

Otaru University of Commerce
Otago Exchange Semesters 1 & 2 2016
Japanese, Linguistics & Language, International Business

My initial decision to study in Otaru, Hokkaido, was made on the basis of necessity. I had already decided on studying in Japan in order to improve my Japanese language ability, and the subject choices available at Otaru University of Commerce showed promise in terms of crediting towards my home degree. Additionally, given the heavily subsidised accommodation (Less than ¥7000 monthly during my stay), and the information pointing towards a lower cost of living compared with some of the other major cities in the South, my internal Scarfie compass had already set a course for due north.

This instinct proved to be more than worthwhile, as I have a hard time faulting any one point of my exchange. I will try to give an overview as concise as possible, but do bear in mind that this is based entirely on my experience- individual results may vary.

Part 1: Initial Arrival in Hokkaido

I landed in Hokkaido towards the end of March, in what is Spring in the rest of Japan but decidedly still wintry up North! In fairness, this may have been partially due to coming straight from Otago's famous 2-week summer. I was met at the airport by my tutor, who immediately found transport for us from the airport to Otaru- a 90 minute train ride I probably wouldn't have figured out myself in my jetlagged state. Following check-in at the university and collecting my key card, we immediately travelled down the hill to a department store opposite the station known as Nagasakiya. This is home to a store called Don Quixote, the one stop shop for almost anything, as well as a ¥100 store, in which predictably almost everything costs a mere ¥100. Nagasakiya also houses one of the closer supermarkets in Otaru, so became increasingly familiar as the year went on.

The first week or so of my stay seemed to involved many visits to various government buildings, banks, and post offices, to fill out an endless stream of paperwork. This is something you become very used to in Japan - everything has paperwork attached to it, and due to a culture often resistant to change, things are often still done in a rather old fashioned way, with carbon paper and faxes. I was particularly surprised to find that the bank I was set up with didn't offer internet banking, but rather a book to have my account balances stamped in at an ATM. My parents informed me that this used to be the norm in New Zealand too - in about 1990!



Having eventually escaped the paperwork I was free to explore the cities of Otaru, as well as Sapporo and other small towns accessible by train. My initial thought given the amount of snow around was to go skiing, but unfortunately all nearby ski resorts had already finished for the season, bar a few several hours away. So I turned to other pursuits, including hiking some of the local mountains, while the weather began improving.

Accommodations are located directly next to the University (itself a 30 minute walk from the downtown/station area), and are small but well equipped. I must admit I was vaguely anxious about the prospect of living in a room around the size of a Unicol room, but with a kitchen and bathroom somehow squeezed in, but in reality I rarely came across difficulties. One thing to note is that Japanese-style kitchens often don't have an oven as we're used to - simply a gas burner and a tray which is used for grilling fish (although it makes toasties okay too). Depending on how far past 2-minute noodles your culinary ability ranges, you may need to invest in additional appliances to cook that taste of home. Nagasakiya is good for this, but can be a little more pricey than we're used to for appliances. For example, the cheapest rice cooker I could find ran me about \$40. If you don't feel like cooking, however. The cafeteria on campus has a selection of reliably hearty food, that'll only run a few dollars.

Part 2: Uni Life

In April, classes at the university began. University lectures at Otaru are vastly different to those at Otago. For one, students generally take on between 7-8 classes a semester, each with 1-2 lectures a piece. Additionally, a standard lecture hour lasts 90 minutes, which was a shock to the system initially! Despite this, I found myself quite engaged with the classes there. Due to the University's small size (less than 2000 students), class sizes are kept very small, and are rarely more than 20 students. They also often involve a high degree of interaction between students, and feel more like well-run tutorials than a formal lecture.

This high level of interaction can be rewarding, but occasionally difficulties arise when paired up with other students. Many Japanese students are initially shy of foreign faces (they're not particularly common!), so the first few weeks of classes can sometimes feel a little isolated, particularly if you're the only exchange student in a group. However, due to the University's size, you begin to be recognised as "Shōdaisei," and students become more friendly. Also, I can't speak highly enough of the students' average English ability. Having said that, any Japanese spoken to them (no matter how elementary) will be greatly appreciated, and may also be key to building relationships with the local students.

Part 3: Time for a Beer

All that class discussion can leave someone with the need to wet their whistle, and if that's your poison, then Japan has your back. While drinking is forbidden on campus, the Japanese culture is very much one that promotes drinking (in moderation, naturally). I previously mentioned that not being afraid to have a go at speaking Japanese no matter how basic may be the key to building relationships with local Japanese. Well I'd like to make an addendum: go out for a beer with a Japanese student and they'll become your best friend overnight. Luckily, Hokkaido is the perfect environment for this, particularly in the summertime when Beer Gardens open up in the summertime in neighbouring Sapporo. In fact, Sapporo often becomes the home for nightlife, with many Otaru students actually living



in the larger city and commuting in for University, a 30 minute journey. Susukino in particular (pictured left), is the heart of all things bizarre in Sapporo, and definitely worth a visit even if you don't drink. However, that is certainly not to say that Otaru doesn't have its own scene going on. Despite being slightly larger than Dunedin, the nearby presence of Sapporo (a city of 2 million), has meant that Otaru still has a lot of small-town charm, with some city conveniences. There's a local craft beer brewery that's a famous watering hole for locals, especially when they have their monthly "Beer Club" event. In fact, for a budding scarfie that wants to make friends, Beer Club is a

must. Around \$20 gets you beer for the whole night in a German beerhall environment, run by an actual real life German Braumeister. The ompah music and enormous steins seems all a bit surreal surrounded by Japanese culture, but you soon get used to it, especially after a few "prost/kanpai."

That said, you certainly don't need to drink away your sorrows in Otaru. One of my favourite aspects of Otaru, and particularly the University area, was its proximity to nature. This is something we often take for granted in New Zealand, but believe me; you miss it when it's not around. One thing to be aware of, however, is the massive seasonal variation in climate. I mentioned feeling cold upon arrival, with below freezing temperatures well into April. This gave way to an extraordinary summer, which bar a few typhoons (a lot less scary than they sound) was blue skies and 30 degree heat. During the summer break in particular, I travelled around Hokkaido, visiting national parks which rivalled New Zealand's supposed monopoly of natural beauty, all without getting rained on quite so much. However, when it rains it pours in Japan, and you don't want to get caught without an umbrella, especially in the spring.

This summer continues right through into September, and with an autumn season that seems to only last a couple weeks, winter hits with a force. Despite temperatures being much colder than New Zealand, and snowfall that has to be seen to be believed, I didn't feel as cold as I sometimes do in Dunedin. Part of this was due to the quality of the accommodation - our little dorm rooms heated up a treat, though gas bills could rise just as quickly. The snowfall naturally lends itself to skiing, and any snow sports fan will be spoilt for choice. The University actually runs a 3 day ski course around Christmas time, which I thoroughly recommend for anyone from beginner through to more advanced.

It's pretty difficult to sum up a whole year's experience in only 3 pages, and as I'm sure you can tell I could waffle on indefinitely. In the end though, I can't recommend the city of Otaru enough as a place for student exchange. The International Office there are really out there to look after you, and offer up some amazing opportunities that shouldn't be scoffed at. Thanks



to them, I had some amazing experiences, including staying in a small fishing village for a week to study the lifestyle, all the way through to performing in the Otaru Midsummer's festival (pictured above). My recommendations to potential students is to pack warm clothes- but don't make the mistake I did and bring all warm gear. Believe me, it gets seriously hot. Additionally, though the Japanese rail service is amazing, it can be more expensive and less reliable up in Hokkaido, especially for long-distance travel. So, if you have your NZ Driver's licence, I do recommend purchasing an International Permit from the AA before you leave. It can potentially save you a lot of cash in the long run, especially for those ski bums out there. Finally, if you do go to Otaru, make sure you make the most of your opportunities; I saw too many students live their lives at the library or the dorm. You've only got one year maximum out there, so go out an experience as much as possible.