

2023 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Nigel Barrett

The trip to Kurashiki was my first trip to Japan. It was truly an amazing experience, and it would not have been possible without the people who helped me prepare, helped me along the way, and made the entire trip possible. To the Heart of America Japan-America Society, and the Kurashiki commission, thank you for giving me the opportunity of becoming a student ambassador and going to Japan. If I had not learned about HAJAS and what they do, I don't think I would have made it very far in finding a program on becoming a student ambassador to Japan, and probably wouldn't have gone. Hideko Schackmann, thank you for helping me learn Japanese. Patty Woods, thank you for helping us prepare for the trip, and staying positive about it and keeping up the energy throughout the COVID pandemic. Thank you, Jan Conard, for also helping us get ready for the trip, and get our presentations for Japan ready. I would also like to thank James Benson for being an amazing guide for us. You made going through Japan significantly less stressful, a lot more entertaining, and just far more enjoyable in general. To my host families, the Irie and Shibakawa family, I cannot thank you enough for letting me stay with you, as well as taking me to new places, helping me get a firsthand immersion in Japanese culture, and giving me new experiences throughout the trip.

Although this wasn't my first time out of the country, it was my first time traveling without my parents or any other adult, not including myself or Aidan, so the buildup to leaving was a bit nerve-wracking. I was afraid we might have to rush through the airport or might get lost along the way, or that one of us might accidentally miss the flight. None of that happened thankfully, and the plane ride went without a hitch, except that I got very little sleep on the flight over.

Tired and ready to move, the day we arrived in Japan we accidentally left our bags in the pickup area, realizing this after we met up with James Benson. We scurried back to go pick them up and the security guards were very nice as they let us through to get our bags. We were now on our way to begin our grand trip. With the help of James Benson, who we probably wouldn't have made it to the first station without, we slowly made our way through the bustling crowds and eventually made our way to our hotel in Kyoto. After resting up a bit, James asked us if we wanted to go to the festival happening on the streets of Kyoto and I, even in my drowsy jet-lagged state, really wanted to go. We all went to the festival, had some ramen and eventually made our way back to our hotel. The next day, we went around Kyoto to go sightseeing at places like Kinkaku-ji and the Kyoto tower and went to a food court where we had to order in Japanese. After being there for a bit, we finally met up with our first host families.

The first day of being with my host family was a little bit awkward because I didn't know how to interact with them, and I couldn't speak enough Japanese to communicate well with them. However, that didn't get in the way of us connecting. They were very kind and patient with me and did their best to make me feel comfortable in their home. I also went to the Kurashiki commercial high school, where I did some fun activities, met some of the students, and interacted with them a bit. I went to the convenience store where I got lunch with some of the students, made calligraphy with the calligraphy club, made origami with the English club, and then finally said our goodbyes.

The next few days I got to do more with my host family, like going to Bikan Chiku and Keito, attending my host brother's high school, visiting a shrine and shopping mall, and doing fun activities at home like simply just watching TV while relaxing in the living room. My host family took me to different restaurants and had me try different kinds of food. The day I went to Keito's high school, I also went to the welcoming ceremony from Mayor Ito, but before that, I

had a bit of a surprise. When Hideaki-san, my host father, and I went to get lunch, where I got gyudon which was very good, I met up with the person I was going to host in Kansas City. After that meeting, we met up again when we went to the mayor's welcoming and farewell ceremony for the Kansas City and Kurashiki delegates. The next few days after that were filled with some more sightseeing, like going into the mountains, and shopping. Finally, it was the last day; there may have been a few tears shed.

On the first day of meeting my second host family, the Shirakawa's, my host mother, Keiko-san and Riki came to pick me up. I was immediately asked if I wanted to go to the ocean, which I could not and would not refuse. After dinner, Riki, and Keiko-san and I all went to the beach nearby where Riki and I messed around in the sand and went looking for some stones to skip. The next day I went shopping with Oba-chan, swimming after crossing the Seto bridge, and went to get udon noodles from what looked like a short washbasin. After lunch, we went to a shrine on the top of a mountain with a beautiful view. Afterwards I met Cassie, a lovely Greek lady who was raised in Australia and taught English and had 3 cats.

After that, Aidan and Caleb and I went on a bus tour. We went to a place where we made Daruma, had a yacht ride, and got ice cream at an olive garden. The next day I went to Rio's, my host sister's, Judo practice, octopus fishing with Rio and Ryutaro, my second oldest host brother, and took part in a second Judo practice session with Rio. When we went to Hiroshima and Miyajima, we ate a lot of different foods such as mussels. Despite not liking mussels, even I had to admit they were delicious. Keiko-san and Riki took me to some tourist places before taking Rio, Ryutaro and me out to a log cabin where we had barbeque and lit some fireworks before going to sleep tired and happy. In the evening after coming back from the log cabin, I had a farewell party with lots of family members from the Shirakawa family during which we ate a lot of food and looked through some old photobooks of the family. The day after, I went to do some

shopping and sightseeing with Oba-chan and slowly became better at communicating in Japanese as well as learning a bit more about Japanese culture and traditions. Finally, we went to the farewell party for everyone, where we all had to say our goodbyes, and there definitely were plenty of tears that came with it.

Afterwards, Aidan, Caleb and I went and stayed in the hotel before we had to fly out. We went to a castle in Osaka and tried to go to the Pokémon store, which was jam packed and had an estimated 90-minute line for checkout. Finally, we went to the airport where we parted ways with James, who had been an amazing guide and translator and who had made things extremely fun and entertaining.

Going to Japan as a student ambassador for the Heart of America Japan-America Society was impactful, wonderful, exciting, and just downright amazing. Because I was able to get the opportunity to do this, I learned so much about Japanese culture, traditions, foods, and so much more. I was able to live the life of someone in Japan. There aren't enough words in the world to say how happy I was when learning new things, being more immersed in the culture, and finding different things here and there I had never heard of. It also was a very humbling experience because the people of Japan are very respectful and courteous, and cared about themselves as well as the people around them. The experience I had was once in a lifetime. If given the opportunity, it would not matter how much time and effort it would take for me to repeat this experience because I would do it again and again. I can't say it enough, but thank you for this opportunity and experience.