

## 11 Days in Japan

April 20<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> 2017

I am Kim Magtibay and I am a first year engineering student at the University of Auckland. Over my five years of studying Japanese in high school, I became enamoured with Japan's rich traditional customs and its glittering modernity, in particular how the two can coexist within its society. Thanks to the nationwide Haiku Shodo competition that I was fortunate enough to win, I experienced first-hand Japan's enchanting culture and charming people over these 11 days.

The haiku I had entered was:

*"In order to understand one another*

*Between different cultures*

*A bridge is built"*

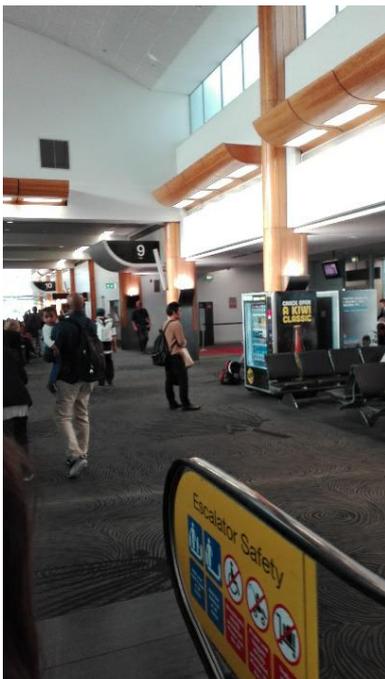
わかり会う

違う文化の

橋建てる

Cherry blossoms are an important part of Japanese culture, and their beauty is renowned across the world. Of course, I wanted to see it with my own eyes! During the mid-semester break I flew to Fukuoka and spent the week doing all that the city and prefecture had to offer. Every single day was a memory that I will always remember. This is a report covering these experiences.

### April 20, Day 1:



My family and I made it to the airport at around 5:30am, which was a little bit too early, as the proposed meeting time was about 8:00. I guess that that's better than missing the flight entirely. After a few hours of walking around the airport and waiting, the time had finally come for me to say goodbye to my family.

I went through customs and waited for Tessa, the other winner, and Hitomi from NZJS who happened to be catching the same flight to Narita airport. We then waited at the terminal and did some frantic last checks for our passports. The call then came for passengers to begin boarding the plane, and soon after that we had taken off: we were on our way to Japan.

The flight between Auckland and Narita takes approximately 10 hours with no breaks. Sleeping would have been a good idea, but I was too worried about the introductory speech that I would have to give to the school. Therefore, I used most of my time on the plane writing parts of the speech.

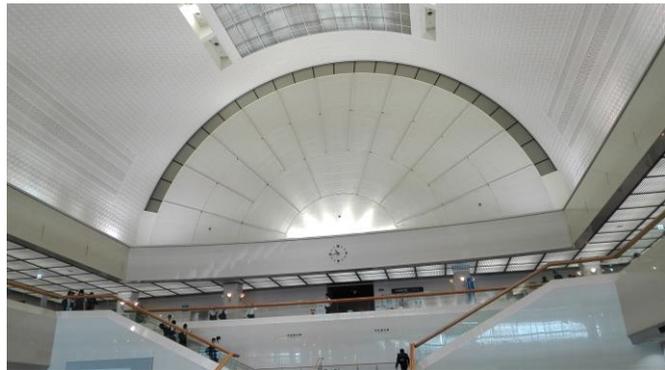
Our flight landed in Narita at around 4:50pm (Japanese time). It felt good to finally be able to stand up after 10 hours, but we didn't have time to rest. We were met by a representative from the Fukuoka city council who had helped us get onto the plane in time. It was hectic: first we had to go through customs and state what we were going to do in Japan, then we had to pick up our luggage and transfer to a feeder bus to the domestic flight that would take us to Fukuoka. That flight took 3 hours, and during that I took the opportunity to get in a few hours of sleep.

We landed in Fukuoka Airport at around 8:30pm. After collecting our luggage once again, we met our respective host families (mine being the Fukushima family), and went home with them. I got to talk a little bit with my host sister, Miho, and her mother, Kuniko, but I was too tired on the way to get a good conversation going. Upon arriving at the host family's house, I gave them the souvenirs that I had brought with me and went to sleep, tired from the long journey that I had just taken.

### April 21, Day 2:

Still jetlagged, I woke up at 5am and began preparing for the day ahead. After getting changed and readying the souvenirs to be presented to Fukuoka's city council, I was dropped off by my host mother and father at the city council building. There I was met by Ms Hisatsugu, who works at the international relations section of the council, and I was able to extend my thanks to the council members that were responsible for this trip.

This was only the beginning of the day. The other reason I was taken to the council building was to meet up again with Tessa and another person named Ryan (who had been there for a similar experience) for a tour of what the city had to offer. First stop: the museum. As a group, we looked at an exhibit that detailed the rich history of Fukuoka and its significance to the Kyushu region, and overall I found its similarity to Auckland interesting.



Around lunchtime, we went to eat at a restaurant near Fukuoka Tower, our next destination. The food was very high-class and I had never had anything like it before (especially the hamburger steak I had decided to order). It should go without saying that the food was delicious!



With our lunch sorted out, we entered Fukuoka Tower, one of the parts of the city that had a direct counterpart in Auckland's Sky Tower. There were a lot of souvenir shops at the reception floor of the tower, which we bought a few souvenirs from. After waiting a bit, we toured the tower and climbed to the highest floors of the structure via an elevator. I'm not too good

with heights, but it was still a stunning view of the city from up there. Sadly, it was cloudy so

the photos weren't too good.

To end the programme for the day, we went to the Natural Disaster Center to learn about the various disasters that could take place in the city and the things to do when they do happen. They mainly dealt with earthquakes, but there were other interactive activities involving fires, winds, etc. Especially enjoyable for me was the dark smoke chamber, where we had to navigate our way through the rooms within the shortest time possible. Most of us (except Tessa) got stuck in one of the rooms: very scary!

The day program ended at 4pm, after which I went back with Kuniko. I definitely was not as tired as the night before, so I was actually able to talk to my host family more. They were very impressed with the fact that I could speak and understand Japanese well, especially Miho's brothers Naoto and Tadashi. My studies finally paid off, I thought, as English would have been quite difficult for them to understand.



It was a Friday, and so later that night Tadashi had karate practice. Of course, I wanted to watch this to get to know my host family better, and so I went along with Miho to see him practice the *kata* (forms of karate) that he had been practicing over the year. It was funny to see him embarrassed: he didn't often have two people watching him perform. Due to this embarrassment, however, I didn't get to see a solo 'performance' out of him on that session. I definitely have to get a good video of him at some point, I thought.

Eventually, I fell asleep after the enjoyable day that I just had.

### April 22, Day 3:



It was a Saturday, and so I was to spend the day doing activities with my host family. In the morning, I went out to their garden, which was quite different from the ones that I had seen in New Zealand: it seemed more like an exhibit from Auckland's botanical gardens! Naoto had a soccer game, so he couldn't go with us to many of these places. After he had left for the game with the host father, Naotaro, we went out to eat lunch at a restaurant near the Tenjin area.

After this we went to Kushida Shrine, where a large annual festival called 'Hakata Gion Yamakasa' starts. It was a welcome change from the large modern buildings that surround the area that the shrine takes up. This part did not truly have a direct comparison to Auckland, and it was one of the parts of the trip that I enjoyed the most: where else would I have seen the rich traditions of Fukuoka than a shrine?

We headed off towards a park near the shrine, and this is where I saw some cherry blossoms with my own eyes. I

had been told by Kuniko that cherry blossom season had ended a few weeks before I had arrived, and so I was downcast. However, it turned out that there were variants that bloomed later than the others, perhaps anticipating this reaction from tourists that wanted to see them. They were beautiful – and the pink petals blowing in the wind only added to the wondrous atmosphere.



With all that done, we entered Canal City, one of the large malls within Fukuoka. The first thing that I had noticed was its size: it was far larger than many malls within New Zealand. I also noticed its different architecture: there were 'canals' and lots of open spaces where people could socialise. Sadly, I didn't bring too much money that day so I could only go window shopping with them. I would have to deal with buying more souvenirs for my family at a later date.

While I was in Canal City, we went to a Japanese arcade where there were a lot of *purikura* booths and more traditional arcade games like 'Dance Dance Revolution'. Miho, Tadashi, and I decided to give a *purikura* booth a try: it was definitely my first time going in one. This was one of the things that I had studied about, after all, and I was sure that it would be an experience to remember. What a laugh. From that I learned that the booths were designed primarily for Japanese people in mind: the effects (especially the eye enlarging effect) looked almost comical on me. Even now I still chuckle at the memory every time I look at the photos that were printed. Sorry I don't have photos to share of this: they're incredibly embarrassing for me.

It was about 3pm when we finally got out of Canal City, and we were picked up by Naoto and the host father, Naotaro. The next stop was a factory where I was able to try multiple types of sauces and other interesting side dishes. Again, I didn't have too much cash with me at the time so I couldn't buy any of the sauces and snacks that were sold there. They would have been so nice to bring back!



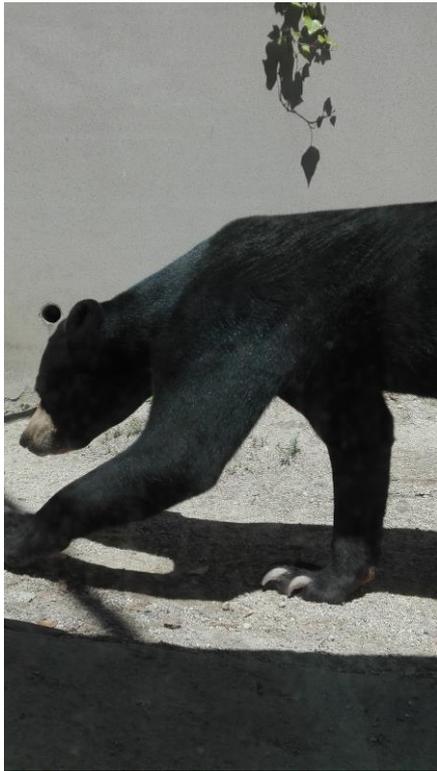
With the whole family together, we went to a buffet quite far from Tenjin. There were a dizzying variety of foods available there, and I was particularly surprised with the amount of *takoyaki* (my favourite Japanese food at the time) available. We ordered a large amount of food and we as a host family were able to talk a lot. It reminded me of my own family, helping me feel less homesick.

After eating, we went home where I studied for a little while before going to sleep.

#### April 23, Day 4:

That day was a Sunday, and we attended a church service. While Kuniko went to help out around the church, Miho, Tadashi, and I headed towards the zoo, which happened to be quite close by. On the way there, we stopped by a bakery which sold a large amount of

breads and pastries for about 100 yen: it was so cheap, and yet it was very nice. After having a small snack break we continued on the way to the zoo.



It was a hot, bright day, as opposed to the chilly weather during the morning hours. Perfect for an outing to the zoo. Inside there was your everyday variety of zoo animals, for example elephants, lions and giraffes, but there were also animals that I had never seen before, such as the Malayan sun bear. What had really made me laugh was the fact that a seagull (an incredibly common, almost annoying sight in Auckland) was an exhibit in the zoo. It goes to show just how different to Auckland Fukuoka was, in terms of wildlife, anyway.

Also part of the area was the Fukuoka City Botanical Gardens, accessible by a lift from the zoo. We had our packed lunch here, at a desk surrounded by flowers and trees. It bore a similarity to Auckland's own botanical gardens. Within the area there was a café and photo gallery filled with photos of sights such as hummingbirds within the gardens, and here we bought some more snacks and ice creams.

There was also a small amusement park there, where we checked out many of the rides and had a turn on the Ferris wheel. It was funny to watch Miho's reaction to the carriage shaking as it went around. From its highest point we were treated to a nice view of the city, being able to see many landmarks (such as Fukuoka Tower).

After going to the zoo, we went home for a while before Miho and I headed out again to go shopping in Tenjin. There were a lot of people and shops there: too many to even count! At a certain point we had split up so we could go around more of the shops separately. I had headed out to souvenir shops and places to buy shoes. I ended up purchasing many souvenirs but nothing for myself yet. When we met up again, I met one of her friends from middle school, and we went around some places that the two friends wanted to visit. We went home at around 5:00, as we both needed to prepare for school tomorrow.

I took a bath and went to sleep even earlier than normal, scared for the day that would come ahead.

#### April 24, Day 5:

I was woken up at 5:30am, having to take a shower, get changed into my uniform and eat before the bus left at 6:20am. Miho and I caught the bus heading to Seiryō High School, where Tessa and I were to go as part of the exchange programme. While she talked to her friends on the bus about answers to some of the homework, I slept a bit more on the bus ride. After a while we had arrived at the school: just in time for the 8am morning classes.

The morning class was historical Japanese. Although I thought I was somewhat alright at understanding Japanese that class only showed me just how little I truly knew. It seemed like they were analysing an older piece of Japanese literature, and I could not understand the structures and forms they used at all. After class ended, however, I realised that the class was difficult to understand even for native Japanese speakers.

After that class, I was taken to Mr Saku, the teacher in charge of the international student department. He was energetic, and seemed pleased to meet Tessa and I. To my surprise, he could speak English very well, and so for the first time in the entire trip, I was finally able to speak English without seeming out of place. He took us to the staff room, where we had to say our introductory speech to the staff present, thanking them for their care. After this, we alternated between going to the same classes as our respective host sisters, and going to Mr Saku's English class to help them practice their conversational skills by asking us questions. It was very fun, as they asked a variety of questions that we found quite challenging to give a straight answer in Japanese. For some, we had to explain in English to Mr Saku to translate to the class.

After the school day ended, we had the opportunity to experience some of the club activities that they had to offer. First up was the tea ceremony club. I have had experience with the rituals involved in a traditional tea ceremony, but the instructor showed us some things that I had not experienced yet (in particular, admiring the individual cups that we had drunk the freshly brewed tea). Wanting to be immersed in the full experience, I had decided to sit in the traditional *seiza* position. Big mistake. I was not used to sitting in such a position, so after a



while it began to ache. I could not show the pain, however, so I held it in until the ceremony finished about 20 minutes later. I tried standing up after to stretch and move around for photos, and found that my feet did not respond at all. We all had a laugh at my expense as I struggled, and after a while I was able to stand without leaning on walls. We took photos with the tea ceremony club and headed out to see some more clubs.

We then went and watched the kendo and judo clubs practicing in their club rooms. I had seen and participated in a judo lesson in Auckland before, so I went to watch the kendo club first. Unfortunately, I didn't take part in the lesson as I didn't have the proper equipment to, but it was still an enjoyable experience watching them spar against each other. It was certainly a lot louder than expected: it turned out that kendo practices involved shouting to indicate the start of a person's attack.

After this, we all returned home via bus. I studied both my university material and the material I had brought over from the high school, and then went to sleep early again.

#### April 25, Day 6

The next day of school was quite similar to Monday: woke up early, started classes at 8, went to help out at English class. Instead of bringing a packed lunch to school, however, I went to order food at the cafeteria around lunch time. I had chosen to eat pork udon and (like most of the food that I had tried in Japan) it was delicious: it was miles better than the foods that my high school offered in our tuck shops!

After lunch, instead of going to the next three periods, Tessa and I were taken to the home economics rooms, where Mr Saku and a few other teachers-in-training were being taught how to make *sakuramochi*. Of course, we were to join in, too. The instructor explained why the ingredients used were chosen before jumping into the cooking tutorial. We dealt with sticky rice, which was quite hard to shape and mould into the right shape. Plating up in particular was difficult, as this involved placing the soft, sticky rice balls into a *sakura* leaf

and then onto a plate. It was a great experience, and I wish that I still had the ingredients on hand here in Auckland so I could make some on my own. I gave one of my *mochi* to Miho, who ate it after the lesson ended.

Like Monday, we went to visit even more clubs after the school day ended. We entered the calligraphy club, which was in the middle of an initiation for the new members, and we got to take part in it and wrote some calligraphy. After a few practice runs and help from the club teacher, I had rewritten my haiku onto a canvas that I could take home. I was also given a few other pieces that some members had written, alongside a copy of my haiku written by the instructor himself! I learned a lot more about the complex art of calligraphy, and I'm pretty sure that I improved more over the one hour I spent there than a whole week spent practicing in Auckland!

We then went to the music clubs, more specifically their famed orchestra. We watched them practice and even tried out some instruments ourselves. I had tried playing the violin with almost disastrous results: it sounded *bad*. Thankfully there was a piano so I was (hopefully) able to redeem myself after that incident. We were also able to watch the entire ensemble practice together. With that done, we had went home again.

Upon arriving home, I was finally able to speak with my friends and family in New Zealand, who demanded pictures of what I was doing there. After watching some TV with my host family (or rather, Naoto and I, as Miho and Tadashi were both too scared to watch the horror show to completion), I went to sleep.

#### April 26, Day 7:

Today was my last day of going to Seiryō High School. It started off in the usual manner of early classes and even earlier mornings, but Wednesday was also their PE day. I had initially assumed that their PE periods would be similar to our periods in New Zealand (which involved playing sports), but I was wrong. The entire class, especially the boys, were not looking forward to the lesson. Miho told me the day before that they were going to be practicing *shuudan koudou* – Japanese precision walking. That was a scary experience, reminding me of my own times in the Philippines where we had similar routines. It was very impressive to see how exact each movement was, but I'd rather not participate in one of these.

After this, we had another traditional Japanese class, but instead of continuing their studies of literature, the class all showed me an individual aspect of what they had been learning about. What was particularly fun were the Japanese tongue twisters, which I couldn't end up pronouncing. I then showed them some English tongue twisters and it was funny to see them struggle with the pronunciation of the phrases.

The last class was English. Like my experiences in Mr Saku's class, the class asked me questions about myself, but this time I was alone up there, and so they asked me targeted questions about my time there and what I liked (one even asked me about what kind of girl I liked, which was quite embarrassing). Overall though, it was a highly enjoyable experience, and we all shared a good laugh.

Like many of the other days, we cleaned the school after lessons ended and before club activities began. A little argument had broken out between two of the students, and they bickered for a while, with each of them seeking my approval as a way to 'one-up' the other, of sorts. We all laughed, as we knew that the argument wasn't really serious: it was just some friendly teasing.

At the final homeroom class, I said my last speech thanking the class for making me feel welcomed, and after that we waited for Tessa's homeroom to finish.

After school finished, we didn't go to any other club activities, instead opting to go to a nearby mall to hang out and eat some afternoon tea. We walked around for a while, going into 100yen stores and clothing outlets, and when that finished, we went home. I was going to miss going to this high school, I thought.

#### April 27, Day 8:



One thing I definitely won't miss, however, is waking up at 5:30am every morning! Today I woke up at 7:30am, and there wasn't too much of a rush to get ready as the programme started at 9am. I had a long day of activities ahead of me, Kuniko had said, and she was right. Tessa and I had started with another cooking activity, this time cooking udon from scratch. With a representative of the council, we

had to knead, press and feed the dough into a pasta machine to get the noodles required. The process was quite similar to making bread in some parts, especially the kneading. Afterwards, we made and fried some *gyoza* to eat alongside the udon. The result was that we had a full lunch that we ourselves had created, alongside some spare noodles and packets of soup to take home to our host families.

With our stomachs full, we went to a *kimono* rental store, where I tried on the traditional Japanese *hakama* (their equivalent to a suit) and some slippers. The process of wearing it was uncomfortable, to say the least: it was especially tight around the waist and stomach areas. I couldn't even sit down properly with it on!



I had initially thought that we were only going to wear the *kimono* inside the store, but I was proven wrong again when the council representatives told us that we were going to Ohori Park dressed like this. Thankfully we were wearing the winter *kimono* so the winds weren't that cold, but this didn't help my embarrassment as I felt people's gazes on us. The park itself was picturesque, a testament to how much time and care it took to maintain it. Most of my scenery photos were of this park, as it was just beautiful. One of the representatives noted that I looked like a champion *shogi* player, and so I made serious faces in many of my solo photos as a joke. It really helped boost that impression!

We returned to the rental store at about 5pm, and headed back home. It was a relief to finally take off the *hakama* and get changed into normal clothes! I was met at the bus stop by Kuniko, and seeing as Miho's bus was about to arrive soon, we waited for her, too. Miho, having heard about me wearing a *hakama*, wanted to see the photos herself. So I challenged her to a game of basketball, saying that if she won, she could see them. One big

problem with this: I am *hopelessly bad* at basketball, so I was hoping that she could be worse than I was. I lost.

After that, we went home, ate dinner, and then slept.

### April 28, Day 9

I woke up at 8am again, and I had to prepare quickly as I was expected at Hakata train station at around 8:30. Upon arrival, I waited for Tessa and Ms Hisatsugu, and at around 8:40am we caught the train to Dazaifu, an area famous for its shrines. The train ride took about 40 minutes before we arrived at our destination. It was sunny there: perfect for a day trip. Even at that early a time, it was very busy, with students on field trips and tourists alike present in Dazaifu. The area is famous for its *mochi*, and so we tried this first to avoid the queues that were bound to appear during lunchtime. We ate at a restaurant, and the interesting taste of the *mochi* proved to be addicting as I ended up buying more over the time that I was there.



After trying the *mochi*, we continued down the long path towards the shrine itself, lined by various souvenir stores. With a few minutes of walking, we had reached the main area, filled with traditional architectures surrounded by nature. I had wanted to pray at the shrine, and so we all had to wait in the constantly growing lines of tourists and students also wanting to do the same thing. When we had finally reached the

front of the queue, I learned the traditional method of praying at a shrine: this involved clapping and bowing at certain times. It was a special moment for me, as I experienced an aspect of Japan's rich culture.

Lunchtime arrived, and naturally we ate in a nearby restaurant. I had ordered *oyako-don* as the restaurant's version of it was apparently very nice. It was also cheap compared to the other options. I was sceptical at first as it used a raw egg, but the rumours surrounding its taste were true: I ended up loving it.

We explored the rest of the shrines in Dazaifu and after this we headed to the nearby Kyushu National Museum for a change of pace. The modern looking architecture contrasts greatly with the other buildings within Dazaifu, separated only by a glowing escalator and pathway. This museum describes the history of the Kyushu region and significant events that occurred. Here we had a tour of the exhibits with English voiceovers for most of the exhibits. It was highly interesting but sadly photographs were not allowed inside to prevent counterfeits, and so I do not have many inside this place.

Before we left, we had some time to purchase some souvenirs from the various stores around Dazaifu. Eventually, the time came for us to catch the train back to Fukuoka. Through the underground paths starting at Hakata train station, we returned to the city council building for the last time. Here Tessa and I said our final farewells to the council, and had the opportunity to talk to two Japanese girls who had a similar experience to ours in Auckland. With this, I realised that my time in Japan was running out.

Upon returning to the host family house, I had started tidying up the room and studying when I was invited once again to watch Tadashi's karate practice and to visit the *yatai* stalls that

went up at night. Not one to miss out on good food and good times, I immediately accepted and went along with Miho. I learned that this was also her first time going to such a stall, which surprised me. I ordered a *tonkotsu* udon to eat before going to watch the karate practice.

After watching the practice, I went to sleep.



### April 29, Day 10

It was a Saturday, my last full day in Fukuoka. Again, Naoto had soccer games on that day so both of my host parents were out. This meant that we couldn't go out during the earlier hours of the day. I decided to cook some simple scrambled eggs and bacon for Miho and Tadashi's breakfast before they woke up as a surprise, but they ended up smelling the bacon frying, exposing me. Thankfully, they found the bacon and eggs very nice.



I began packing my bags after breakfast, and then just talked to them in the living room for a while. Then one of Miho's friends came over and we cooked some *takoyaki* and *okonomiyaki* at home to eat for lunch, which was delicious. By the time Naoto came home we had run out of actual meat, and so we had to pick one and hope it had it inside. I was unlucky, and got no meat inside the last balls of *takoyaki*.

While waiting for Miho and her friend to get ready, Tadashi and I played some Wii games (he got frustrated when I won, which was hilarious). After this we went to a mall nearby, where I bought a lot of souvenirs and some clothes for myself. Today was rather uneventful compared to other days, but it was one of my favourite because I was able to just appreciate being with my host family that day. I just liked moments like that: good food and good times. Needing to leave early tomorrow to make it to the airport, I slept early.

### April 30, Final Day

My alarm for 7:00am went off. I still hadn't finished packing up all my luggage yet, and so for the next hour or so I scrambled around, searching for everything I brought along with me to Japan. By 8:30 I was ready to go, and we were off to the train station that I had first been picked up from. I said goodbye to Naotaro, Naoto and Tadashi, and continued on. After a train ride, Kuniko, Miho, and I reached the airport, where I met up with Tessa and Ms Hisatsugu again. We had some food in the airport and it seemed rather sad, as it was the last time we would be eating together. Finally the time came for us to say goodbye. I tried not to cry as I said my final goodbyes to Miho and Kuniko, and thanked them for their hospitality and care. At the last steps before customs, Tessa and I thanked Ms Hisatsugu for this opportunity to visit Fukuoka, and finally we passed through. Soon after going through customs, we caught a plane to Narita airport, where I caught a few hours of sleep.

It was different from when we had just arrived in Japan. We had a little bit of time to explore the airport and buy the last souvenirs that we could, and with the incredible variety of stores

available (far larger than what was available at Auckland Airport, for sure!), I almost lost



track of time while I was there. Eventually, I ran out of spending money and so waited at the boarding area, just watching some Japanese television. At around 6pm, the call came to begin boarding the plane back to New Zealand. I looked outside and was greeted by the sight of a sunset: the reddening sun resembled the national flag, a fitting end to my trip to Japan.

Closing thoughts:

I hope that I will be able to return someday, so that the bonds that I have built over my time there will remain strong. Without a doubt, this experience is one of the best experiences I have ever had, and so I am truly grateful to everyone who made this trip possible, from Mrs Crosby (who helped my interest in Japan grow from year 9 to year 13). I would also like to thank NZJS for creating such an opportunity for students like me to experience something out of the ordinary, and the competition sponsors (the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education, and the Japan Foundation) because I would have none of these memories and experiences without your contributions. Finally, I would like to thank the Fukushima family for taking me in and making me feel like I was a part of your family.

I am truly grateful.

本当にかんしゃしています。