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My exchange year in Japan

I arrived in Tokyo about 9 months ago, in the middle of a very hot and humid summer, in late July 2019. It was my first trip to Japan and although I had already studied Japanese language and culture on and off for about 3 years, I was not quite sure what to expect. My knowledge of Japan was mostly limited to readings on the Edo and Meiji periods, the history of Japanese cinema, some animation and documentaries on modern Japan and the post-war Japanese economic miracle, but friends' and media accounts had prepared me for a strange, almost alien land. To my surprise, I found nothing alien about Japan; very different yes, original indeed, but also very familiar, relatable and fascinating. Those first few months after my arrival in Japan when everything was brand new, fresh and waiting to be explored were undoubtedly one of the most thrilling periods of my life.

Shortly after my arrival, I attended Ochanomizu University's summer programme, hoping to improve my Japanese skills and familiarise myself not only with the university where I was going to study during the next academic year but also with the city and life in Japan in general. This was my first time attending an all-female institution and I was very curious as to its dynamics and academic environment. The summer programme was a fantastic experience; I was introduced to Japanese education and etiquette, worked on projects with international students, explored Tokyo and considerably improved both my listening and speaking skills.

After the end of the summer programme, I decided to travel for a while, first volunteering for about 3 weeks at a ryokan in the small fishing village of Onjuku, in Southern Chiba and later island hopping

in Okinawa. During my summer 2019 adventures, I stayed with a Japanese family in rural Japan, learned about traditional hospitality, how to cook gyoza and curry rice, made unexpected friendships, learned how to surf, hiked to mountain temples, explored historical towns, got stranded on a small island and narrowly escaped two typhoons among other things.

Once back in Tokyo, I moved into the university's student dormitory in the buzzy neighbourhood of Oyama, mostly known for its bizarrely named high street "Happy Road". At first sight, the dormitory is a rather bleak, uninviting 70s building with old peeling floral wallpapers that have turned yellow with time, laminated pink floor mats and strange rules and regulations, such as strict midnight curfews and steep penalty fees for missing rather counter-productive dormitory meetings -that are very difficult to understand to begin with! The entrance is tightly guarded by three rotating elderly guards in blue uniforms and all comings and goings are subject to the scrutinizing look of the two "dorm-mothers" who act as both administrators and go-to people in times of need. Once you get past the initial shock though, these exact oddities make for an unforgettable experience.

The past six months went by incredibly fast and have been busier than expected. Since no history modules were offered in English at the university, I decided to focus on Japanese language modules instead. These have proved more difficult than expected due to the high level of Japanese proficiency among international students. Hoping to immerse myself further in Japanese culture, I joined the university's aikido and volleyball clubs and actively took part in seminars, events and festivals; I attended sadou seminars, an Edo Kiriko workshop in Asakusa -where I cut my first ochoko, classical concerts at the NHK Hall, bunraku and kabuki at the National Theatre, the Yakushi-Nyorai and Setsubun festivals at a Buddhist temple in Fussa as well as Joya no Kane in Kamakura. In November, I started teaching Greek language and history at the university's Foreign Language Education Centre, something I thoroughly enjoy.

In mid-December 2019, news reached us of a new virus outbreak in China's Wuhan. In the short span of three months, this outbreak turned into a pandemic affecting 199 countries, of which many are on lockdown. The much anticipated Tokyo Olympics 2020 have been postponed for the summer of 2021 and international travel has been suspended in many parts of the world. My stay in Japan has also become uncertain due to the closing of schools and universities. My experiences here in Japan during the past year have certainly been extraordinary and regardless of what the future holds, I'll treasure them for years to come.

