

## **Earthquakes, Typhoons, and Heat Waves....Oh My!**

*By: Geriann Pioquinto*

For the last fifteen years of my life, I have always seen Japan like I saw Oz. It was a place that I could never imagine myself really being, yet I would daydream about going there all the time. To my childhood mind, Japan was filled with the promise of cute sailor girl uniforms, delicious food, and anime merch. Yet as I grew older, I realized I wanted to become an English teacher in that country and set to work making that dream a reality. After lots of sleepless nights pouring over scholarships, getting one study abroad experience cancelled the same day I got all of the money to cover it, switching to a different program also that day, and waiting in agony for two months to be accepted by the Kansai Gaidai University, my bags were packed and I was walking through O'Hare security to find the gate I would board my flight at.

I was a bundle of nerves as I waited to board my midnight flight. Would I get along with the people also going on this trip? Would I transfer between airports okay? Would I mess up at Japanese customs? Would Japan be everything I dreamt it to be? Could I really see myself living there for a few years by myself to teach? As I sat at the gate, I was mentally preparing myself for every possible bad outcome. Especially the plane spontaneously combusting. Thanks, *Final Destination*.

But after taking a deep breath and finally arriving at the Kansai International Airport, I already knew I loved Japan even more. Heck, the airport was a four story building complete with a mall and hotels attached. After a few hour wait, I was on a shuttle bus with my new classmates toward our new home for the next six weeks.

If I could only say one thing about Japan it would be that it does not disappoint. It has something for everyone like any country would. But I do not think that any country could match the cleanliness or safety I felt while being there. It astounded me how kindergarteners could walk freely by themselves to and from school, the lack

of cars on the streets, and the sheer closeness of buildings all around me. Already going in, I knew this was how their society was, but actually being there was a whole different monster.

But I suppose I should talk about the real monster I faced in Japan. It goes by the name of natural disasters. The friends I made on the trip and I have joked that everything that could have gone wrong while we were in Japan did. For instance, on June 17 the Osaka area (Takatsuki, Ibaraki, and Hirakata) was hit with an earthquake of a 5.3 magnitude. It was morning right before classes started. As per usual I was eating my breakfast onigiri and catching up on YouTube videos I had missed. At first I heard a distant rumble and a few seconds later, my entire dorm room shook. Things on the shelves at the side of my desk flew off and it took me another few seconds to realize I was experiencing my first earthquake. My brain was in panic. Do I hide under the desk? Do I run out of room? What do I grab? What were the procedures? Why is everyone outside so quiet? Was I the only one feeling this thing!?

The tremors subsided and I cautiously went outside of my room. Everyone on my floor was yelling in Japanese. All I could understand were the girls saying repeatedly, "That was scary!" The two RA's on the floor were trying to calm people down and firmly gave directions in Japanese. The girls mobilized quickly. But I could understand none of it. It was the first time in my life that I felt so helpless. The weirdest part of the experience was being told to stay in the building, that I was safest in the dormitory. Fun fact, Japanese buildings were built with earthquakes in mind since earthquakes are a common occurrence in Japan.

The international student group chat blew up as we sent pictures we found of the aftermath. There were four reported deaths and 417 injuries. Classes were cancelled and the trains were down. For the following few days a bunch of students slept together in the lounges and everyone had their important belongings in one place just in case we would have to evacuate at a moment's

notice. While fear was at the back of our minds, most of us treated it as a big sleepover. We ignored the shortage of bottled water and the constant shortage of normal food we would buy to eat at the convenience stores close by. Those nerve wracking days subsided quickly and the baby earthquakes began to be normal to all of us. Life went on.

Then came the typhoon. While the typhoon was north of the Hirakata area where we lived, we still experienced intense rain and slight flooding in the nearby rivers. Most plans were barred by rain because the railways were either flooded or the area was evacuated in preparation for flooding. However the days that it did rain, the weather felt cool and the plants seemed to flourish. Maybe it's because I'm a rain person, but rain in Japan made the scenery look prettier. During one of the heavier rainy days, I went up to the Umeda Sky Building and looked down on the beautiful city and the sprawling river. Standing atop the 568 foot building, I saw a sight that could match the breathtaking view from Willis Tower. It was one of the moments where I felt like I was back in Chicago. I guess the other positive of the excessive rain was that I was encouraged to actually stay in and study or interact with my Japanese floormates.

And for the finale, the last leg of the trip was subject to an oppressive heat wave that was deemed a natural disaster because the heat stroke toll was rising to ugly heights. The heat was not impossible, but it definitely made scaling mountains to see beautiful shrines or mountain located parks quite a challenge. Crowded areas like downtown Osaka were also a test of will because of the collection of body heat plus the weather. I never valued water more than at that time. The only real scare we had with the heat was one of my friends nearly passing out at the farewell party. Heat stroke is no joke, friends. Please stay hydrated.

Despite the natural disasters, Japan offered so much beauty and fun in exchange for the small hardship we faced. From the amazingness that is Japanese convenience stores

to the unmeasurable kindness of the country's people to the mouthwatering food you can find literally anywhere, Japan did everything but disappoint.

Looking back on this trip, my one regret would be not spending time hanging out with my friends or making new ones. Due to a number of circumstances, there were a lot of times where I traveled Japan alone. While it is certainly worthwhile that I saw and did almost everything I wanted to do in Japan, I'd like to offer some advice to those thinking about going abroad to study. Travel with your friends. Travel with *someone*. It's lonely not having anyone to share the fun with.

[Pictures included on next few pages]











春  
日  
社  
常  
石  
燈

春  
日  
社  
常  
石  
燈

春  
日  
社  
常  
石  
燈

春  
日  
社