

## **Otaru University of Commerce, Japan**

**S2 2016**

**Degree: BA Classics**

I went on a student exchange in Otaru in Hokkaido, in the north of Japan. I picked Japan for two reasons. Firstly, I had never been before and Japanese culture and lifestyle was fascinating to me. Secondly, because I wanted to get some experience teaching English and I thought that Japan could provide me with this opportunity. I was a great experience studying and living in a country so very different to NZ, and I know that as a future exchange student, you will have as great a time as I did. This is not a guide of what you should do but more of a recap of my time with advice. When you are there, you will have your own adventures and make your own memories. However, this will provide some good ideas and show just how much is available to do.

### **Hobbies**

Let's start with free time and hobbies. The international students I lived with were great company and always keen to do things, we planned multiple trips together, including Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Nara, as well as skiing trips in various places in Hokkaido. We went to theme parks like Fuji Q, Universal Studios and Disney as well as visiting Japan's famous temples and restaurants. The people you share the international house with and study with really make the exchange memorable, so mingling and making friends is compulsory!

In terms of entertainment and shopping, Sapporo (40 min train ride away) has far more options than Otaru, but that is not to say Otaru is without options. I ended up learning some Judo, teaching Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, and playing social sports weekly (volleyball, dodgeball etc.). The gymnasium is where most activities are held and its located a 2-minute walk away from the university/ international house and although it is very basic, it is sufficient and usually empty. There are lots of social "circles" to join and if you seek more than social sport there are competitive groups for most sports. If sports aren't your thing- maybe drinking is? Japanese pubs have "nomihoudai"! It is all you drink for 1200 yen (around \$15 NZ) for 2 hours. Also an added bonus that the food at these Japanese style pubs is superb.

### **University life**

Otaru University was very helpful to myself, and all international students over the semester. They provided me with a tutor, Kentaro, who became a good friend and helped with everything,

from setting up bank account and insurance, to booking physio appointments. Having a tutor was crucial, because the language barrier can be pesky but Kentaro made these obstacles vanish.

Studying itself was very different from Otago – attendance is almost compulsory (especially in language papers) and there is no blackboard to rely on. Classes are 90 minutes long and for the most part, they involve more human interaction than Otago.

In terms of paper options it varies by semester and year, but you can expect language, economic and culture options to always be there. On top of these papers, students have the option to join a seminar for one year, or 6 months and I cannot recommend John Thurman and his Seminar enough. Trust me on this, if you have the option- join John's class.

Next is the university food. The campus has a great cafeteria with lots of options, usually around 300-600 yen per meal, and located in the heart of the Uni. Miso soups, Donburi and lots of noodle options – I ate there twice a day because the supermarket was just far enough of a walk to get slightly annoying.

## **Life**

I arrived in September and fell in love with Otaru, early morning jogs in the sun to the view point, lots of sunlight all day and the fresh smell of Hokkaido nature. This place was the epitome of peaceful and I loved it. However, as soon as winter hit, things change. The winter hit hard and fast in 2016, I left Otaru in shorts and a T- shirt for 8 day holiday in November to Kyoto/ Osaka, and when I returned there was snow everywhere. I am not usually a big winter fan but Otaru changed my opinion. Perfect powdery snow falling and covering all the landscape was something I will never forget. If you are an avid skier or snowboarder then you will have a blast. If not, you can still enjoy Sapporo's world famous snow festival, thigh high snow to play in and of course, a white Christmas, which is a must do at least once in life.

The living conditions of the dormitory were great. Like I said it was very cold in winter but inside the room, the accommodation is warmer than any flat I had in Dunedin. The fact you have your own kitchen, with two gas elements and a small oven, gives you complete autonomy and independence. The room has everything you need – bed, wardrobe, drawers, desk, and bathroom. It's so cheap and the JASSO scholarship was giving me 80,000 yen a month so money wasn't an issue. The cheap accommodation allowed me to spend more money on food and travel than I could have while I was in Dunedin.

My time in Otaru was well spent, the place is really special and unique and I would have stayed there for a whole year if I hadn't had been a finalist. Japan is definitely a great experience and I am sure you will enjoy it as much as I did!

P.S- book return flights if you go for one semester, flights back to NZ were expensive compared to return flight prices.