

Kurashiki Student Exchange 2002 Report

By Courtney Jones

I applied to go on the Kurashiki Exchange because I thought it would be an exciting experience and a good way to put what Japanese I had learnt to some use. The selection process was not what I expected, but very laid back and that put me at ease when it came to my interview. When the acceptance letter came in the post it was quite a surprise for me, I was excited. As the trip got closer the excitement began to mount.

Having meetings together as a whole group was a great idea, as we got to build relationships with other members of the group. It gave us a chance to get to know each other and make new friends.

Our leaders, Pip and Richard were excellent role models. They allowed us to explore by ourselves to the extent that they still had control over us and we also did things as a group.

It was a shame that we never went for dinner prior to going to Japan at a Japanese style restaurant, as it may have helped us in a little way to prepare for the different sorts of foods we were to eat, while on the Exchange.

I believe I left it too late before I started to fundraise for the trip. As a group we should have applied for Pub Charities support. We were not aware of the process and consequently I was not eligible to apply for Pub Charities as an individual. We needed the assistance of our school who were not necessarily supportive. Future groups should look into fundraising as a group but must work through an incorporated society/school they need to be told of the process and this needs to happen at a very early stage. I was helped by Tuskers Hornby, who generously gave me food vouchers to raffle off. Pub Charities paying for our team uniform was a huge help, which we were appreciative of. Our exchange team looked really sharp in our Canterbury clothing, which was sold to us at discounted prices.

When we met on the Tuesday morning, the main feeling in the air was excitement. I was looking forward to the trip, but also going to miss my family. I was mostly looking forward to the 11-hour plane trip, which was one of the first things we were going to experience. In the back of my mind was September 11, but I had to push that out and make the most of it. It seemed to take longer than 11 hours, but that would have been due to it being a day flight.

Our Exchange schedule was full of exciting things to do and see, like our day trips to an Amusement park and Hiroshima. Our first nights accommodation was only adequate. But it was a bed and a shower, which was all we were really hanging out for. I felt that the part of Okayama we were in wasn't the best either. I slept in my friend's room for my own peace of mind. When in Kurashiki, on our first day, I enjoyed going to the Achi

Shrine, but the best part of that day was the Bikan Historical Quarter, full of beautiful jewellery and old buildings alongside a canal.

My first day of school was awful; I was on my own at Kurosaki Junior High school. I spoke little Japanese and felt uncomfortable and emotional. I put it down to lack of sleep and being separated from my family in New Zealand and friends on the Exchange. After an excellent sleep that night, the next day and days after at school were much better and I really enjoyed them. My host family, the Nishi's were wonderful. I cannot speak highly enough of them. They made me feel welcome and relaxed. I had a fantastic stay with them. We went shopping and visited Temples and Shrines. On the first Saturday of my stay, I found that my camera had no film in it, they took me back to some of the places where I had missed photographs.

The only way to put my first few days in Japan would be to say it was a massive Culture Shock.

The highlight of my trip would have been the day we travelled to Hiroshima and Miyajima. It was amazing to see Hiroshima with my own eyes. It is quite an emotional place, the Peace Park is very beautiful, the way they have restored and kept everything. The ferry trip across to the Island of Miyajima was lots of fun. The day was overcast but humid. We wandered around the Island for about 30mins and saw Deer walking freely around the Island and the Water Shrine. It was an amazing experience. Japan is extremely different to New Zealand and I benefited greatly from the experience of another culture and country.

I would like to thank both Kurashiki City Council and Christchurch City Council for their fundraising, support and organisation, and Mayor Nakada for having our exchange group stay in Kurashiki City.

Thank you to our leaders Richard Paton and Pip Smith, and special thanks also to our guides while on our Exchange, Bill Goudry and Keiko Onishi. If it wasn't for them we might not have had such a good time or got back home!