

Denbigh Kirkbeck

Japan Trip

We arrived at the airport on a crisp April morning just on the turn of 5am. Despite the early hours the carpark outside the Auckland International Airport was jam packed. Still half asleep I grabbed my black suitcase and worn down Adidas gear bag and trudged towards the entrance to the Airport. At this point despite my severe lack of sleep I was out of my body filled with excitement and I had butterflies swarming in my stomach just thinking about the possibilities to come. We grabbed some quick breakfast at some overpriced café just outside the boarding gate and my family and I sat there quietly while I was waiting to be called up. There was a sudden ringing noise and then a muffled voice came on the overhead speakers informing all passengers who are going to Narita to please check in and head to gate 22 now. Suddenly, nerves had taken over the excitement and anxiety replaced the once found joy. My legs turned to jelly and yet were stuck in the ground like concrete. However, I accepted the facts that I had to go and this was to be an experience of a lifetime and just as quick as the anxiety came, it left. I said my final goodbyes and love to my family, flew through customs like a feather in the wind and awaited soon this young blond boy with his oversized hoodie, Nike track pants and unquenchable curiosity was off again to the place he learnt to love 2 years earlier.

In all honesty I don't remember much about the plane flight over as I was asleep for most of it, apart from when I was abruptly awakened by a screaming baby in the row in front of me. And from that point on the plane ride was one from hell. As we were finally arrived above Narita we were informed we had to redirect all the way down to Nagoya to temporarily stop to refuel as it was unsafe to land, so I was stuck on a grounded plane for about 3 hours with a screaming baby, no food, and cramped legs while we wait to take off again to Narita. And to top it off once we finally landed in Narita to get through customs was like a thousand rhinos all trying to fit through this one doorway fit for the size of a mouse. I didn't clear out and escape customs until about 1:30 am. However the wait was well and truly worth it. Unsure what my host family look like, I was left wondering around for a good 15 minutes taking in the beauty of this crowded airport.

Suddenly I hear my name being called out and I feel a burst of joy as I'm finally meeting my new host family. My host family were a very loving, kind, friendly and funny group of people and wouldn't have asked for anyone else. The dad was born in America he towered above me which I was quite surprised about because I seemed to be one of the tallest people around! His name was Richard and was an engineer. He wasn't home too often but when he was we always shared a laugh and he gave me a lot of advice about what I should do when choosing a job as I have considered engineering so his advice and insight into the industry was extremely beneficial. The mother Sachiko was a lovely lady who owned a beauty therapy/ hair salon and for the first two days I followed her around for work, and it may sound boring to some, but to me it was very interesting because I got to see an insight into what a normal working day in Japan was like and saw a more down to earth side that you can't see as a tourist. To me it was refreshing as it gave me an opportunity to see a side of Japan I couldn't last time. Richard and Sachiko had a young boy called Nathaniel, I tended to call him Nate for short. He had dark rich chocolate like skin and braided hair that reached down to his back. He loved all things Nintendo and in the afternoons or evenings once he finished his homework, we would have Pokémon battles or races on Mario kart. The pure innocence and bliss on his face when we were exploring the streets of Tokyo and that cool Friday afternoon was adorable and he would always have some joke or prank to pull. Adding to the family they lived with Sachiko's 96 year old mother, I rarely saw her at all during my stay as she mostly stayed in her room the whole time. Keeping her company was the family dog. A toy poodle who goes by the name Sancho, he had white

curly hair or at least in the spots covered. Sancho was a very old dog and had just recently turned 14 years old in human years, he wore nappies due to his poor bladder control and had a hatred for Richard the dad. I love them dearly for everything they had done for me.

During my first week I experienced heaps of different activities, some I mentioned before like helping the host mother at work, but also for the first Wednesday and Thursday, I went to a school on the outer area of Kashiwa city and in all honesty I was unbelievably nervous. I mean who wouldn't be, I was going to a new school where I knew no one and not to mention they spoke in a language I hadn't studied for about half a year, so yeah I was a little nervous to say the least. But the nerves just like the plane flight were for nothing because everyone at the school was very friendly and welcoming to me, although that was probably because of my hair colour. At school I made plenty of friends and a month on I'm still talking to these amazing people and I'm almost certain that these contacts will be people I can visit next time I go to Japan or if they ever come here.

On the Friday Sachiko took me and Nathaniel out to Tokyo for the day and honestly I could write another full length report on just what happened in that day, so I will aim to keep it brief. We started the bright sunny day by getting a small rental car and driving into the city. Our first stop was lunch in the city park near the Imperial palace and then we walked it to the Imperial palace, to see such power and strength just from a building was surreal, the design in each tile, the looming gates and the yet the surreal beauty. After this we walked to Tokyo station where we caught a train to Akihabara and walked the streets. To me this was strange as it was quite a different side to Tokyo that I hadn't seen before, it was quite modern and crowded. Walking down the streets we suddenly turn into this small elevator and head up into this old building, and as the doors open there we walk into a pale pink large open room with a bunch of tables and a few people sitting around at these tables and rushing past us is a lady in a maid outfit and it clicked we were in Japans infamous maid cafes and in all honesty it is one of the strangest things I have ever experienced but I loved the strange and bizarre feeling about the whole thing. After the cat café we took a train back to our rental car then drove to Harajuku. Like Akihabara to me they were both very modern and lively, and love them both dearly. After this we met up with a dear friend of Richard and Sachiko who goes by the name "Big Mike" he was very kind, he worked as a bouncer outside a night club in Roppongi, he said there would be work for me if I ever wanted to come over to Japan, I wasn't top sure if he was being serious or not but he was very kind towards me. After this we briefly stopped by Tokyo Tower and saw it illuminated in orange, red and yellow against the black night sky and then we flew over Rainbow Bridge on our way home. That day was truly magical and did so much that I won't ever forget.

On the Saturday I was leaving to wait for my old host family to come pick me up I spent the time with Nathaniel, he wanted to go play with his friends so that's what we did, we played soccer, Frisbee, tag and just biked around his neighbourhood. It was peaceful and showed me just how much I will miss him. Over that first week I met so many new friends and made countless unbreakable bonds that I will treasure forever and yeah I got a little watery in my eyes as I was saying goodbye to my family even if I had only known them for a week.

At a few minutes over 5pm my old brother Torajiro and his dad Akira came to pick me up and take me to their home in Tsukuba. That Saturday night I reunited with 4 out of 5 of my original host family and it was amazing but unfortunately I had to wait till the next day. On the Sunday morning Tora and I went with two of my old friends Kota and Shuntaro to play a few rounds of bowling. To me this was special because it wasn't anything major it was just me hanging out with friends I hadn't seen in a while and just chilling out. That evening we had a special get together with a few more of my friends I hadn't seen since my last trip and despite it only being 2 years it felt like a life time, but

it was the best feeling to see these friends again. Kayo the mother and Hana had prepared a buffet of sorts including traditional Japanese foods and New Zealand foods and it reminded me of myself in the way that I have a piece of both residing in me and no matter if I'm in Japan or New Zealand I will always be at home. On the Monday and Tuesday I went to school at Meikei High school where I was through the roof with the excitement at the idea of reuniting with all of my friends but in reality it was awkward, these were the same people I had grown to love but at the same time they weren't they looked at me like a fly on the wall and didn't recognize who I was, and those who did made it awkward and brushed me off, which was a shame but I don't know what I expected really because the majority of my friends had left school and were now at university already. On the Wednesday I took the train into Tokyo to meet my friend Naotaka where he wanted to show me his university, I met a few of his friends there as well, all 3 of them were studying language and wanted to meet me and I them for the same reasons, to expand their connections to other countries. After this Naotaka and I met up with my brother Gimpei and some of my other really good friends who I spent most of my time with in Japan last time round. We caught up over some Shabu Shabu and some good laughs.

At the end of the night Gimpei and I said our goodbyes to my friends for a second time but I knew it wouldn't be the last. We stayed the night in some cheap hotel across the road from Tokyo station and the next day our travels continued.

We woke up at 6am and sprinted to Tokyo station in time to catch our Bullet train which was departing at 7:30 am. Of course we made it on time and we departed for our trip to Kyoto. The Bullet train was a surreal experience reaching up to speeds of 450km/h and arriving in the beautiful city of Kyoto in just over 2 hours. As we departed from the train station, it was so refreshing to see a different side to Japan, one I couldn't see in Tokyo. A side of Japan where Classical meets modern so elegantly. We grabbed a quick bite to eat and then Gimpei and I caught a bus to the first of three temples we planned to visit that day. My back was starting to ache as I decided it would be smart to bring my entire Adidas gear bagged packed with my Canon camera toilet bag and spare change of clothes. As we arrived at the Kinkaku – Ji there was an aura of peace that was sitting over us similar to the cloud. All the little things like the dew sitting on the vibrant green leaves hanging over the old fences surrounding this golden pillar towering up in the middle of this still green pond, with a reflection so clear you're unsure what is the real temple. After this we went to two other temples, unfortunately I don't remember the names but I do remember that the clouds were growing thicker and darker as we trekked up the hill towards this large wooden temple that over looked Kyoto like that of a slumbering guardian and as we ran back down the hill to escape the rain I remember slipping over and quickly catching myself before any injury. I remember catching three separate trains and missing our bus to reach the third temple. At this point fatigue had set in and we were setting up for our brief trek into a tunnel made from the countless amounts of red gates. After our days exploration Gimpei and I made our farewells and he caught his train back to Tokyo and I made my way to Osaka where I planned to meet my host family there. It was truly sad to say farewell to Gimpei because he is like a brother to me but we both knew it wouldn't be our last farewell.

The end of the night was a bit of a blur and nothing much happened as all we did was arrive at the hotel. The last Friday in Japan we woke up and went down to the lobby to enjoy a quick breakfast before spending the day at universal studios. It was a surreal experience with highlights such as Harry Potter land and water world. But the entire park was amazing to see, the joy on every ones faces walking by enjoying the moment and what they were presented with. We departed from Osaka as quick as we came and arrived back home at near midnight.

The final day was extremely difficult for me, not physically but emotionally. Just packing my bag in the silence of my room in the countdown to my departure was very difficult but as I finished packing

I took one last look at my room, I can still remember the room and all that was inside it whether it be the texture of the wallpaper or the firm mattress or the window sill looking out towards Mt Tsukuba with the pigeons nest outside. It truly was my second home. On the way to the airport we stopped by a tempura restaurant for lunch just on the outskirts of town.

When we arrived at the airport I broke down into tears at the fact that I won't know when I will next see my second family again but I accepted I will see them again and with that knowledge I picked up my gear bag said my farewells, wiped the tears from my eyes and walked through into the checkout awaiting for my flight back home.

This trip was a pure blessing and I would love to give a huge thank you for everyone who made this possible from Mrs Hoshino, my teacher who originally convinced me to enter as a small year 9 and to persevere through until year 12. I want to give special thanks to the New Zealand Japan Society of Auckland who chose my Haiku as the best to go through and not only represent myself, but your society as well it was a great honour. And finally to the sponsors of the competition who were the ones who sent me over to Japan to experience such an amazing opportunity. So thank you to the sponsors The Sasakawa fellowship fund for Japanese Language education and the Japan Foundation, because without you none of these memories, friendships, or opportunities would've never existed. So thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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P.S: Attached to the mail you should find a folder of some of my photos from the Japan trip.