

When I first packed my bags for Japan, I thought I was just going on a fun school trip to see a cool new country, try great food, and hang out with my classmates. I didn't realize that going to places like Niigata, Tokyo, Edogawa, and Hiroshima would completely change how I think. Before I left home, I was just looking forward to a fun vacation. But as we traveled and met different people, my mindset completely changed. I realized that a trip like this is really about making new connections across different languages, learning about history, and finding out how much we all have in common. By the time it was over, my trip to Japan with my school had turned into a valuable learning experience that completely reshaped how I see the world.

Our trip started in Niigata, where we stayed our first night in Haneda Airport. Where we got to eat some amazing ramen after a long flight. In Niigata, we immediately jumped into trying new things. Participating in the local kite festival was an unforgettable highlight, especially because I actually got to be on the news for the very first time! This experience showed me how much pride the local community takes in their traditions. We also got to explore at the kite museum by making and flying our own custom kites. We also got to pick some strawberries and cucumbers, where we also got to see the hard work of traditional mochi pounding. It taught me a lot about Japan's deep connection to agriculture and teamwork. One of the most valuable parts of our time in Niigata was visiting a local school where everyone was incredibly nice and welcoming. While we were there, I learned how to play the koto, a traditional instrument for the first time. We also watched the students perform a dance for us and had a mini undoukai,

which is a Japanese sports day where we got to do ball tossing together. I got to introduce my friends to the traditional onsen (hot springs), and they loved it so much that we went every single night to relax, talk about our day the highlights and in the end got to dress up in yukata.

When we moved on to Tokyo, the trip shifted from modern Japanese culture to city life. Going to Tokyo DisneySea was incredibly cool for me since I had never been there before, and I loved walking around with my friends, seeing the magical views, and getting matching headpieces. We loved it so much that we even went back the next day just to go to the mall and buy a bunch of cute accessories. We also got to take tons of purikura, a Japanese photo booth which was such a fun souvenir.. We even got super competitive at the game centers, getting really heated trying to win prizes and having a blast playing the drum games.

Next, we went to Edogawa, where it was very educational. At the Tokyo Sea Life Park, local students guided us around, where I learned that the massive tuna are the main attraction. Seeing all the animals was so fun. The absolute best part of being in Edogawa, though, was doing a homestay with a student from Kanto Daichi High School. My host family was so sweet and welcoming. I learned so much about their daily routine, like how early they have to wake up and how long their commute to school is. Spending a school day with them showed me just how different Japanese high schools are from ours. In drama class, we had to act out the cultural differences between Oahu and Japan, which really made me think about my own home culture. In English class, the students asked us questions and we got to have a conversation. We ate lunch

together and compared everyone's different lunches, and we even tried a Kendo class, where I learned about discipline and respect in Japanese martial arts.

While we were in that area, we also went to Shibuya and walked around. Me and my friends went to Shibuya 109, and I was shocked by how tall the building was and how many floors it had—we had the hardest time deciding what to buy because everything was so cute! Meeting the Mayor of Edogawa City was another incredible honor, where we learned all about the strong, historic ties that Oahu shares with Edogawa, showing how communities across the ocean can support each other. The mayor was very nice and gifted us so many things.

The final part of our journey took us to Hiroshima, which changed my perspective on history and peace. Visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and seeing the Atomic Bomb Dome was a very heavy, moving experience. Local students gave us a tour of the outside, making the history feel real and human rather than just something in a textbook. I felt incredibly proud and responsible to represent our group by placing 1,000 paper cranes into the memorial box, knowing that 1,000 cranes symbolizes a wish for global peace and healing. My friend also placed flowers in front of the Dome. Afterward, we went inside the museum to learn more about this tragic event. Afterward we went to a tower where we saw the amazing view of the city near the dome and got to make our own cranes which we dropped and made a wish. Visiting Hiroshima Castle and walking through a beautiful nearby garden to feed the koi fish showed me how a city can rebuild

itself. We also made Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki and learned that food is a huge part of cultural identity.

Then we took a boat to the island of Miyajima. Starting right when we stepped off the boat and were greeted by wild deer who weren't scared of us at all and kept trying to eat our clothes! We got to make momiji manju (which was delicious, especially since I usually don't like anko) and decorate and sand traditional wooden shamoji paddles. Hiking up Mount Misen, riding the ropeways, and walking right up to touch the massive Torii gate at low tide allowed me to see how spiritual beliefs and nature tie together. Touring the inside of the temple taught us about Japanese manners and beliefs, concluding our trip with a deep respect for their way of life.

Looking back, my mindset has completely transformed. Before this trip, my world was mostly centered on my community in Oahu. By stepping into Japanese classrooms, living with a host family, and exploring everything from quiet temples to loud game centers, I realized that even if our routines are different, our caring for friendship, joy, and peace are exactly the same. I am so grateful for the group of nice, funny people I got to travel with, and I want to thank everyone who made this possible. This trip didn't just teach me about Japan—it taught me how to open my mind to the rest of the world.