is considered an automatic fail (unless you were sick or other circumstantial event occurs). Also, it really annoys your classmates since there is a lot of group work.