Exchange Report - Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

Spring/Summer (Apr - Jul 2018)

Before exchange

Preparation
For your student visa, the website for the Consulate General of Japan in Vancouver details all the documents you need for the application. My visa took about a week to process and was free of charge.

If you plan to find a part-time job while studying, exchange students are allowed to work up to 20 hours a week. The application form is included in your acceptance package and can be submitted at the airport during immigration. [Note from ISS: Please ensure you check the Consulate's website for your country of citizenship for guidelines and any changes/updates since the posting of this report.]

Academic details
There isn't a requirement for which department you need to be enrolled in when applying to Waseda. It all depends on what courses you want to take during your exchange. I registered for the School of International Studies (SILS), which offered the most classes taught in English.

Packing
Pack light! Really think about whether you're going to use something before deciding to bring it with you, especially if you plan to travel during your exchange. Toiletries like toothpaste, body wash, shampoo, etc. can be bought for cheap at supermarkets all over Tokyo. It gets pretty humid during the summer, so bring plenty of underwear and socks to avoid having to do laundry often.

You won't need any power plug adapters because Japan uses the same plugs as Canada.

Travel and transportation
Tokyo has 2 airports: Haneda and Narita. Haneda is closer to Tokyo but is usually for domestic flights and international flights within Asia. Narita is much further out and is for international flights outside of Asia.

The most convenient way to get around Tokyo is by train. If you don't have a ride to your accommodation when you arrive, you can probably take the train there. The network is extensive enough that you can get anywhere in the city within reasonable time. There are a mix of train lines operated by public and private train companies, so your train fare will vary depending on how many lines you switch between. However, as long as you hold an IC card
(eg. Pasmo, Suica, Icoca, etc.) — it's like a Compass Card but you can use it pay for other things as well — you can ride nearly any train line across Japan.

If you live in a fairly flat area, it's also convenient to own a bike. It makes exploring nearby neighbourhoods and getting groceries much easier. However, you'll need to invest in a bike lock and be sure to park only in legal parking spaces.

**Financials**
Although many places in Tokyo accept credit, Japan is still a cash-based society, so it's recommended to carry cash with you everywhere you go. I found that investing in a coin purse was beneficial, since you'll frequently receive coin change when eating out or getting groceries.

If you run out of cash, there are ATMs at all convenience stores, and there are convenience stores every couple blocks in Tokyo, so no major worries there.

The exchange rates in Vancouver turned out to be better than the ones at exchangers in Tokyo. If the exchange rate is good, I would recommend that you exchange a decent chunk of cash before departing for Japan. Your next best option would be to use the 7-Eleven ATMs with a compatible bank card. I used a Tangerine card during my time in Tokyo and the ATM's rate was usually about ¥2 off the CAD-JPY market rate seen on Google.

**During exchange**

**Accommodation and living**
I managed to get placed in a university dorm, so there was a bus that picked us up from Narita Airport and took us straight to our accommodation. If you run into any issues while living there, there are resident assistants (RAs) — who are students themselves — that can help.

*View of the Waseda neighbourhood from my balcony*
In my dorm, I shared a kitchen, a laundry room, and 2 showers with a floor of 10 people. We very rarely blocked one another when using these amenities, but in cases that we did, we usually communicated through a group chat.

Rent ended up being the most expensive part of my monthly costs.

There are more options for cheap food in Tokyo than in Vancouver, but eating out can add up pretty quickly. Fresh fruits and vegetables are a little pricey, but the frozen options are quite cheap if you can find a wholesale supermarket. The university cafeteria has a good selection of meals and is decently cheap too.

Restaurants in department stores are quite expensive, in general. However, these department stores usually have a basement floor full of take out food and snacks. Prices here are reasonable during regular hours, but get heavily discounted about an hour before close. You can usually pick up dinner or lunch for the next day here for cheap. This discount also applies to supermarket bentos.

If you have access to a kitchen and pantry, I recommend at least cooking enough for one home-made meal a day. You can meal prep for the entire week or take time each day to cook lunch or dinner. This will save you a good bit of money in the long run.

**Academic details**
Your enrolment requirements will depend on which department you're in. Lectures are usually held once a week. There were no tutorials or labs, at least for the SILS classes I looked at.

Since I was in SILS, I was required to take 6 credits worth of Japanese language courses, offered by the Center for Japanese Language (CJL), along with 8 credits worth of SILS classes. Each SILS class is worth 2 to 4 credits and each CJL class is worth 1 to 5 credits. Most SILS students end up taking an average of 2 or 3 SILS classes and 2 Japanese language classes in a semester.

In general, the Waseda classes aren't as heavy as SFU classes. Just keep up with your readings and assignments and you'll be fine. Most of your time will probably be spent on keeping up with the CJL classes, especially if you're new to Japanese.

**Country information**
Tokyo is the densest metropolis in the world. You'll have a different appreciation for personal space after spending months on constantly crowded streets and subways. That being said, there's lots to see and do all around Tokyo, and it's all accessible by train or by foot.

There are also many neighbouring towns and cities that are about an hour by train from Tokyo, making them great for day trips. For example, Yokohama has a cup noodle museum and has the largest Chinatown in Japan. Odaiba hosts many seasonal festivals and events, and is
popular for its hot springs. If you're a fan of Hayao Miyazaki’s work, the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka is worth checking out.

*Cup noodle museum in Yokohama*

*Inside the Odaiba Oedo Onsen Monogatari*
If you find yourself missing the ocean, Enoshima is by the beach, with a view of Mt Fuji on a clear day. If you're interested in seeing the sunrise from the peak of Mt Fuji, it's only a 2.5 bus ride from Shinjuku to the halfway point of the trail. Be sure to check for weather conditions before attempting the hike though, since it's dangerous to go up on a rainy day.
Flying is a cheap option to get to other parts of Japan, but sometimes it's much more convenient to take the Shinkansen (bullet train). You can get a student discount off the base fare if you use your student ID. Kyoto is a good place to visit if you're into shrines and temples, and is great for biking. Nagoya is a little quiet, despite being Japan's 3rd largest city, but has a unique cuisine and interesting museums that are worth checking out.
Social and extra-curricular activities
Waseda has an amazing number of student clubs — called 'circles' — available and they're all very passionate about what they do. Definitely take the time to check out the clubs days during the first week of class, especially for the famous 'funnel of flyers'. Extra-curricular activities are a good way to meet other students and expose yourself to the university's culture.
There are also many campus events worth checking out throughout the semester. For example, at one event, Jack Ma (CEO of Alibaba) was part of a dialogue on entrepreneurship, food technology and research. At another event, a Buddhist monk taught us about the philosophy of Zen and meditation. There will be a couple times a semester that you'll even get the chance to be part of the cheering section at a Tokyo Big6 baseball match. Most of them don't cost anything other than your time, so take it as a chance to learn more about Japan.

After Exchange

Advice
Google Maps is your friend when travelling to new areas, so it's worthwhile to get yourself a good mobile data plan, instead of relying on WiFi at subway stations and convenience stores.

Don't be shy about not being able to speak Japanese! Do what you can with what you have and just be yourself. The language will come naturally as you go.

I've learned many things about myself that I would never have if I didn't go on exchange. The experience of living on my own, travelling and meeting new people from all over the world is what I'll remember most fondly. You can always visit another country as a tourist any other time, but the opportunity to live there as a student is open to you only through exchange. Take the chance and make the most of it!