

Kurashiki Student Exchange 2002 Report

By Sarah Murphy

One day my Japanese teacher announced that she had been sent a fax from the City Council regarding a Sister City Exchange trip to Kurashiki, Japan. I decided to apply because I was itching to go overseas and wanted a chance to learn more Japanese, and put it into practice. It was hard writing the essay, because I wanted to make a good impression and didn't want to say anything that would decrease my chances. When I got an interview I was really surprised and excited – My parents were too!

I was really nervous in the interview but I tried to relax a bit. It was like applying for a job! There were a few awkward questions but I think I handled them pretty well. I must have!

Everyday I checked the letterbox for a letter from Richard Paton, and finally one came. As soon as I opened it and it said "We would like you to be a member of the Kurashiki Student Exchange Team" I jumped up and down shouting "I'm going to Japan!". I was really surprised and really happy. I was a bit scared though, as I was the only one who even applied from my school.

In the weeks leading up to the trip, the group met on every second Tuesday to sort out details, get things like uniforms organised, and generally get to know each other better. We were asked to ring each other up and 'chat'- this was a bit awkward at first because it was hard to find what to talk about. There was also a mad rush of phone calls on the Monday night before the next meeting. I'm glad we had these meetings, as going to another country with 15 strangers would have been very scary.

Pip and Richard took care of the bookings, uniforms, itineraries, and passports for us, which was very helpful. They organised and supported us all, and continued this support during the trip, constantly asking if everything was going OK and visiting us in our schools.

Pip offered to send emails from us to our parents if we didn't have Internet access in Japan.

Fundraising the \$2650 for the trip was only difficult part of the build up. I took a job walking one of my Primary School teachers dog. I also held a Goal-a-thon with one of my Saturday Netball games. The support I received was great.

The Canterbury Clothing Company provided the uniforms for us at a discounted rate, and Pub Charities donated the money to pay for them. I think you'll agree that these uniforms looked great.

I wasn't nervous or excited as the departure date arrived – I think this was because it hadn't really sunk in that I was going. My older brother went to Japan early last year so I was pretty prepared for what to expect. I had been communicating via email with my host family for about 2 months beforehand so I wasn't apprehensive about meeting them.

Leaving my family in Christchurch wasn't a big thing for me, although I did get a little homesick near the end of the trip.

The plane trip was very long but never boring, as we swapped seats to sit next to different people throughout the trip. We could also watch movies, listen to music, and watch TV in Japanese.

When we arrived, it was pretty hot. I was expecting Japan to be totally different to New Zealand, and in a way it was. But almost all the signs and important things were written or said in English (as well as Japanese). It was really easy to get around.

As soon as we arrived we met Mr Bill Gourdrie and Miss Keiko Onishi, from the International Affairs Office of the Kurashiki City Council. They were really helpful throughout the trip, especially Bill, who was an American who has been living in Japan for a while.

They met us at the train station and took us to our hotel in Okayama. It wasn't much, but it was alright for a night. Then they took us for a real Japanese meal of McDonalds! In the morning they did the same thing for breakfast. Then we took the train to Kurashiki.

Exploring the Bikan Historical Quarters was very interesting. Our guides took us to the Achi Shrine where the master told us all about the history of the area.

The courtesy call to the Mayor of Kurashiki, Mayor Nakada, was a very formal event with video cameras, photographers, and speeches. I felt quite honoured to visit the mayor. As I was leaving, I was interviewed by a newspaper reporter and I was quoted in the paper as saying "I wanted to come to Japan because it would be good experience the culture".

It was very scary splitting up after that, when we met to our host families. Mine were very kind. My host mother spoke very good English so it made it very easy to communicate. They treated me like part of the family, and I was included in all the family games. I had a 14 year old girl (who I went to school with), a 10 year old boy, mother and father in my family. They wanted to make me as comfortable as possible and introduce me traditional Japanese way of life. They also wanted to know a lot about life in New Zealand. They were very surprised that we had a grass field at school (they only have a dirt playing field).

On my first night with them my host sister had cramming school, so we went out for dinner at a sushi restaurant (with the little conveyor belt and everything!)

The next day was my first school day and I had to be there at 7:00am because Saki (my host sister) had Basketball practice. She had it after school as well, so I think I was there until about 7:00pm. The school was so big! All the classrooms were in one big block shaped like a 'U'. I think it was about 5 stories.

I was amazed at the segregation between girls and boys at my school. They are split for P.E, the girls did dancing in the gym and the boys played soccer on the field. When they were singing in music the boys stood on one side of the room, and the girls on the other.

I attended school with Kate Harris and we did a lot of fun things that the school had planned for us- traditional Japanese things. Like Calligraphy and

Ikebana (Flower arrangement) for example. We also did Japanese music, Origami, Japanese Archery, Tea Ceremony, Wearing Kimono and cooking. In cooking Kate and I had to make a New Zealand meal. We didn't quite know what to cook, so we made chicken nibbles, raw carrot and mashed potato. For dessert we served Kiwifruit, whipped cream, and Tip Top Hokey Pokey ice cream (which we were surprised to find at the supermarket!) The meal wasn't very nice but Kate and I were the only ones who knew what it was supposed to taste like!

Everyone at the school was really nice. The students always said "Hello" when I passed them in the halls, and gave us presents when we left. School was really interesting and fun. It gave me more of an insight into the Japanese way of life. It was great.

The welcome lunch held at Ivy Square on the middle Saturday of the trip was very fancy! There were waiters wearing tuxedos and waitresses wearing French maid uniforms! It was good to see all my friends again, after about 4 days apart. We had such a lot to talk about. It was also the first time where we got to meet each-others host families.

The next day was a free day with my host family. I liked the free days a lot as they allowed my host parents to take me wherever they wanted for how ever long they wanted. They took me to an Italian - Japanese restaurant, and we accidentally met Nicole and her host family. The food wasn't very nice. After lunch, we all went to Sega World (which is like a huge Time-Out) and played the games. We also got 'Purikura' (Photo stickers).

My host family then took me to a shrine in Okayama. It was really big and beautiful. I suppose shrines are like Maraes in New Zealand. My host brother and sister had never been there so it was an experience for all of us.

The group visit to Sugou Elementary School was really fun. It was great doing cooking with my group- we made crepes. They were all very helpful and *showed me* how to do things rather than *told me*. We were given little gifts at the end. It was so sweet! When I got home that night I watched the video of us at Sugou that was on the news. I looked like everyone had a great time.

After Sugou, the group went to Washuzan Highland Amusement Park. That was a great time for us to go crazy and scream all we wanted on the rides. I wish we all had a little more time there, because I didn't get to go on all the rides. My favourite ride was definitely the Backnagger, which was a backwards rollercoaster. A few of us went on it twice in a row, but Pip and Richard got a little white in the face after the first time around.

On the last Friday, the group went to Hiroshima on the Bullet Train. It was hard to imagine the bustling city as an Atomic wasteland, but the Memorial Museum certainly proved that it was. It displayed photos of people that were burnt in the blast, photos of the area before and after the attack, clothes that had been burnt, and even had real skin on display. I think a few people felt a bit sick.

The Peace Park was very beautiful though, with busloads of school children constantly coming through. It was just about the only place where I saw grass! Every now and again there were colourful cranes hanging from the ornate statues dotted in and around the park.

We also went to Miyajima. After running to catch the ferry to the island, we patted the wild deer, shopped for souvenirs, and saw the shrine. We didn't have much time there, so it was all a bit rushed. We only just caught the ferry back.

That weekend my host family took me to Fukuyama. We stayed in a hotel with traditional Japanese Tatami matting and futon mattresses. That was an experience in itself! I watched The Matrix in Japanese on the TV- that was funny!

The next day they took me to an amusement park. It wasn't as good as Washuzan Highland, but some of the rides were pretty cool. I had to go on a few rides by myself because none of my host family were game enough to go on them!

The day we left was a very emotional day for some of us. We had had so many great adventures together with our host families, and it was probably the last time we would see each other. My host mother was crying really hard, and I was a little bit sad, but looking forward to coming home.

On the way to Osaka Airport, we stopped off at Okayama Castle. Once again it was very pretty. We also walked around the Korakuen Gardens. It was so different to a garden in New Zealand!

The plane flight home didn't seem like 11 hours. There were some cool movies on and there was also sleep to catch up on. Monday and Tuesday sort of morphed into one day.

I was really glad to see my family again, and over-joyed to sleep in my own room! I had so much to tell them and my friends at school.

One my highlights for the trip was Washuzan Highland. It was so fun! Everyone was encouraging each other to go on the rides when they were scared, and people just had a really good time.

I was a bit frustrated that we didn't get to see more of Japan, although I realise that the exchange was a Sister City exchange. I would've liked to have visited Tokyo.

It was a very enjoyable trip and a really great experience. I met lots of new and interesting people and made some very good friends. Thank-you to the Kurashiki City and Christchurch City Councils. A huge thank-you to Richard and Pip, and another big thank-you to my host family- the Yoshikanes. The trip wouldn't have been as great without you.