

2023 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Caleb Morris

To begin this essay, I want to state that in all my years I have never learned a word so vibrant or with enough enthusiasm to fully and confidently express my recollections of the time spent in the love and care of my host families, the adventures of daily life in Kurashiki that were so abundantly provided, or the mysteries that unraveled in between every facet of life in Japan. I love the precious nuance that is left ambiguous to my mind, your traditions and values seem impossible to explain. Japan, you hold a special place in my heart, joined together only with the love and care of the people who brought me here, and the friendships I have formed.

In saying that, I want to also say “thank you.” Thank you to my family, who have dedicated themselves to supporting me in learning Japanese. Thank you, to Hideko Schackmann, Nakata-sensei and the Johnson County Community College Japan Club as a whole, who have and continue to teach me the pesky but fascinating phonetics of such a language. Patty, Jan, Fran and Charlene, thank you for your help in organizing a safe and easy flight over to Japan, as well as being great companions here in the States. Thank you to the Lemery family, who never ceased in creating an inviting home with welcoming smiles. And of course, thank you to my friend across the world, James Benson, who helped us all as a guide and as a friend. I extend my heartfelt thanks to Mayor Ito and the rest of the city council, for welcoming us with open arms. Finally, with much gratitude I thank the families of Yamada and Kawaguchi, for letting me into their lives.

Traveling to Japan with very little travel experience was quite the trek. I didn’t get any sleep during the flight. After 4 hours flying, a 3-hour layover, and 12 more hours flying, I finally arrived in Japan and was over 6000 miles away from home. After meeting us at the

airport, James took us to see the huge festival in Osaka and to a nice family ramen shop. It was the best ramen I've ever had in my life.

The next morning, I was excited to finally "start" this trip. We grabbed our bags, checked out early, and hailed a cab. The driver was nice and informative, showing us around local shrines and sights. The Kinkaku-ji temple was mesmerizing. He drove us into the countryside where a large bamboo forest encompassed the space all around us. The scenery was breathtaking.

After a long and fun journey, we said our goodbyes and boarded the train. We were anxious to finally meet our host families. I had exchanged a few emails with them before I left for Japan. After walking out of Kurashiki station and passing the "Welcome to Kurashiki" sign, I was met by an energetic crowd, all holding a banner with the same phrase, and greeted by Mayumi-san, my host mom and Yutaro. I was so anxious that I could speak neither Japanese nor English! But Mayumi and Yutaro were eager to get to know me, so I pressed on. I was excited to get to know more about them. After driving home, Mayumi-san prepared dinner while I started unpacking my bags. I explored a little around the house, talked to Yutaro, passed out gifts, met Kojo-san, and started to get to know the cats. Going to sleep that night was very difficult as I eagerly anticipated what was to come.

We got up early in the morning and Kojo went to work. Yutaro and I went to school! I wished Mayumi-san goodbye, and I lined up at the front gate of the school with Nigel and Aidan. Even though it had only been half a day, it felt like it had been forever since we last saw each other. The high school certainly had a different way of doing things than the schools I attended back home. When they showed us around the school, every student seemed to be fascinated by us. We were put in the spotlight while teaching for well

over 6 hours that day. It helped me to break out of my comfort zone and start engaging with people in Japanese. Around lunchtime, we met with the English club, playing games, and learning together. Getting to know Nino, Shouya, and the rest of the students at Kurashiki Commercial High School and the English club was such a delight and I wish we could have spent more time together.

The next day Mayumi-san and I took a trip to Himeji castle, towering above the rest of the city, perched upon a grand hill. That hill might as well have been a mountain, as Mayumi and I were exhausted by the time we finished hiking up and down the castle. We retreated to a Soumen restaurant and to Mayumi's cat café, Mikan Neko, which we would return to daily. Mayumi and Kojo worked every day to keep the cats happy. I love cats and at this time of my trip I was having withdrawals from not seeing my pets. Hanging out with almost twenty cats in one place was... heaven.

The other student ambassadors and I were met at city hall with a rousing ovation. Meeting Mayor Ito was a great honor. It was a very nice way for us to say thanks for everything and a great final welcome to Kurashiki.

The next day was big and magnificent. We got up bright and early and headed to the beach. Yotaro and I went to an inflatable water park, and we had a lot of fun. After the beach, we spared no time and went straight to Universal Studios. Hanging out with Yotaro was a blast. We rode the new Spiderman ride and the Jurassic Park waterfall. That was an intense drop! We had so much fun together, and we were very tired on the drive back home.

It was great to meet all the members of my first host family. Mayumi-san mentored me in the ways of Japanese customs. Kojo-san, who despite being such a hardworking man,

always had a gleeful smile on his face. Yotaro-san seemed to hold the same fascination with me as I did him. While we bid farewell, I was thinking of my time with them and how it had only been half of my trip thus far.

On first meeting the Kawaguchi family, it was clear that they had been eager to get to know me for a long time. Fortunately, I had been in Japan for a little while by this point and was able to give a better greeting. Upon arriving at their home, I was bombarded with love. Akane was sweet and always energetic. Yamato was silly and smart. Kanna was caring and kindhearted. Kotaro was kind and cordial.

The first morning, we headed out to the local shrine. It was such a beautiful morning. The water glistened as the koi swirled in circles in the magical pond. Kanna loved taking photos, and we had several photo ops. They are some of my most prized photos.

The next day was spent on the inland sea. I had never sailed before, and it was terrific to take the reins and help guide the ship. After a nice day on the water, we took a small trip to an olive garden, relaxed on the mountain top, and ate candied olive ice cream. The day after next, was our sightseeing trip to Hiroshima. We got up bright and early to visit Miyajima Island, where we tried some Hiroshima Okonomiyaki, which was surprisingly delicious despite my disdain for cabbage. Once we arrived in Hiroshima, it was very bittersweet. I enjoyed all my time there, but looking at the ruins and the grotesque museum of atomic destruction was frighteningly insightful. I learned a lot during the trip, and enjoyed it, but it was very sad and terrifying. I would do it all over again.

The next day, Kanna's sister came to visit, and we did many fun things together. We made some matcha tea, took a tour around an old hotel, and ate lunch together. It was a grand meal with grilled barbeque and a mysterious divine dipping sauce that tasted

amazing. Despite all this fun, the best part of the day was when we all attended the school festival. Akane and I immediately began playing some Japanese festival ring games. There was a dragon and a samurai. The dragon was impressive as it moved in a very snakish way. The ending of the festival was spectacular. As the night dimmed, Mayor Ito gave a speech to the school, and I waited to reintroduce myself. It was great to give a final farewell. The night felt magical, watching a barrage of fireworks in the sky.

The next day we headed to the katana museum, and I kept thinking of how happy my dad would be if he were beside me. He loves katanas. We headed to a candy store that took over an entire warehouse, and I felt... like a kid in a candy store. Unfortunately, the evening came, and I had my bags packed and ready to go. I kept my composure during the farewell party, but it was hard. Akane cried and I shed a tear as we walked away. The farewell party was a great way to say goodbye, but it would never have been enough.

The trip to meet the Yamadas and Kawaguchis was one I will not long forget. The opportunity to be a student ambassador was a gift. I never had any expectations for my trip to Japan, and yet they were still shattered and broken. I experienced so many new things, things I have never heard of before. Thank you to the Heart of America Japan-America Society for allowing me build lifelong memories and a lifelong admiration for Japanese culture. I hope to return again and again and again.