

University of Tokyo

2017, Semester One

Bachelor of Arts, Chinese

This is likely not a surprise but my time at the University of Tokyo was a truly magical, invigorating growth experience. It has strengthened me, taught me so much, and showed me so many new perspectives that I would have never otherwise learned about. I feel so lucky to have met all the people I did whilst on exchange, as well as having had access to the high quality teaching staff at the university.

Tokyo as a city is incredible. It is the largest city in the world and it truly has everything anyone could possibly imagine all in one place. Having all of this available to me was a huge luxury. What makes it even better is that because of how considerate and welcoming the city's inhabitants are, I never once felt overwhelmed by Tokyo's huge population in such a small space. Everyone was always kind, and respected the rules and each other. It made for a relaxed, practical environment that I miss every day.

I stayed in the Komaba International Lodge during my time as an exchange student and I was very satisfied with my accommodation. Most of the exchange student classes are on the Komaba Campus of the University of Tokyo, and the lodge was only a 5 minute walk away from campus and the train station so it was very convenient. Most of the other dorms were about 30 minutes away so I felt very lucky to be so well situated. The room was excellent and my floor was full of other students, with a common area for us to all spend time together. I was particularly impressed by how cheap it was to stay in, especially considering the usual price of property in Tokyo (a lot worse than Auckland!). This could be due to the fact that we were right next to train tracks, and a train ran by every five minutes which took some getting used to during the night. The communal kitchen was very well equipped and a good place to socialise at night. My absolute favourite part of the dormitory, however, was definitely having a private bathroom.



Once rent has been paid, it was surprisingly cheap to live in Tokyo. The main reason for this is how the food hardly costs anything, without compromising the quality. The other main factor is how cheap the transportation system is. I definitely overestimated how much life in Tokyo would cost and I think it is very affordable to any Otago student who has the travel grant and saves hard over summer. The fact that the University of Tokyo semester starts in April helps, as it gives an extra month to save up! As a bonus, travelling to other countries in Asia from Japan is significantly cheaper than from New Zealand and a lot of us took this opportunity to visit places like China, South Korea and Taiwan. The only thing that I would describe as expensive is the clothing. Japan is famous for its fashion and that doesn't come cheap!

The University of Tokyo's system for taking classes differed a lot from what we do at Otago, but I actually found that it was very flexible. It allowed for people to take very specific papers and tailor their work load to how busy they wanted their exchange to be. There are even half semester papers available for those who want to be very busy for one part of the exchange and then relax for another part. Something I particularly enjoyed was the wide range of papers available that focussed on Asian history and politics; these are incredibly interesting



subjects that isn't really discussed in New Zealand and it was really eye opening for me to learn about this. There are also many Japanese language courses available at every possible level, which almost all exchange students took advantage of.

A particular highlight of Tokyo as a city is its incredible transport system. It's cheap, simple, and very well thought out. The whole city is well

connected and made it very easy to get familiar with Tokyo quickly. Even those who don't speak any Japanese found it easy to navigate because all of the boards, announcements and train updates are provided in English as well. Travelling around the whole of Japan is also very easy, with faster options like the bullet train and the cheaper bus being available multiple times a day.

For such a large city Tokyo had very clear air, as well as being astoundingly litter free. Even when it was colder, I found no difference between the air quality in Tokyo and that of Dunedin. Most of the time the weather outside was very comfortable. The only exception to this is during the peak of summertime, from July. The humidity was very difficult to live with! All the buildings and trains are well air conditioned, but the moment I went back outside the hot, heavy air would hit me again. Luckily most of the Japanese summertime is university holidays, but I would recommend that anyone going to Tokyo at that time of year be prepared with some very light clothing!

Japanese food is delicious and Tokyo offers the absolute best of it. Even now all of us exchange students often discuss how much we miss particular restaurants and dishes. It was all very reasonably priced, and we were even able to go to some Michelin Star restaurants that were priced the same as a normal Dunedin restaurant. I particularly loved that because of the sheer size of Tokyo there is plenty of other delicious cuisine available for whenever you get a craving for something you miss from home.

I was very active during my exchange and, even after 5 months, I still do not feel like I have done a fraction of what Tokyo has to offer; there are so many options for things to do. A particular favourite activity for me was the ample museums and art galleries dotted around the city (but a large cluster in my absolute favourite place- Ueno Park), featuring many famous works I would never have had access to back home. It's also good to travel to the different districts to see how distinctive there are from one and other, like the used book district, the café



district, and the famous Harajuku. Tokyo also had excellent night life, with great bars and clubs as well as the Japanese style Izakaya, where you all sit together and order a steady stream of drinks and small dishes throughout the night. The only thing I think Tokyo is possibly missing is historical buildings, as most of the temples have been destroyed by either earthquakes or war, but that simply gave us an incentive to travel the rest of Japan.

Overall, I couldn't imagine a situation where anyone who tried to enjoy Tokyo wouldn't fall in love with it. The people are kind and accommodating, and the city is so alive and full of different cultures. In terms of advice for any exchange, I would say the most important thing for anyone to do is to continually put yourself out there in the beginning. There are so many exchange students that it's not feasible to invite everyone to every outing and dinner. Often the only way to get invited is to be present when the idea comes up. It's worth it to invest the time into getting your face out there from the start, even if you're a little tired, so that you start a social 'chain reaction' of sorts. This has the added bonus of keeping you too busy to think too much about home! Everyone on exchange is doing it to put themselves out there and meet different people so don't be afraid to be yourself and show enthusiasm. Enter with a positive mind-set and it'll be better than you could possibly imagine.