Exchange Report – Meiji Gakuin University in Japan

Fall semester, September 2009 to February 2010

My name is Doris (Yu) H., a current third year student in the business faculty, concentration in accounting. I had always been intrigued by the Japanese culture, and after taking all the Japanese language courses in SFU, it felt like high time that I take something that was purely personal interest to turn it into something that could benefit me in the future. In other words, to hone my Japanese proficiency and actually come in touch with the real and current Japan. I chose Meiji Gakuin University as my exchange designation because it is located in the center of metropolitan Tokyo, where majority of Japan’s commercial activities lay, and I could observe the Japanese commercial atmosphere.

Before Departure

Meiji Gakuin University sent over a package with all the relevant details to how to prepare for the exchange. A proof of scholarly exchange was also sent over to enable me to apply for long term visa for Japan. Nothing needs to be prepaid before arriving in Japan, but the rent for the university dormitory must be paid shortly after arriving. It is best to prepare enough Japanese yen, because most places, including the university, do not accept credit cards. It is, however, sufficient to just bring your internationally accepted debit card, and you will be able to withdraw yen through it in all 7-eleven stores.

Japan is very clean, and there is a lower risk of eating the wrong food. The Japanese government provides insurance, and foreigners can also join in the program at about $10 per month. Every international student must join in the government insurance, and will be taken to do the paperwork during orientation.

Upon Arrival

Meiji Gakuin had arranged for pick up at the Narita Airport, so all the exchange students are advised to get to the designated meeting spot on time. Meiji Gakuin has a very big and supportive buddy system, in that each exchange student will be assigned 2 to 3 Japanese buddies and they will do their best to make the exchange students feel at home.
The university dormitory is located in Okusawa-ku, in the middle of metropolitan Tokyo. Meiji Gakuin has 2 campuses, but most of the classes for international students take place in the Tokyo Shirokane campus rather than the Yokohama one. All international students, about 35 people, live in the dormitory, each with an individual room. There are shared kitchen, washroom, shower and laundry facilities. Rent for the dormitory is about $500 per month with a $250 deposit, which all must be paid in lump sum in cash at the beginning of the term. That amounts to about $2750, so bringing adequate cash is advised.

During orientation, students will be taken around Tokyo to familiarize with the surroundings, as well as apply for your foreigner identity card, health insurance, bank accounts, cellphones, and transit cards. Meiji Gakuin provides an approximate $400 bursary for transportation. Students actually arrived in Japan three weeks before classes start, as required by Meiji Gakuin, so we were given some time to get used to the surroundings.

Academic Information

Meiji Gakuin has a set of courses made especially for international students, and they are mostly taught in English, except for the language courses which also take up the most time and work. There are two weeks of summer Japanese course, after which a language ability test will be performed to sort students into the appropriate level of Japanese class. International students are not allowed to take normal courses taught in Japanese unless they have achieved level 1 in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test.

Students have one week after term begins to decide on the courses to take. They will be given a timetable, and choose from it. After deciding, students under normal circumstances cannot drop the courses. The classes are generally focused on Japanese culture, humanities and literature.
Country Information

Japan’s climate is milder than Vancouver, so you do not need to prepare too much winter clothing even if you go on the winter semester.

Culture wise, the main difference is that Tokyo has a lot, a lot more people than Vancouver, and you could get claustrophobic sometimes, especially in the trains at rush hour. It is also generally impolite to talk loudly on your cellphone in trains. Living in Japan is very convenient, with food and necessities all within arm’s length, and the main form of transportation is by public trains.

Tokyo is known for high density commercial activities, in other words, there are more than plenty of places to shop. My favourite locations would be Harajuku and Shibuya. For tourist
attractions, you would have to travel a little further to places such as Yokohama, Chiba, Kamakura and Yamanashi. The buddies will actively introduce you to these attractions.

Challenges

Although classes in Meiji Gakuin are conducted in English, most of the buddies and Japanese around you do not speak English fluently. If your Japanese is not proficient enough, you may easily feel left out of the Japanese circle. International students in the dormitory, however, mostly speak English, and it’s a nice consolation to have them around. Great friendships blossom from living together under the same roof.

Tokyo’s living expenses are similar to Vancouver in general, but due to its abundance and variety of things you can buy, money always tends to be not enough. Taking up a part time job is a good option, especially if you are staying for a year. Teaching English is a good start, but beware of security issues. Working in shops, on the other hand, would require higher level of proficiency in Japanese.

All in all, I had the best time of my life in Japan, and cliché as it is, my experience was made wonderful by all the people I had met. The Japanese buddies are warm and friendly, while the international students in the dormitory become like family. With great food, people, entertainment, and most of all, a great university, what more can you wish for?

Despite being from various different countries, the exchange students in the dormitory share a special bond. Here, we gather at an university organized culture event to Yamanashi prefecture. The university offers many such cultural events to let exchange students experience Japan.