Exchange Report  
Kansai Gaidai – Fall 2017

First things first, if you’re reading this because you’re unsure whether or not studying abroad is worthwhile, stop second-guessing and apply! I can’t even begin to properly describe what this experience has meant to me. To be perfectly honest, the idea of going to Japan had never been more than a fleeting thought prior to my first year of university, but once I developed an interest in going I was determined to follow through with it. I never could have anticipated that going abroad for four months would be the best thing I’ve ever done and my only regret is that I wasn’t able to stay longer.

You might be stressing out about all the paperwork and the logistics of actually going abroad, but luckily the prep work is the most stressful part of the whole process. I was a nervous wreck trying to make sure I was meeting all the deadlines, but now looking back at it all, I’m not even sure why I was. The process is fairly simple: research classes (Kansai Gaidai has one of the easiest sites for doing this), collect a couple of reference letters from your professors (make sure you know at least two of them well enough to ask), and fill out the rest of the paperwork given by SFU. Once you’ve applied and been nominated, you'll need to do a bit more work, but it's nothing too stressful. Applying for a visa can be done at the Japanese consulate downtown and you'll need to make sure your travel insurance and such is sorted. SFU’s resources will walk you through it when it’s time to start. Don’t worry about knowing what needs doing, just make sure you get it all done on time.
One of the most helpful things I did ahead of time was research Japan. It seems like researching a foreign country ahead of time is obvious but I was surprised by how many people were unaware of Japan’s many cultural differences. It also helped to mitigate most of the culture shock since I was already prepared for many of the changes. For one, Japan is a cash-based society, and while there are some restaurants and bigger stores where you can pay by credit card, the majority of places are only going to take cash. Taking money out of the ATM at any convenience store is possible if you have a debit card with the Cirrus logo on the back, but I’m glad I brought as much cash with me as I could in the beginning; it saved me quite a lot of money on international transaction fees and the like. It may be a bit nerve-wracking carrying around hundreds, if not thousands of dollars’ worth of money in your wallet, but Japan is a very safe country and I never found myself in any position where doing so made me feel uncomfortable.

Another thing I’m very glad I found out beforehand was that Japan doesn’t carry deodorant; at least, not the type or strength that most people from North America are used to. Look it up if you’re interested, but in short about 90% of Japanese people don’t produce the bacteria that causes body odor, which means that they have no reason to sell the same kind of deodorant we get over here. Save yourself the trouble and bring a few sticks with you; especially if you plan to be
there during the summer months, as Japan gets unbelievably humid and you will sweat. A lot.

Orientation is nothing special: we spent the first week going over basic things like school life, cultural etiquette, and health and safety, but aside from those daily one- or two-hour lectures we were left to our own devices. This is the best time to meet people and make friends, since all of the exchange students will be living in the seminar houses during this time and no one has access to the kitchen facilities (meaning you can easily ask other students if they’d like to go get food with you). After orientation week, homestay students are assigned to their families and classes begin. The Japanese students follow Japan’s school year, so we didn’t see much of them until about the end of September. In general, classes are easier than at SFU and professors are fairly lenient about absences because they want you to experience the country, though this does not mean that attendance is optional.
Learning the transit systems early is a must, as Kansai Gaidai is located about an hour-long train ride away from downtown Osaka. Buses are different from Vancouver’s – enter from the back and pay as you exit from the front – and the train system is something that I still don’t fully understand. The best thing to do is get an IC card, which is basically a reloadable transit card you can use around the country for most forms of transportation. In the Kansai region, you can purchase an ICOCA card, though the more internationally known card is SUICA. It doesn’t matter what kind you get, as they both work in the same way at the same places, and can easily be reloaded at any train station. These cards will also save the hassle of trying to purchase the correct train ticket when figuring out how to get where you are trying to go.
There are many places to explore that are within a reasonable distance from Kansai Gaidai. Again, downtown Osaka is about an hour away by train, Kyoto is roughly the same in the opposite direction, Nara is about an hour and a half, and all of these places have their own draws. I personally went to Universal Studios Japan three times because of how close it was and always had a great time. There are also quite a few things to do around Hirakata (the city where the campus is located), like going for drinks at an izakaya (bar/restaurant), Kuzuha mall, and any number of karaoke places. If time allows, I would also recommend a trip out to Tokyo or Hiroshima; some of my friends also traveled as far as Hokkaido and Okinawa, though Okinawa during typhoon season can be pretty hazardous.
For me, it was extremely helpful to know some Japanese before I left. I had finished the equivalent of SFU’s JAPN 200 by the time I got there, so I was able to communicate to some extent. While many signs and labels will have English, do not expect anyone outside of Kansai Gaidai to know more than a handful of English phrases. The dynamic at school threw me off because all the Japanese students spoke English (it is a language school, after all), but rarely did anyone outside of the school speak more than a few English words. Even when, for example, a barbershop had an English sign outside stating that they gave discounts for students, the barbers themselves only spoke Japanese. Save yourself some trouble and at least attempt to learn some very basic phrases and words before you go. You’ll be glad you did and Japanese people will appreciate your effort.

One of the best things I told myself before I left Canada was never to turn down invitations and to be as outgoing as possible. I’m a fairly shy person, so this was hard for me to do, but I knew that if I was going to be starting a new school with no friends in a country where I can’t fully speak the language I would have to be more proactive. Because of that, though, I was able to meet some of the best friends
I’ll ever have, both fellow exchange students and local Japanese people. Getting along with everyone isn’t mandatory – I certainly didn’t – but I felt that the more people I was able to connect with, the more worthwhile my stay in Japan became.

As of now, I’m simply trying to finish my degree and save up money so that I can go back to Japan on my own someday. I doubt I'll get to experience something like this again, so I can only encourage others with even the slightest interest that studying abroad is the right choice. If I could do it all over again, I wouldn’t need a moment to make my decision, and cannot stress enough just how invaluable this has been for me. In the span of just a few short months, I was able to travel to seven prefectures, make friends from eleven countries, eat countless kinds of food, see one of my favourite bands perform live, ace my Japanese tests, and still go out to have fun almost every day. And I even went on a few dates too. I really don’t have anything bad to say about this experience, so if you still haven’t started applying after all this, then what are you waiting for?

Go for it!