

My Week in Japan

July 8th – 15th 2015

My name is Nain Alfante and I am a year 13 student of St Dominic`s Catholic College, Henderson, Auckland. Last year, in 2014, I was lucky enough to win the nationwide Shodo and Haiku Competition run by the New Zealand Japan Society of Auckland and spend a gloriously lively, educational week in Japan as a prize. In the space of seven days, I was immersed in a different world full of bicycles and fashionably-dressed girls, delectable cuisine and amazing trains.

My Haiku translates as:

*The bright summer sky
Reflects the world`s happiness
Like a big mirror*

夏の空
しあわせうつす
かがみのよう。

New Zealand summers bring to mind beach barbecues and pohutakawa flowers. I was quite excited to know what a Japanese summer was like! In the Term 2 holidays I boarded the plane to Narita Airport and then spent the week touring around Tokyo and the Chiba prefecture – and of course, speaking Japanese as much as I could. Every day was a brand new experience; and this is my daily report.

Wednesday 8th of July – off to Japan!

To catch an 8:20 plane, I left home early and had breakfast at Auckland Airport while I waited to board. This was a new experience to travel on my own, so I was feeling rather nervous when I went through the checkouts and dropped off my luggage. The flight to Japan took a total of 11 hours. Such a long time to spend sitting in one seat – and plenty of time to sleep and watch movies! There were mostly Japanese people in the cabin I was in, and to hear the fast paced Japanese being spoken casually in conversation was, at the very least, important preparation for how things really were in Japan.

My first view of Japan was, instead of bright summer skies completely different to the grey clouds I`d left behind in wintry



Auckland, layers upon layers of clouds and a light drizzle. It turned out I had arrived in the short period at the beginning of summer known as “*tsuyu*” – a period of constant rain. It was the first of a whole week of interesting surprises.

I was picked up at Narita Airport by my host mother, Mrs Hayashi, who works at a primary school as a part-time English teacher. It was a two-hour ride from the airport to the house in Nagareyama, Chiba. On the way, I took plenty of photos because it was all so new, all the signs in block hiragana, katakana and kanji characters naming places, faces, wares on sale. It wasn't hot at all, but rainy. It was seven thirty by the time we reached the Hayashi household and the first thing we did after being shown around the house and dropping off my bags in my room was make a typical Japanese dinner. I was surprised that the daughter hadn't yet returned home from school yet, so we had dinner at nine in the evening, a lot later than I am used to in New Zealand. Japanese food is certainly a very healthy affair – vegetables make a big part of every meal, and I found a new favourite food in edamame beans.

In the Hayashi family is the mother, Mrs. Kazuyo Hayashi, with her husband and two daughters. The eldest lived in the city so I did not get a chance to meet her at all but I made friends with the twelve year old daughter Miki quite quickly. Everyone was certainly very kind and I am most grateful that they spoke entirely in Japanese to me, giving me a chance to improve and patiently putting up with any of my mistakes. Of course, we had to say the “*Itadakimasu*” and “*Gochisousama deshita*” phrases before and after we ate, and they were nice enough to hand me a fork, although I did try valiantly to eat using the chopsticks they had as well. The phrases we were all taught in Japanese lessons were my life lines; I passed a lovely, not-awkward-at-all evening with the family and after helping clear up, I was off to sleep for the first time on Japanese soil.



Thursday 9th of July – First Day in Japan

It gets bright so early in Japan! Still used to NZ time three hours ahead, I was up at five and surprised to see the room was already flooded with morning light. It was actually cold today, since it was both rainy and windy. After having breakfast with the family and seeing the father off to work and Miki off to school, Hayashi-san and I took the dog Jun-chan out for a morning walk. The Hayashis watch the morning news while eating breakfast at 6, and it was quite interesting to see there are reports on the morning traffic on the main highways and railways lines as well as the normal news in Japan and



around the world.

Hayashi-san had work that day, so she dropped me off with a friend and her daughter Hikari, who took me to Tokyo by train. Japanese *denshas* are much faster than NZ trains, and the card system very convenient. Tokyo Eki (Station) is a breathtaking sight on its own. It was huge, practically an enormous mall, and so full of businessmen in smart suits and busy people that one couldn't quite stand still to take pictures. I had lunch at one of the many restaurants there, trying tempura udon dish for the first time of my life. (And it was delicious, and you can imagine. Japanese food lives up to its amazing presentation.) After spending time at a mall and taking panoramas from the balcony on the tenth floor, we then booked a Hato Bust Tour around Tokyo city in the afternoon. Tokyo is a city of skyscrapers and one is always looking up at the prestigious towering buildings.



On the Hato Bus tour, because it was raining, we were all given raincoats to wear since we were riding an open topped bus. We rode over the Rainbow Bridge, and took photos of the Tokyo Tower (I had mistakenly assumed it was the Eiffel Tower on any Japanese souvenir keychains before – so it was an educational experience!!) and saw the famous Hibiya Park and Japanese House of Parliament. After that – a little cold but really excited to see more of the famous capital city – I was taken by another train to Akihabara. There, Yoshimi-san and I met up once again with Hayashi-san and Miki and we had dinner at one of those sushi conveyer-belt restaurants. The salmon sushi was delicious!! My first day in Japan was a lot of fun!

Friday 10th of July – Second Day in Japan



In the morning, I was dangerously close to taking just a cold shower in the morning since I didn't realise that the heat was actually controlled by a switch on the opposite wall instead of the tap! As today was Friday, I went with my host mother to the primary school she worked at, so we had to leave quite soon after breakfast to get to school on time. Today I went to a lovely primary school named Mukai Kogane, about a ten minute drive from the house. I borrowed slippers to wear inside the school and during Homeroom time, I believe I must have performed my Haiku about

ten times that day to various teachers! The staffroom itself seemed like a classroom, with the teachers all rising to greet the principal when he came in for the morning notices.

I joined my host mother in her English classes, and gave a little introduction about New Zealand to the students. The students didn't quite understand me until I repeated it all in Japanese; they were all so cute and welcoming, I quickly made friends with them – especially when it was time to practice the English phrases learnt that period. Photos weren't exactly allowed in the classroom around the students so I mostly took photos of the surroundings. It was nostalgic for me to see lessons being taught from a blackboard though! The school was really no different from a New Zealand school, just in a different language, I thought. Noisy kids, class clown kids, shy kids are always going to be in every single class no matter where you are.



I had a real Japanese school lunch with a class of sixth-graders. English lessons ended for the day after lunch, so my host mother and I went to see a Temple and Shrine close by and then have afternoon at Café Antigua – a café quite popular with women and with the best banana cake icing I've ever tasted. In Japan, unlike New Zealand, shopping areas, houses, temples and shrines are all rolled up in one gloriously varied mix. New Zealand feels a bit like a bento box sometimes with its carefully allotted areas for shops and suburbs. Japan isn't like that – everything is all together and I think it's so amazing that there are peaceful and quiet shrines about only 200 meters away from a busy street.

Saturday 11th of July –Third Day in Japan

It is summer indeed now! The sun was scorching, and according to the morning's news, Tokyo's temperature was 33 C! Today we had last night's yakisoba and fried vegetables with rice for breakfast and I went out with my host mother to Kashiwa City. It's a place that is both countryside and city, so I passed lovely lush rice fields on our way to a bazaar deep in the middle of the city. Today was full of shopping. At the bazaar I bought cute handmade crafts to take home as souvenirs, and tasted a many of the food samples as possible, the way anyone would in any normal farmers market. After that, we had lunch at a ramen shop! I've finally had my own bowl of ramen – complete with Naruto and sliced egg and delicious pork slices. Next was a trip to a mall where we did even more shopping at a Daiso, a fancy looking Japanese tea shop (the tea they let us try was too deliciously refreshing to describe on such a hot day) and various other stores. My hands were



quite full by the end of it.

I think my favorite thing about shopping in Japan was how they wrap up purchases and put them in cute little bags! It's certainly very convenient, especially since you can simply present the wrapped purchase as a gift in itself. Now if only NZ stores did the same...



Sunday 12th of July – Fourth Day in Japan

If there's one thing that I've learnt today, it's to never, ever wear black, no matter how cute the dress is. Today I spent the day at Asakusa, a town teeming with life and traditionally Japanese wares – and quite possibly the best place for anyone to buy *omiyage* for people back home. It was HOT, crowded and quite a maze to get around in. Half my entire vocabulary for the day was: It's hot, and "MIZU!!!" Asakusa is quite popular with tourists so I saw many foreigners in the crowds, all buying things ranging from Japanese *hachimaki* to Hello Kitty pillows. Every restaurant was packed so my host mother and I had to wait some twenty minutes or so for a seat at another udon restaurant where I had a hot seafood udon with tempura on the side.



We saw the Sensoji Temple too, and a pond full of koi on our way out. We stopped at whatever place had air conditioning at full blast, so afternoon tea was at Doutors Coffee where I tried a Mille Feuille. I've gotten quite used to greeting everyone I make eye contact with! Later that night, I stayed up late to watch the new episode of the Death Note TV series that began airing at the start of July. It was a lot different from the manga, but it's certainly an encouraging sign when you can understand quite a lot of what the characters are saying without any English subtitles there to read from!

Monday 13th of July – Fifth Day in Japan

I have heard of Harajuku for a long time so I was certainly excited to see the town famous as the center of Japan's most extreme teenage cultures and fashion styles. Hikari-san took me out on the train; we went first to Akihabara, then swapped



trains to ride all the way to Shibuya. We had a DELICIOUS “gyuu katsu” at one of the restaurants there and that’s pretty much the first time I’ve ever had rare meat and I really liked it! From Shibuya station, we walked all the way to Harajuku. On the way one could only notice just how fashionable all Japanese women are. They really, always seem to wear clothes that are on point, all the time.

It was a day full of walking and trying on clothes. My highlight was walking into a Disney store selling all kinds of things from Rapunzel aprons to Eeyore keychains. I think cuteness is all you need to describe Japanese girl culture!!

We took the train home again. Shibuya station felt like an airport because it was just so very long. I liked how they had two up escalators there though; one that was a normal speed and one that was a lot faster. Japanese people have a way of standing to the left and leaving the right side of the stairs/escalators for the other people – usually businessmen and school students –who don’t stand still and let the escalator carry them but hurry two steps at a time. After finally getting home, I went straight to sleep. What an exhausting Monday!

Tuesday 14th of July - Sixth Day in Japan

As the last full day in Japan, I could think of no better place to go to than to Mukai Kogane Primary for the last time. This time around, Hayashi-san had only two classes that day, so that left me plenty of time to go around exploring the school and meeting the kids again. After period 4, I helped the teachers set up for lunch in the staffroom before going to eat my own lunch with a sixth grade class. I like how everyone eats the same food in a primary school, even the principal. Lunch was spaghetti, vegetable soup with milk and a lemon custard tart. It was more of a day of goodbyes with the kids than anything else; I spent time talking to the kids – and even helping out when sweeping the stairs – of class 5-1 who were all so adorably cute, it was hard to leave. Mukai Kogane is a school full of smiles.

After that, I helped my host mother with the groceries, spent the afternoon pretending the Japanese television was listening homework, and made a NZ roast dinner away from home. Car rides with Mrs. Hayashi are worth a schooldays work – I’ve learnt so much about Japanese society and history from her than any school textbook!





Wednesday 15th of July – Travels end

Today I spent the morning finalizing bags and travel documents, taking heaps of farewell photos and really just trying to take in as much of Japan as I could before I was driven once again to the airport and farewelled there. Japan to me, especially since it was such an encapsulated stay, will forever be imprinted in my mind as a place of wonder – the people, the sights, the lifestyle itself. Coming from a lively family with even livelier siblings, being able to visit a Japanese primary school was probably the best experience I had. I've always admired the Japanese school lifestyle, and this visit really proved that to me.

I consider myself blessed to have been able to experience such a week in Japan. I'd like to thank my teacher, Itou-sensei for giving me lessons in calligraphy (mine was truly terrible at the beginning!) and for getting me to try this all in the first place. And, of course, to my host family, the Hayashis. My stay in Japan taught me so much about Japanese culture, and for putting up with my mistakes and faux pas along the way, I say a big *arigatou gozaimashita*.



Going to Japan was a whole eleven hour ride, there and back. I could not have experienced it without the kindness of the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education, who sponsored my air ticket, so I thank them with all my heart. To the New Zealand Japan Society of Auckland, I am truly grateful for this magical week. Haikus are fun to write even if you don't receive a prize for it, and I think my haiku was proven to be true, since the Japanese summer sky was as bright as I was in this lovely country.

- **Nain Alfante, July 2015**