Exchange Report

Kwansei Gakuin University, Contemporary Japan Program (Modern Japan Track)

Nishinomiya, Hyogo, Japan

Computing Science

Sept 2018 – Jan 2019 (Fall Semester)

Getting a Visa

When I applied to Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU), I was asked to fill out various forms, including forms asking my reasons for study, a self-report of medical conditions, a statement of my finances, and a letter to the host family or accommodation coordinator (dependant on whether you stay with a host family or in the dorms). These documents were handed to International Services for Students for them to send to KGU. After being accepted by the university, a Japanese student visa is needed. This requires a Certificate of Eligibility which is sent by KGU after being approved, which arrives after around 3 months and can be picked up at ISS. The Certificate is the most important requirement for the visa, which can be applied for at the Consulate-General of Japan in downtown Vancouver. The application takes around 1 week and does not cost anything.

Packing

When packing for Japan, I feel that you should pack relatively light (around one week's worth of clothing), as most things can be found in Japanese supermarkets and stores. The only thing to note is that Japanese over-the-counter medication is often weaker than their Canadian counterparts, so preparing some medication is recommended. Alongside this, if you have any prescription medications you need to bring, check whether or not they are prohibited in Japan; if it is, you will have to get a yakkan shoumei, a document that allows for certain medications to be brought into Japan.

Flight and Arrival

My itinerary to Japan was slightly different compared to usual due to a typhoon damaging Kansai International Airport, requiring me to be redirected to Fukuoka and then taking the shinkansen train to Kobe to meet with KGU representatives. The ticket from YVR to Fukuoka costs around $1200 CAD and the shinkansen ride to Kobe cost around $170. After meeting with the representatives, we were taken to a bus and rode to the Kobe Sheraton hotel to spend the night. At the hotel, we were given welcome packages which explained what KGU expected of us, information about life in Japan, and when to pick up SIM cards for our phones. The next day, we took our luggage to the banquet hall for the university to arrange for them to be delivered to our dorms. After a speech which goes over the information found in the package, we all taken to our respective dorms to unpack and rest.

Orientation

We were led to KGU by student representatives for orientation the following day. At orientation, we were given our placement tests to see what or level of Japanese was. This consisted of writing all the hiragana and katagana, a short essay, and reading comprehension. The Contemporary Japan Program is different compared to past exchanges with KGU, as they do not require any understanding of the
Japanese language to be accepted. After the test, we were taken to the cafeteria for a welcome lunch. Modern Japan students were taken after the lunch for orientation regarding the mandatory class and what was expected of them while Japanese Language Track students were given a break. After this, we were taken to meet our Japanese buddy teams who would guide us through the campus and to help us with official paperwork. Half the groups were taken to register their addresses at city hall while the other half were given a tour of the campus and purchased their commuter passes.

The next day was orientation on using the KGU computer systems and how to log in using our accounts. Alongside this, we also were given an orientation on how to use the library. Finally, we were taken to either the city hall or to purchase a commuter pass depending on what you had already done the previous day.

**Course Selection**

For the fourth day of orientation, we were taken to a room and given a booklet with all available courses for exchange students and were told to write down what classes you wished to take onto a paper (we were given a booklet with available courses in the welcome package, those who want to check course syllabuses were able to do so online). The minimum amount of credits you need to take is 10 credits, which means you need a minimum of 5 courses as each course is worth 2 credits each.

**Money**

If possible, try to bring as much Japanese yen you can exchange, as Japan is still very much a cash-based society. While you will be able to find places that allow you to use your credit card, they are relatively uncommon and often require you to spend a certain amount of money before you can use it. I brought 100,000 JPY initially and had to constantly withdraw from ATMs, which was costly due to foreign transaction fees alongside the poor exchange rate. Overall, I used around $8000 CAD over the course of 5 months (including trips over the provided breaks). One of the biggest drains of your finances is transport, as the commuter pass only covers the distance from your dorm to KGU. All trips not along this line will cost extra. For example, a one-way trip from Takarazuka (where my dorm is located) to Umeda in Osaka costs around 500 yen, meaning a trip to Umeda will cost you around 10 CAD even before you even decide to buy anything there.

**School Life**

Classes at KGU is relatively relaxed compared to SFU, as the courses were designed to be fair for students who do not use English as their first language. I took 6 courses, all of which were based around discussions, group presentations, and the occasional quiz. Each class is 90 minutes and follows a 5-period schedule, with the first class starting at 9 am and the last class ending at 6:20 pm. Students are mainly marked on their attendance and participation in class, as homework is minimal. For finals, most of my classes asked me to write papers, while the Japanese speaking class required us to make a short skit with 2 other students.

In terms of school life and meeting people, I felt that most people who go on exchange will already be more willing to communicate with each other due to taking the initiative to travel, so making friends with fellow exchange students is not hard, as you will see them in class, in your dorm, and in the global lounge made for international students. When it came to meeting the Japanese students, I had a slightly harder time befriending them due to not having too many opportunities to meet new people. I
highly recommend you get a nihongo partner and to join a club or circle (clubs are stricter with attendance and participation, circles are more casual in nature), as both options allow you to meet new people with similar interests as you.

**About the Locale**

I was living in International Dorm 2 located in Takarazuka. Dorm 2 and dorm 5 are very closeby, with most students living in dorm 5. Dorm 2 allows you to live by yourself, while dorm 5 requires you to live with 3 other students in the same apartment. Alongside this, the kitchen is much bigger in dorm 2 than in dorm 5. It is important to note that students living in dorm 2 will have to pay for gas, water, and electricity, while those living in dorm 5 only need to pay for gas and water (I’m not sure on exactly what utilities they had to pay, but when looking at my friends bills, they were around a quarter of what I had to pay), leading to living in dorm 5 being much cheaper. Supermarkets and convenience stores are within a 5 minute walk from the dorm while the train station is a 15 minute walk. The station also has many stores and restaurants near it, with various choices such as pasta, tonkatsu, and okonomiyaki. Takarazuka’s main attraction is the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical troupe. While I haven’t seen one of the shows personally, many of my friends tell me that it is worth the cost. Alongside this, the Osamu Tezuka museum is nearby. Osamu Tezuka is the creator of works such as Astro Boy and Black Jack; the museum also talks about his life and the works he has created. The museum also hosts seasonal exhibitions from various other artists, with Macross Frontier being featured when I went.

**What I Learned, What I Wish I Knew, and Advice**

The only thing I wish I knew was how expensive living in Japan really was, as the utilities, gas, and transport took a large portion of my funds. In terms of challenges, I feel that I would have had a much better time if I had a better grasp on the Japanese language before coming, as making friends with Japanese students would be easier alongside being able to read menus and various books that those friends recommended me.

My only piece of advice would be to try to go to everything you are invited to, as your time in Japan is limited and you should use that time to try new activities with your new friends. Even if you wouldn’t normally consider an event, activity, or food, think of it as trying new things!
A photo of the clocktower at KGU.
A man shoots his flintlock pistol at the Kobe Shiro Festival.
Small bird statues at a shrine in Kobe.

Kobe from the top of Mount Rokko
An advertisement for Asahi beer at Dotonbori in Osaka (Taken using black and white film).