

JAPAN TRAVEL JOURNAL

November 30, 2013 to December 16, 2013

I applied for the MNCC Japan Homestay Program Scholarship in September because nothing genuinely excites me more than learning about new people and places and using the knowledge to apply to my own life's endeavors. I was pleased to learn in October that I had been chosen as one of two students to receive the fully paid trip to Japan.

The purpose of my stay is to learn anything and everything I can in two weeks about the cultural differences between America and Japan. I would like to report my observations and findings of Japan in this travel journal.

Kamiah Dix

Before I begin, I must set an image to my location. Here are some facts and pictures of Sasebo.



Location: Sasebo in Nagasaki Prefecture

- Sasebo is a city located in Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan. As of 2011, the city has an estimated population of 259,800 and a population density of 609 persons per km². The total area is 426.47 km². The city includes a part of Saikai National Park.
- **Current weather:** 37°F (3°C)

Nagasaki is known in America as being the city that the USA bombed in 1945. If you do a Google Image search on Nagasaki, black and white images of death and destruction are the prominent results. In fact, around the same time I was in Nagasaki, John F. Kennedy's daughter was in Nagasaki Peace Park giving speeches. I even watched her on the news with my host family.

However, it has been over half a century since the event and Nagasaki is **thriving**. I can see this immediately, with my own two eyes while standing on Nagasaki's Mt. Inasa. The top of the mountain is a lookout point that is considered to offer the third best city night

view in Japan. Since I haven't seen the other two, I have to say the view from Inasa is absolutely the most beautiful thing that has ever blessed my sight. Judging on this view, Nagasaki today is definitely not the same Nagasaki that existed 68 years ago.



Therefore, the most important introductory piece on Nagasaki, in my opinion, is that the prefecture is *NOW* famed for its unique and prestigious food. *Oishii!! I am happy to be stationed in a city in this wonderful prefecture!*







And now on to the city itself...

Sasebo has a U.S. Navy base, which influences the city tremendously.



For example,

...this city is where jazz first came to Japan.
There are also a few "interesting" restaurants sprinkled around.



One of Sasebo's famous food items is "Sasebo Burger," which are just burgers that we in the USA have an abundance of.



It was still cute, however, when my host family asked if I had ever eaten Ketchup.



Why, yes.

This is the traditional-style Japanese bedroom I am so lucky to stay in for two weeks. The room has sliding doors on all sides with lovely Japanese art on them. The mattress is luxuriously comfortable, and the bamboo ("*tatami*") mats perfectly aligned make the experience feel earthier.



Converting one country's currency to another's at an airport is an action that will never cease to astonish me. The feat seems to hint more at the grandiose side of things rather than the dull encounter it really is. One simply pushes a disheveled pile of personally earned papers under a glass window for an agent to calculate the foreign returns, and in a few heartbeats the entire event is history. That being said, at least my particular currency conversion experience had some hindering yet interesting bumps. The agent did not have enough Japanese *yen* for my desired exchange so she phoned a booth on a different floor to bring the difference. The five-minute wait was brought to a close by the agent peering through the window and saying "ahh, there he is."

I turned to watch an airport staff member awkwardly carrying a not-so-inconspicuous and nearly glowing red gift bag with cartoon bunny faces. The agent jumped to the back wall to open the locked door, and she received the item from the currency transporter. It was all very amusing, as the only reason I can think of to explain the bunny bag is to be so severely unappealing that all thieves in the area are forced to sneer at the package and think **wow; I would never steal THAT...** I just thought the disguise charade might work a little better without Mr. Cold and Rigid in the Uniform being the one to deliver the *yen* shrouded in smiley bunnies.

But **here** are the long-awaited facts... One U.S. dollar translates to 105.14 Japanese *yen*. It was easy for me to keep tabs on what I was spending in Japan by just taking two zero's off an amount. One thousand *yen* was roughly ten dollars; ten thousand *yen* was about one hundred. I am naively satisfied with the stock of zero's I have acquired because of my *yen*, but I am seeing that even key chains here are easily one thousand fifty *yen* in both touristy and local shops.

I am no economics expert but my basic understanding of Japan's economy is that

- 1) Japan's economy was deflated not too long ago (1986 to 1991)
- 2) Japan is the globe's fourth largest economy
- 3) The Bank of Japan is the main holder of U.S. Treasuries (which has been unhealthy for Japan)
- 4) Inflation has now turned positive.

The **most** prominent company name in Japan is, without a doubt, Mitsu-Bishi. The same car line in America is the same firm in Japan that sells everything from home heating units to art supplies.



Art Supplies



Batteries



Air unit



HighTech Hand Drier

Japan is notorious for efficiency. I knew this before I came so I had an idea in mind about things I could look for to best demonstrate Japanese efficiency.

The first thing I noticed when my host family led me to their car in the parking lot was that a majority of the vehicles looked small and boxy. (I am pretty sure that as a toddler I played with a toy of every model I see in Japan). ☺ Vehicles fit better in home driveways, which are usually efficiently *under* the houses in this mountainous region. If Japan was a game, it would undoubtedly be Tetris.



The roads in some parts have two lanes. I have not had a chance to physically test this, but if I were to lie down line to line in a lane, I would definitely be lengthier. Some rural roads have only one lane and in this case, cars going opposite directions have to make way for each other to get around. I support and admire the 'less concrete and less effort' approach.

Actually, while we are on the subject of admiration, I have to say admiration is my prominent state of mind in Japan...

You can also see efficiency in markets and stores. Carts are merely metal frames in which you can place two grocery baskets. These baskets are of course conveniently stacked, and the tiny carts take up a third of the space a cart at Food-4-Less does. After passing a basket through the checkout, you take your basket to a counter in the very front of the store and proceed to bag your own groceries with the bags provided. There is always a little roll of tape to secure a protruding piece on the lip of the plastic bag over the other so that no groceries come out.



I helped my host sister bag some groceries a few times, each time wondering what would happen if I secured the bag in a nontraditional way. I finally worked up the spirit to take the two protruding bag pieces and tie them together in a tight little knot, forgoing the tape altogether. My host sister laughed a little and we were on our way.



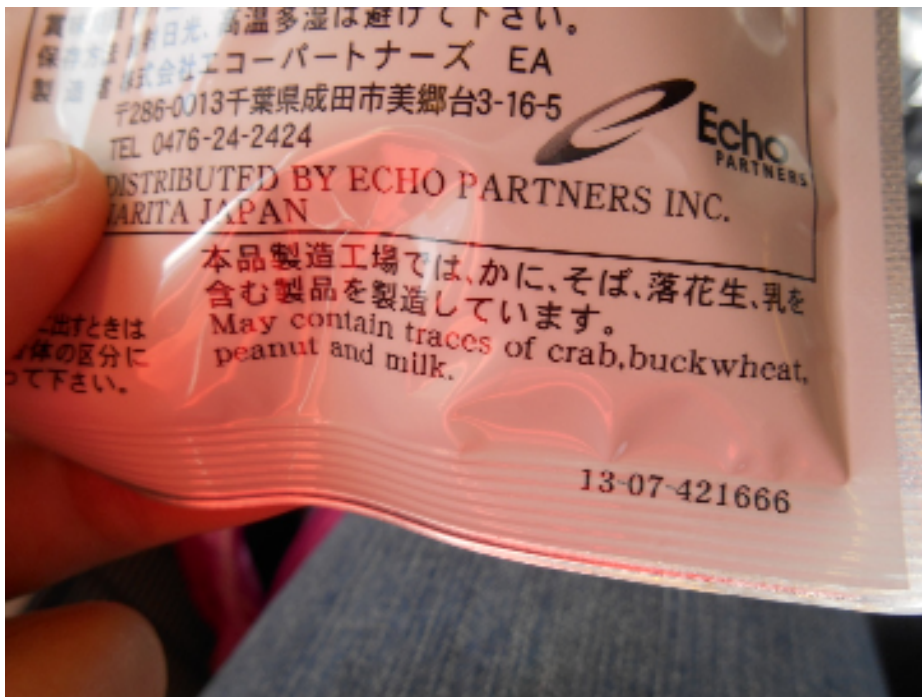
The three Japanese-native English teachers I have met do make some English mistakes, although the message is clear. I cannot bring myself to say this is any sort of language crime. Sitting in the back of classrooms listening to thick-accented teachers have students recite useful "eego" phrases was perfect conditions for me to have a revelation. (I am having a lot of those). English is still English no matter who speaks it, no matter what accent the speaker has, and no matter what minor mistakes are made. Yes, language is complex and structured inside a country or area that speaks it. But the moment a person sets foot into a country that speaks something else, language is only a minor tool for communication. Gestures and tone, energy and charisma become the new communication force. To a person that lacks this powerful ability, I imagine communicating could be difficult. Luckily I extrovert fiercely when I experience something new!

Some interesting facts and statistics about Japan go as follows:

- Japan's population is a staggering 98% Japanese! I saw a large handful of Americans only because of the navy base in Sasebo. There is virtually no immigration to Japan.
- Japan is the world's largest consumer of Amazon Rain Forest timber.
- About 70% of Japan is mountainous!
- The literacy rate is almost 100%.
- There are about 1,500 earthquakes in Japan each year.
- It takes seven to ten years of training to become a chef that can prepare blowfish.
- Native Japanese people live 4 years longer, on average, than native American people. There is a huge importance placed on health and fitness. Some companies even require employees to exercise at work in the morning to start the day.
- Japan luckily has the second smallest homicide rate of all countries.
- Specially grown "luxury fruits" sell for large amounts of money; (think 4 dollars per cherry).
- Japan's unemployment rate is under 4%.
- There is a very real possibility one might get bombarded by a local news crew interviewing about one of a variety of subjects. In my case: Aliens.



Marine life is all around me; in stores, in bowls, in between my chopsticks, and in this little airplane snack bag I acquired from the plane!



When has a crab warning ever been printed on a bag of snackage in America? I love Japan.

Going to the aquarium was an eye-opening experience, mainly because I saw one size and shape of fish I never knew existed and my eyes widened in fear as it swam aggressively from the far side of the tank to my eye level.



The trained dolphin tank housed two uniformly sleek bottlenose dolphins, along with a smaller, shorter, and flatter-

nosed Risso's dolphin. This dolphin could not jump as high or swim as fast as its companions. However, it won the hearts of the audience when it failed to slap a ball out of the water with its fin, and then ignored the fish treat its trainer sympathetically held out to try a second time and this time slap that ball clear out of the area and onto a nearby roof.

Nagasaki's coastline is one of the most beautiful island areas in



Japan.

The "99 Islands" are a popular ferry tourist attraction, although there are actually thousands upon thousands of tiny islands extending from the shore out to the far sea.



It is so easy to get lost in the moment while taking in the super-sensory environment of Nagasaki.



One of my favorite places I have been to is definitely a wondrous place called The Bio Park. The 300,000 meters squared tourist attraction is home to an abundance of quirky yet endearing creatures that have SO much space to roam around! I have never seen such an amazing captive animal location and I refuse to call the Bio Park a

zoo. The enclosures were spacious, accommodating, and engaging for the animals that lived there.



Humans could go in and out of the enclosures as they pleased, with the exception of the beaver and hippopotamus area. I finally got to see AND touch a few members of the most adorable species on earth.



CAPYBARAS! (One lifelong dream, accomplished. Seven hundred twenty-nine to go).

I also ran into this pair of mischievous little imps who later tried to commandeer my camera.





One cool

pig.



The park also features a Flower dome! I fell in love with all the vibrant colors from floor to membrane roof.





Some beginning facts about education that I learned firsthand are:

1) There is no physical contact regulation in elementary schools. I witnessed several amusing wrestling matches in classrooms and hallways. No authoritative figure batted an eyelash... I am also quite sure that my fun host dad principal would have cheered the boys on had he been walking by at those times.

2) After sixth grade, the students receive new and prided uniforms. Junior high school is a tad more serious than elementary school. and there is a big ceremonial initiation for the incoming students. It is a very formal event in which the students must not speak or move too much out of turn. It is their time to show they deserve the uniforms and are ready for the years that lie ahead.

3) A student must complete all education through junior high school. A student cannot be "kicked out" until high school.

4) Students do not change classes: teachers do. A class will have a homeroom and that is where core classes are taught every day. During lunchtime, students rearrange their desks to eat together in the classroom. I love this concept because I think it is more useful to learn about your classmates than to split apart for different classes. Students need traction.

5) There is time set aside each day to clean a school campus and surrounding roads. Students do so well with this job that there is no need for custodians. (*ADMIRATION*). There is a person called a groundskeeper, though his job is to plant and maintain gorgeous scene-setting flowers on the campus.

6) Elementary schools have chickens, rabbits, and various animals that the students must take turns to take care of. The point of this is to teach young ones to care for and be gentle with nature's creatures.

The main difference I see between Japanese schools and American schools is

Respect.

Teachers greet each other formally in the teacher's room each morning. Students sent to fetch the next teacher from the teacher's room must bow upon entry and recite a formal request. (This request was translated to me by an American ALT and it goes something like this: "So and so" from class "so and so" are now prepared to request teacher "so and so" for the class of "so.") Students and teacher stand and bow before the day's lesson is initiated. Japan is socially structured so that respect is apparent in the form of humble words and bowing whenever there is greeting, thanking, and departing. It is a beautiful concept that I will be sad to part from when I return home.

Luckily, I was asked to assist English teachers in the classroom. It was nice to get a tiny indirect taste of my future occupation!



Japanese students are *such* hard workers and I admire their abilities to blend diligence with playfulness. There is no reason to doubt that these students are not responsible, so they get use tools such as this large cooking knife:





This is a junior high school cooking class. We made tacos! The food was labeled in their home economics text book and no one had ever tried it (tacos in Japan?) so we cooked it and there were nothing but positive results!



Japanese schools in rural areas are built as a part of the surrounding countryside, architecturally secured on the sides of mountains.



It. Is. *Profound*... It's the morning sun rising above the peaks to warm frigid bodies just arriving to school, the array of natural colors all around that calms and soothes sore spirits, and the constant feathery breeze massaging every inch of uncovered skin in the cold. The setting is arguably unlike any school's view in America, and its role is a vital factor of happiness and peace for the learning kids. And, if I stand here long enough, a single forgivable tear just can't contain itself while I awe at the view.



The small population of school children, after years of living and functioning in Sechibaru, may stop noticing the profoundness of the everyday sight. One thing is for certain, though; the serenity of the landscape has shaped these kids' very beings in the most beautiful and positive way there is.



Taking pictures is Japanese culture. Before I left any school I visited, teachers would call for picture-taking formation. Students would immediately place all desks in the back or front of the classroom to clear up space, and *twalaa*: picture time! The idea seems obvious, but the fact that there is indeed an actual picture-taking formation demonstrates Japan's neatness. The whole deal is pretty darn magical.





Gift-giving is ingrained in Japanese culture. Aside from the company of the wondrous people I met, the sights and smells and tastes of Japan, and the general peacefulness of movement here, I have received many other beautiful gifts such as cloths from my host family and students alike. And for them, I have come into the habit of drawing my gifts.

Appreciation for my doodles first appeared in the sixth grade classroom in Sechibaru, where students huddled around my desk between classes to observe my handiwork in action. At times I heard the students excitedly draw out a hushed word that sounded like "skiiii!" The teacher even hung up one of my drawings of a hand on the wall in the hallway! My host dad, as principal of the school, suggested that I create other drawings as super-official presents for the class when I

did my super-official goodbye speech. I loved the idea, because I had 1) never poured my heart into one piece of art before, and 2) never had my direct work so appreciated.

Over the course of the week, I worked for diligent hours on various drawings for the students I adored. The teacher even requested a special Christmas picture for holiday decoration. On the last day of the first week, I finally presented the gifts. The wonderful little sixth graders gasped in admiration for my drawing when I showed them the finished product. I later learned that the word "ski," drawn is slang for "suki." It means "I like it."

Drawing became a joyous job because of the way it made the sixth graders feel. It felt good to see others feel good about objects created of my own design.







This drawing was of the view in Sechibaru, created with my little borrowed box of Mitsu-Bishi colored pencils. I captured the beautiful scene in my mind during the morning car rides up and down a mountain between Sasebo and Sechibaru. Some of the most gleeful moments in my life were when people who saw this drawing remarked, "That's Sechibaru."

The second week was spent at my host sister's high school in Sasebo. I drew them a less cartoonish and more abstract gift.



One of my host family's farewell gifts to me was an astonishing dinner feast. It was a time to forget that I would be leaving in the morning. It was a time to enjoy one last communion with my new friends.



Therefore, the last drawing I ever drew in Japan was for my own host family. I doodled their family name on a beautiful little Japanese poster, squinting for hours to put in the minute details of the letters and wishing my love and appreciation would somehow mingle in with the ink and be felt forever in the Okishima family's home.



2013.12.18
Kishima

Afterwords

Japan is a unique country that is differentiated from the surrounding Asian countries, in ways of food and customs and implicit as well as explicit structure. The purpose of my stay was to learn anything and everything I could in two weeks about the cultural differences between America and Japan. However, I have learned ever more than I could have hoped for with the help of my wonderful host family. This new knowledge will be with me for the duration of my lifetime, and I strongly suggest that individuals with curiosities and a will to live go to Japan for an extended visit. I cannot wait until my return!