Exchange Report
Kansai Gaidai University

Since my toddler days growing up in Canada, those around me could sense my attraction to Japan and its culture. Mumbling my own interpretations of the Japanese language I caught from the television set, troubling mom and dad by choosing imported Pocky snacks instead of regular potato chips at the store, and the list continues on and on.

And on, and on. And after a decade and a couple more years of adding to the list, during my third year in university, I decided to study abroad to expand my perspective and to experience how those from other cultures communicated and thought about concepts that I had learned in communications classes at Simon Fraser University.

Without much hesitation – rather, none at all – I opened up the page that listed the possible institutions that would host my adventure in Japan, and after quite an amount of research, I applied and was fortunately nominated for two semesters from August 2011 to the end of May in 2012 at my first choice, Kansai Gaidai University.

Holding connections with over three hundred institutions in more than fifty countries and regions, Kansai Gaidai University was a perfect institution for me to enjoy Japan while learning about other cultures as well.

It might sound slightly odd to you at the moment, but participating in the common Japanese pastime, karaoke, with three friends from Japan, one from Norway, two from the States, one from Sweden, one from Holland, and one me (I should write Canada slash Taiwan here) was not only incredibly entertaining but also rather common, as the students made groups of friends from anywhere around the globe.

Let me tell you more about how I reached that step, though.

Before my departure, I followed all of the instructions received from Simon Fraser University and Kansai Gaidai University, and was able to obtain my visa and make necessary arrangements for my housing and fee payment options well before my departure date. I must admit that I was a nervous wreck before everything came into place, but really, follow the instructions, ask if you are unsure, act quickly, and you should be fine.

Just make sure you are not the last student to arrive and sign in at the dormitories – called Seminar Houses – like me, since you might miss all
the opportunities to speak to your future friends and go on exploration and shopping trips with the Japanese staff members.

(I actually ended up working as a staff member for the arrival period in the Spring 2013 semester, and leading students on neat little trips that I never had the chance to experience made me want to kick the Fall 2012 me for not getting on an earlier flight.)

After the arrival period comes orientation week, where everyone attends a variety of sessions that provide information, allow students to open bank accounts, explain various registration procedures, and sort students into appropriate Japanese language class levels after evaluations and sometimes even interviews.

(On the topic of evaluations, you may want to dig out your old Japanese textbook or obtain one and study before you depart, since being placed in a level lower than you deserve is not the greatest experience.)

Once everything is settled, classes begin, groups of friends are formed, restaurants and local attractions are discovered since the not-as-tough-as-Simon-Fraser classes leave for quite a bit of spare time, and everything begins to roll. You will likely be cruising on your bicycle with your friends after class and taking the train downtown for a night out before you know it.

(For you who paused at the word bicycle, yes, we ride bicycles all the time, and if you live in Seminar Houses 1, 2, 3, or 4, you should realize that your bicycle will allow you to sleep in later than the walking folks every single morning and get you everywhere faster and cheaper than them.)
Homestay students and Hotani Seminar House students can hold back until they know where they will be living and have thought about whether or not they really need one.)

Life in the Seminar Houses, either 1, 2, 3, 4, or Hotani, in your very own apartment, in a homestay family, or in share houses then moves on quickly. Each morning you will attend Japanese classes, have a nice Japanese lunch in the cafeterias or stores on campus, and continue on with your other courses in the afternoon – occasionally hitting the gym or playing with your friends at the sports field.

Some keen students even go on to participate in clubs or circles organized by Japanese students that unite individuals with similar interests, or join in on events organized by Japanese students at the university – such as visiting the wonderful Universal Studios Japan.

Everyone usually finds something to do everyday, and before you know it, you will probably be half way through your semester.

Here, I think I would like to add a section of commentary based on the observations and thoughts of many of us who have completed our study abroad sessions there, placed conveniently in brackets:

(For the majority of us, time and resources are limited. And although you must be thinking that such a statement is merely common sense and it is quite silly that I would write that on my exchange report, I still believe that it is quite important.
The reason why?

Because there are too many students who believe that their study abroad experience is some sort of endless vacation, spending all their time having fun somewhere far from their textbooks and assignments, and using all their money in the beginning of the semester, leaving them embarrassed and quite poorly nourished until the end of the journey. If you do put your common sense to use while you are abroad, though, you will be just fine.

Quit screaming at the lunch ladies about how the salad they serve does not resemble those from North American cafeterias. Try out different foods and beverages at least once, and there will definitely be rewards.

Rather than making fun of and even picking fights with Japanese salarymen at a local restaurant, interact with them politely and you may have a table of new friends.

Turn down staying locked inside your room or trapped in a group of students from the same institution or country, and go out to experience a different world.

Finish your schoolwork early and explore with your friends whenever you have the opportunity to do so.

And keep an eye on the balance of your account and do not be afraid to ask local students where to shop, since there is no shame in eating inexpensive foods to save up for something else, like a brief but awesome vacation to Tokyo or even Korea.
Remember that Japan has been developed by the Japanese, and that you should learn to appreciate what they do instead of complaining about how it is not like how it is back home.

And be open. Be accepting. Be kind. Be willing to challenge yourself to change.

That way, you will be able to gain experiences that you would not have imagined, maybe participate in the common Japanese pastime, karaoke, with three friends from Japan, one from Norway, two from the States, one from Sweden, one from Holland...

And create wonderful memories that you will be sharing with the rest of us in your own exchange report once you are back.)

Honestly, in the blink of an eye, finals will have swung around and you will be facing goodbyes here and there since the semester is almost over – you will not have realized because you were having such a great time.

And when it is finally your turn to board the plane and bid farewell to your tearful friends, you will realize how wonderful the experience was and how much you are missing your life there already.

At least, that is what the majority of the students, including myself, felt.

To you, the reader of this exchange report while you consider studying abroad in Japan at Kansai Gaidai University, I would like to tell you that the experience has changed my life in a positive way –
And I am confident that you will have an incredible experience yourself.

Go.

Learn.

Enjoy.

And please share with us when you return.