

Last winter, I applied for the KCC-JEE summer student exchange, hoping that I might have an opportunity to learn more about Japanese language and culture. A few weeks later, I was surprised to learn that my dream of studying in Japan and learning immersively would come true.

My excitement grew as I found out more details about my itinerary, my host family and the Japanese language school I would be attending. Before the trip, I spent some time researching Kyoto. I couldn't wait to spend part of my summer in this amazing city!

Before I arrived, I was a little nervous about a few things, including meeting my host family, using public transportation in a different country, and attending a school while speaking Japanese! Thankfully, these worries melted away when I arrived in Japan.

After taking the 10-hour flight to Tokyo, I hopped on a second flight to Osaka. Then I took a taxi to meet my host family. They are a family with three young kids. All of them were warm and welcoming, and made me feel right at home. I had my own room and slept on a futon on a tatami mat, which was quite comfortable. During my time there, my host family and I enjoyed a lot of fun activities that I had never experienced before.

Something I really wanted to do while in Kyoto was a tea ceremony, which my host mom was passionate about. After having wagashi, my host mom taught my host sister and I how to use a chasen to froth matcha, and we took turns serving each other the tea and accepting the tea. I love making matcha at home, so the tea ceremony was a really special experience for me!

My host family also took me to see a maiko performance, which was one of the highlights of my trip. Before and after the performance, we were able to speak with the maiko, who happened to be the same age as I am. It was incredible experiencing a traditional part of Kyoto's culture.

As for school in Kyoto, I started attending classes the day after I arrived, so I had to adjust very quickly. I liked the structure of my classes and the teachers were very

supportive. After studying Japanese for the past two years at home, I enjoyed expanding on my language skills in this fast-paced school environment. I also enjoyed taking some optional after-school classes. Some of my favorites included classes learning about wagashi and calligraphy.

One of the most amazing parts of my whole experience was making friends from around the world. Many of my schoolmates were from various countries, including Hong Kong, South Korea and the U.S. We all got along very well and quickly formed friendships. After school, we often explored the city and attended local summer festivals. We went to the Gion Matsuri parade, Mitarashi-Sai festival, and the festival at Nijojo. We also explored the shops along Shijo street. Jaden and I got hooked on collecting stamps from shrines and temples in our goshuincho books. We visited many shrines and temples, including Ginkaku-ji, Kinkaku-ji, Yasaka shrine, and Kiyomizu-dera Temple.

One weekend, we took a day trip to Nara, where we saw the Todai-ji Temple. I was in awe of the stunning architecture and how detailed the massive statues were inside the Great Buddha Hall. We also stopped by the Nara Deer Park and fed the deer some crackers. The deer were cute and bowed their heads in hopes of getting a treat.

At the end of my trip, I felt that I had learned so much that I didn't want it to end! All of these experiences have helped me grow as a person. I've developed close friendships with people and created memories I will never forget. Above all else, this very special time in Kyoto has broadened my perspective of people, our connections and the world we share. I can't wait to go back!

I'm so grateful to the wonderful people at KCC-JEE who made this life-changing experience possible. I will always appreciate the beautiful summer weeks I spent in Kyoto; they have changed my life in many positive ways.