

## Ashleigh Stewart (Canterbury University) at Waseda University, 2010 - 2011



When I was first applied to go on a University exchange to Japan, it was on a whim with no expectations and certainly no idea that I would be chosen to go. However, after much thought and deliberation with myself, I eventually decided to take the jump and leave Christchurch for a year to live and study in Tokyo, Japan. And even after only 6 months of living in Japan, I can safely say that it is one of the best decisions I have ever made, and one that will no doubt completely change my perception, give me a much greater appreciation for the world and shape the person I will eventually become.

6 months ago, as I was sitting on the plane at Auckland Airport waiting for take-off, the only things that were running through my mind were how much I was going to be missing out on back home for a whole year and how much I was going to miss my family and friends. However after the eleven hour flight, I'd quickly cleared customs, was helped by some fellow Waseda University students onto a train, and as soon as I saw the buildings, the billboards and the somewhat familiar landscape of Tokyo, I began to remember how much I loved this country. At that moment I began to feel anticipation and the only thing that I could think of was the amazing opportunities that lay ahead of me. After coming out of the train station, I was met with the bright lights that I remembered so vividly from my school trip to Japan three years ago, and a flood of familiarity came rushing back to me, after that I knew that I was going to survive this year just fine.

However, my feeling of enthusiasm was soon met with apprehension when I saw the room I'd be living in for the next 11 months. It was tiny! Standing in the middle of the room, I can basically reach out my arms and touch both sides of the room. On the other hand, the facilities are amazing. Each of the rooms have their own toilet, shower, bath, refrigerator, desk, closet and heat pump – and I really commend them for fitting all of this into a room the size of a closet.

After the first few days of sleeping during the day and unpacking, I felt like I needed to go out and explore my new surroundings. What I didn't anticipate was the intense heat that Tokyo was experiencing at that time. Supposedly it was one of the hottest summers on record, and I wasn't surprised – 10 minutes after walking outside I was drenched with sweat and had to take shelter in a convenience store.



Over the next few days I managed to make some friends, explore a bit more and begin to establish a new life for myself. Volunteers from Waseda made the transition extremely smooth, they would come to the dormitory to collect all of the foreign students and take us to sort out things like our extremely expensive health insurance and the aptly named alien registration card. These students were amazing; if they weren't there I don't know how any of us would have survived those first couple of weeks. Finally, after a welcome party in my dormitory, I got to know the people I'd be living with for the next year, experienced drinking at an izakaya (Japanese bar) for the first time, and I finally felt comfortable in my new surroundings.



In the middle of September, after a long registration process, I was finally a student at the prestigious Waseda University. To say that it was different from Canterbury University back in New Zealand would be an understatement. It wasn't that Waseda was a great deal bigger – the buildings were definitely larger but because the University is crammed into a small space in a residential area it seemed somewhat small – the whole atmosphere was completely different. There's an air of authority and prestige anywhere you go at Waseda, and although intimidating at first, it makes you feel like your part of something really important. Though with a student population of over 50,000 people compared to Canterbury's modest 1800, this was also definitely a large shock! Another surprise was the significant extension to my school day that I encountered. At Canterbury I was lucky to have 10 hours of class a week, and each class was only 50 minutes long. Here we took 13 classes, had 20 hours of school a week, classes on a Saturday morning, and each class was an hour and a half long - which was especially

painful when you had double periods. Aside from this, school started out positively. Classes were small, about 15-20 people in each, and straight away I clicked with the students in my main class and we formed a tight knit group. It was more like being back in high school than University, and although at first I found the change unnerving, as I felt my Japanese level slowly improve, I became more and more confident. The workload was also extremely intimidating to begin with – it wasn't uncommon to have homework for every class each day – but once I got into a routine, I felt myself really start to enjoy my new life. In time I saw the workload as hefty, but not overly difficult, so after I'd been here for a couple of months, I decided to get a part-time job at a restaurant to help pay the excessive bills that come with living in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Before I knew it, I had a steady job and was succeeding more than I thought I ever would at a school in Japan, and had definitely become comfortable living in Tokyo.



In my spare time, when I can find it, sightseeing and travelling has been at the top of my list. In my third month here, a couple of my friends and I signed up for a small trip to Ten'ei village where we could observe rural life and activities. This was by far the most influential trip I've been on, and I would definitely recommend it to any foreigner living in Japan. Not only was it good to get out of the city, but we learned so much about things that I didn't even know went on in Japan – to be fair I wasn't even sure there was a countryside! Other than that I've managed to explore most of Tokyo, been on a ski trip to Nagano, been on a trip to Hakone, travelled to Kyoto, Osaka and Hiroshima with my family while they were here to visit for two weeks, and even attempted to

climb Mount Fuji (the keyword here being 'attempted' as we got caught in a hail and lightning storm and were forced to take shelter at the 8<sup>th</sup> station for a ridiculous amount of money and descend the next morning). I've experienced much of what Japan has to offer, and I really believe that it has changed me as a person. I have a greater appreciation for not only other countries and cultures, but also, as I'm the only New Zealander at Waseda, I have a much greater appreciation for my own country. Not only that, but I also now have a much stronger desire to get out and see the rest of the world, and would consider returning to Japan one day to live permanently. To anyone considering studying abroad, there's only one piece of advice I can give – do it! To begin with I was not even considering accepting my place in the programme, but I am immensely thankful that I did. I've met amazing people from all over the world that I hope will continue to be a part of my life in the future, experienced one of the most amazing cultures in the world first-hand, and gained an immeasurable amount of life experience that will be invaluable to me not only now, but also in the future. There's not even a question of whether I made the right decision in skipping out on a year back home; to be a part of something this amazing always requires some sort of sacrifice, and missing a year of partying and relaxing in New Zealand is an insignificant sacrifice to make for the incredible experience that I'm a living now.



I now feel as though I'm part of an elite group of people that can say that they've had this opportunity, and I know that these memories and experiences will help me for many years to come. So thank you to everyone that aided in my nomination for the grant, without it I may not have been able to have this amazing experience!