

Wonder and Wisdom

Janis Bremer, Principal at Jessieville Middle School, Chaperone

Stepping off a plane on the other side of the world was just the beginning of a life-changing experience for ten Garland County senior high students. Thanks to the generosity of many and the efforts of the Hot Springs Sister City Foundation, eight girls and two boys represented our community in the city of Hanamaki, Japan.



The wonder of a different language, driving on the “wrong” side of the road, visiting a Zen Temple, and meeting hundreds of Japanese students was almost overwhelming at first for our kids. But very quickly the hospitality and consideration of the Japanese people replaced any nervousness with absolute excitement about all the new experiences. Our students visited seven junior high and high schools where they loved participating in origami, judo, calligraphy, and the ancient martial art of kendo taught to them by the Japanese students. One of the most wonder-filled moments came at the full-school assembly where our students entered as celebrities to music from the band and took the center stage as stars for the day. The formal tea ceremony gave the students another insight into the culture of Japan as students followed the ancient ritual of the Japanese tea ceremony.

However, despite all the wonder, the real life-learning came through our students’ interaction with the students and adults of Hanamaki. Experiencing life with their host families was phenomenal -- from eating Japanese food, using “squatty potties,” watching Japanese television, and communicating in another language, our students learned much about the Japanese way of thoughtfulness, giving, and kindness. They talked non-stop about how “nice” the Japanese were and saw, even in the schools, the Japanese openness to making new friends and showing generosity to their guests. The wisdom they gained from their experiences will change their way of looking at the world for the rest of their lives. Each of our students expressed a strong desire to share what they experienced with their friends and families at home and to return to the land of Japan to learn more from a people who have much to teach.

Whitney Houston, Fried Chicken, and Birthday Candles: How My Trip to Japan Will Stay With Me Forever

Jill Tyler, Jessieville High School

Having the opportunity to go to Hanamaki is something that I will always be grateful for and never forget. This trip has had such an impact on my life, and I made memories that will stay with me forever. There are three main words that I can associate with my three fondest memories: Whitney Houston, fried chicken, and birthday candles. While this may seem odd for a trip to Japan, I will always associate these things with my stay in Hanamaki.



From the start, I knew that the language barrier was going to be a challenge. My host father didn't speak any English, my host sisters were just learning some English at school, and my host mother knew a select few words and phrases. But, one area where we could all connect was music. One morning, while my mother was driving me to the International Center, I was looking through her American music. And then, I saw it: Whitney Houston's Greatest Hits. When I pointed this out to her, she said "You know Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown?" After I told her yes, she put the CD in the car, and we sang "I Will Always Love You" together while driving through the streets of Hanamaki. After this occurred, Whitney Houston's Greatest Hits ALWAYS played in the car on our rides together. The other touching Whitney Houston moment was after my host mother and sisters had picked me up for the day and we were on our way home. The sun was setting, the windows were rolled down to let the breeze in, and all was well. The next song that came on was "Jesus Loves Me." Being a Christian, it had been different for me not to see a steeple on the horizon when we drove anywhere, and I had been feeling a little down about it. I knew that my family was Buddhist, but to my astonishment, they were all humming along to the song. I asked, "Do you know what this means?" in my best broken English/charades language that I had been using all week. They asked me to explain. I nodded my head and said, "Yes." Then, I made a cross with my fingers and said, "Jesus." Next, I crossed my arms over my chest, and sang, "Loves Me." I saw the recognition of my words on their faces. At first, it was quiet, but then when the chorus came in, I heard, "Yes, Jesus Loves Me..." This was truly one of the most spiritually gratifying moments in my life. To think that I had made an impression of my faith upon my host family, even with a simple song, filled me with joy.

Next, we have the memories of the many family dinners I spent cross-legged and on the floor with my host family. The food was like nothing I had experienced before. But, what was even better and more memorable was our conversations. This might sound contradictory seeing as how we could

barely communicate, but it's fascinating what messages we can get across with: an electronic translator, Japanese to English dictionary, our facial expressions, and lots of charades and hand gestures. My most memorable dinner was when I made my box macaroni and cheese for them. This was also the night that my host mom was going to make me fried chicken! If not for the chopsticks, you would have thought I was back in Arkansas! Before I went to Japan, I read in our do's and do not's manual that you were not to take food from the serving dish with the side of the chopsticks that you put in your mouth. So, when I began to reach for the fried chicken, I began to rather clumsily turn my chopsticks around. Immediately, my family stopped me and told me not to bother with that. When I questioned them to make sure it was okay, my host mother said to me, "You are family," and the father and sisters chimed in with "family." This was probably the most touching gesture that anyone had given me. In less than a week, they had considered me part of their family. I smiled my biggest smile, and tried to take a big bite of the fried chicken without crying.

When I found out the dates for our trip, I was ecstatic that I would be turning sixteen while in Japan. It would be a birthday that I would never forget. After visiting an elementary school where the kids rode unicycles for us, I was already happy. When they sang "Happy Birthday" to me in English, I thought I was going to die! They were so adorable. Then, when I found out that we would be in the festival that night, I was over the moon. The festival was amazing with all of the people in their unique robes carrying their ornate shrines. Getting to carry a flag in the parade wasn't half-bad either, considering we were the first foreigners EVER to be in the parade! After the sun had long set and my feet were killing me, I made the walk up to the International Center to meet my host mom. While I had been told that my family was going to do something for my birthday, not much had been mentioned since. And the week had been so busy that I hadn't been expecting much. But, when I got home, some odd happenings began to catch my attention. First, they asked if they could borrow my video camera. I gave it to them without question. Next, they led me to the table, had me sit down, then leave and turn the lights off and shut the dividing door. So there I am, sitting alone and in the dark for about five minutes. Then, I see something catch fire in the kitchen. By this point, I didn't know what to expect. But suddenly, the door slid open, and there's my dad with the video camera, my sisters singing and carrying wrapped gifts, and my mom carrying in a gorgeous chocolate cake adorned with strawberries and sparkler candles. They were throwing me a birthday party! The cake was divine and I will probably never have a better chocolate cake for as long as I live. Then, it was time for presents. All week, I had talked to my host mom about going shopping and trying to find a Yukata cheap for myself. A Yukata is a summer Kimono, and I needed to get one at a bargain so I could afford to buy one for both my sister and myself. The first gift was a beautiful and cute set of gold hoop earrings with pink flowers on them from my little sister. My older sister got me an adorable white shirt, and lastly, my parents got me...a Yukata! Imagine the look on my face when I opened the wrapping paper to find the bright yellow bow! I did start tearing up then. The thing took my breath away. It was black with pink, yellow, and purple flowers, and a bright yellow obi and bow. They even bought me shoes to match! I got to wear my outfit

the next day on the second night of the festival. It's safe to say that the expectations I had for my sixteenth birthday were pretty much blown out of the water.

Hopefully these brief snapshots of my trip can relate to you how much I truly treasured the experience. I made relationships with people that will stay in my heart forever. I truly want to thank all of those who made it possible for me and the other nine students in our delegation to take this trip together. We not only made lasting friendships and memories with those in Japan, but with each other. So what key things did this trip teach me? It taught me that I can have an influence on the lives of others, that if others are important enough to me, so can they, and that I can find family in the places where I least expect it. Again, thank you so much, and know that whenever I hear the words, "Whitney Houston," "fried chicken," or "birthday candles," that I am thinking of the greatest trip of my young life.

A Magical Week

Julia Ross, Lake Hamilton High School

Getting off of the plane at Narita was in a way, like stepping into a new world. I had prepared for the trip to Japan as much as I could have. I had studied the language, mastered using chopsticks, familiarized myself with the food, and learned more about Japanese rock music than most Americans would ever care to know, but despite all that knowledge, it was still strange to see all



the signs written in Japanese, Ito En green tea in the vending machines, and to be counting out yen instead of dollars. I realized as I looked around and took in the new atmosphere, that no matter how much I studied, how much sushi I ate, and how many Japanese Twitter and blog posts I read, nothing could ever begin to truly begin to exemplify how delightfully different Japan was.

On the first day, I didn't get jet-lagged. I didn't even get homesick, not for a second. As we headed towards Yasawa Junior High Monday morning, my eyes were glued to the bus windows, taking in the scenery and perfecting my Japanese speed reading. The scenery was comfortably familiar to that of Arkansas, although it had a definite Japanese quality to it, like something from a Miyazaki movie. As far as the speed reading goes, I was honestly surprised with how much I knew.

Japanese school was quite honestly one of the biggest culture shocks for me. As an American, I'm used to riding the bus to school, chewing gum in class, and a noise level far above anything I heard

there. I'm used to cliques, and nobody wearing the same outfit. In Japan, they wear uniforms, there are no cliques, and everyone rides their bikes. Kids express themselves in the form of pencil bags and pens. They respect their teachers and no one talks back. In my opinion, it makes for a much better learning environment, although I know that if they tried putting Japanese school rules in American public schools, there would be an open revolt.

Now, if I was to make a top ten list of what I enjoyed most about Japan, talking with the students would definitely be up in the top 3. We shared our knowledge of music, sports, movies, anime, hobbies, pets, cell phones, Hello Kitty, and everything else we could say with the language barrier and a time limit in the way. They showed me purikura pictures, bento lunches, and more cute phone charms than I knew existed. I was ecstatic to find friends that shared the same passion for Lady Gaga, Johnny Depp, and Miyavi. Even though my Japanese wasn't perfect, and neither was their English, teenagers are teenagers, and we can have fun in any language.

As much fun as I had with the students, the greatest time I had in Hanamaki was when I was spending time with my host family. At first, I was insanely nervous. My host mother, Mrs. Sasaki, spoke only a few words of English, so for the first hour or so of my stay there, I had to rely almost entirely on my Japanese. Fortunately, Juri, my host sister came home from school, and she spoke some English, and had a translator on her phone. At first, it was a bit awkward, as I was tired, culture-shocked, and not fluent in Japanese, but pretty soon we were getting to know each other like best friends, like sisters. On my first night at their home, my host dad took me and Juri to the nearby supermarket. They laughed at me gazing around, wide eyed in wonder at how different everything was. We bought that night's dinner, went home, and ate in the living room in front of the TV. We talked about Dragon Ball, One Piece, Japanese music, and the Japanese soccer team (I was so glad I had watched the World Cup). Dinner time seemed to be the main time for family chatting. Juri and Kazuho, my host brother, would go upstairs to study for a while, and they sometimes had to go back to the school for team practices. Juri was on the Judo team, and Kazuho played volleyball. As the week went by, the fun continued. Kazuho taught me how to play Wii Tennis. Juri showed me her amazing collection of Japanese fashion magazines, as she wants to be a model and I want to be a fashion designer. We watched weird game shows and sitcoms. I helped her study for an English test. By the end of the week, the Sasaki family was like my second family.

Then, there was the festival. The Hanamaki Festival to me was a whirlwind of excitement, color, and all around happiness. I was swept into help carry three portable shrines, which were very heavy, but the atmosphere of the festival made them fun to carry. I bought Ramune from one of the many street vendors. I got fans, good luck charms, and candy from other groups of shrine-carriers. At one point I saw a girl from Hanamaki Minami High School whom I had talked to earlier that day. She jumped up and waved at me, and I happily jumped and waved back.

But alas, all good things must come to an end, although my trip went out with a bang. On Saturday, I went to Morioka, the biggest city in Iwate. Juri and I scavenged through the marvelous three story thrift shop, ate at a conveyer belt sushi restaurant, shopped and took purikura pictures at the humongous mall, and belted out our favorite songs at a karaoke bar. It was possibly the most fun I've ever had. That night, we threw a yakiniku (Japanese barbeque) party at our house. Taylor Hornsby and her host family came, along with several neighborhood friends, one being an English teacher from the JET program, so Taylor and I had someone to translate for us. We ate amazing food, laughed about things that had happened that week, like my reaction to natto (fermented soy beans). We talked about the festival, the schools, the culture differences between Japan and America. It was wonderful. However, eventually, our yakiniku festival had to end, everyone else had to go home, and I had to pack, but I stayed up as late as I could manage just to have a few more hours of sitting and talking with my host family. We exchanged gifts, and it finally struck me that I really had to leave.

The train station the next morning was one big cry-fest. I tried to hold in the tears as long as I could, but as I hugged my host family good bye, I found holding it in to be hopeless. I think that I even saw my host grandparents cry at my departure, and I realized what an impact that I had made. As I look back on that week in Hanamaki, I realize that there's only one word I can use to describe my experience, "magical." I found that word in everything from the landscape, to the festival, to my interactions with high school and junior high school kids. Hanamaki has a kind of magic to it that is probably impossible to find or recreate anywhere else.

My Memories of Nippon

Cassie Sheets, Lake Hamilton High School

In my brief experience in the land of Japan, I gathered many memories that will stick in my mind forever. It was unforgettable in every way, and it has inspired me to pursue ways of returning back to that wonderful country. In many ways, I have changed due to the experiences I collected on this adventure. I now appreciate their culture in a far deeper sense than before, when I was just a researcher. Looking back, I can hardly believe that exhilarating experience was a little over a month ago. I miss it dearly: the land, its culture, and the friends I made while traveling there; though I have to say that I miss my host family most of all. Through the people that I now consider dear to me, I had the chance to become more acquainted with the customs and everyday life that occur on a daily basis in Japan. As



a whole, these factors gave me the most unforgettable time that I doubt any other traveler will ever get to enjoy.

Everything about this trip amazed me. The people were hospitable, the land was clean, and the food was not only good, but healthy in many respects. Recalling these things makes my heart heavy that I had to leave such a wonderful paradise; not only in everyday living did I feel comfortable, but in the customs as well. One of the moments that I will never forget is visiting one of the classrooms during our tour of the Agricultural school. Unfortunately, I have no recollection of what the class subject was, but I do recall the subject of which they were speaking. The students were reading a text that was explaining the value of food. All I remember is one line, which I don't think I'll ever forget: "We must honor the sacrifice of an animal's life to become our life's source." These wise words correspond greatly with my own beliefs, and I was grateful in that moment to find a culture who felt the same. With this memory, I felt like I belonged in the Japanese community more than ever. Beliefs are always clashing in America, which has also been a weak spot for my involvement in our communities. But in Japan, religious beliefs are not a priority, which put my mind at ease. Among the top religions of Japanese culture, one is not required to affiliate oneself with any denomination. Many times a religion is based off of a legend or myth, or in simpler terms, whatever belief that fits a person best. This topic being one of the main things that I will always appreciate about the Japanese culture, it will also be part of the driving force for my return.

And how I wish I could return, indeed! The memoirs of my time with my host family will always stick with me. I have been assured many times that I am welcome back into their home. I cannot even differentiate which person of my new family that I miss the most! These amazing people will always be in heart and mind for the memories we shared and the bond we built. Even though I was a complete stranger; in fact, even of a different race, they took me in as if I was one of their own. Looking back, I wish that I had been able to spend more time with them; the one week living as a part of their family was not nearly enough! They did everything in their power to make sure I had the best time I could while living with them. They were patient when we had trouble communicating; they made full blown home-style meals, even for breakfast; they helped me with my shopping for gifts and such -- even though it is tiresome on the both of us -- and they helped me with pictures and video so I could remember our time together more clearly when I returned to the States. They did so much, even more than I mentioned in this paper, to make me feel like family. They are so dear to me and I hope one day that I will be able to see them again.

While filled with these memories, my head and heart are both corresponding with the reasoning of my eventual return to Japan. It has now become my official dream to become accomplished enough -- both in school and life -- for me to go back to the place that now feels like a second home to me. For now, though, I thank the Sister City Foundation and everyone who has helped me embark on this journey. Thanks to these people, I have fulfilled a dream that I thought would never come to pass in

my lifetime. I will always be deeply grateful for this life-altering accomplishment that has steered my way to the path of my life.

A Life Changing Experience

Simon Jordan, Hot Springs High School

Strict and conservative are the first words that pop into most people's heads when they think about Japanese culture. Well, my host family was the complete opposite. I was very lucky to be with a family that showed many characteristics of my family. The family I stayed with was very outgoing, caring, and crazy, and I would not have liked it any other way. The Takahashi family made the trip a life changing experience.



When we first landed I felt like kissing the ground. The 14-hour flight was probably the only part in the trip that was not exciting. When we got on the bullet train that was the first time it hit me that I was definitely not in Hot Springs, Arkansas anymore. The man next to me pulled a bottle of wine and fish heads out of his bag and started to have a snack. I tried not to stare, but it was totally different from what I was used to. After we arrived at our destination we quickly hopped off the train to meet our bus. Soon after we arrived at the hotel, gifts were already starting to be given to us. Our first happi coats were waiting in the lobby. We soon found our beds and introduced ourselves to them. I slept for a total of 3 hours. Excitement kept me awake. In the morning the boys were the first to wake up and get ready. Who would have thought? That's when our first morning in Hanamaki, Japan started.

We met our host families Monday afternoon after playing basketball and volleyball for several hours. We were sweaty and we all looked like a hot mess. Great first impression. We had a pretty quiet drive home, but the awkward silence soon ended after playing Wii with the family. It was a great way to break down the wall of nervousness. After that night we were closer than ever.

Thursday was the day of the parade. Thousands of people dressed up in happi coats and smiles definitely made me feel welcomed and like a Japanese teenager. My host father and brother happened to be deer dancers, which are big cultural figures in Hanamaki. It just so happens that they asked me to be the first foreigner to participate in their skit. This is a huge honor. That was probably one of the greatest events in my life.

Saturday we got to spend the entire day with our family. We went out of town to a big mall. That was a blast. Toshiki and I hung out like best buds on a regular Saturday, taking pictures and having fun. At the mall, I bought a pair of limited edition tennis shoes and a couple of T-shirts. After the mall, we went to an arcade and sports room. We played basketball and badminton, but sadly I lost. We went home and spent the night talking and watching television. That was my last night, so I packed up and prepared myself for a sad departure.

This trip was a life changing experience and I am definitely coming back. It was the most fun I have ever had. Everybody has to come to Hanamaki, Japan at least once in their lifetime. It will change their life.

Student Exchange

Emily Hollansworth, Fountain Lake High School

A trip of a lifetime; an opportunity like no other; an experience I am sure to never forget. The memories and friendships made during my time in Japan are something I will treasure and carry with me for the rest of my life. It was such a privilege and honor to be a part of the student delegation for the 2010 Sister City Exchange Trip to Hanamaki, Japan.

During my trip to Japan, I was not only able to make new friendships but reconnect old friendships as well. In January 2010, a delegation from Hanamaki traveled to Hot Springs. My family hosted a 14 year-old girl named Himeka. While she was here, we developed a very strong friendship. As she departed I feared I would never get to see her again. I was wrong. The 2010 September student exchange trip allowed me and Himeka to reconnect and continue our friendship right where it left off. Our friendship is something that will never die. Our memories together are too strong to let distance on the globe tear us apart. Himeka and I continually mail packages back and forth and contact each other via email. I am so thankful to have such a lifelong friendship with Himeka.

While in Japan, I was privileged enough to stay with Himeka and her family. The Sasaki family lives in a very small house in the countryside. The house has no air conditioning and is equipped with traditional Japanese plumbing and bathroom facilities. I found this a challenging adjustment compared to the modern facilities that are more commonly found in my home country. Some may say my circumstances were extreme and a bit of a disappointment; I must disagree. I feel that I received an inimitable cultural experience. While staying with the Sasaki family I began to realize how blessed I



was to live in the home I do. I was able to appreciate the small things in life that are so easily taken for granted. My experience in the Sasaki's home has helped develop me into the person I am today.

My experience in Japan has expanded my knowledge of the many different cultures and lifestyles surrounding me. Cultural exchange has become a strong interest of mine; I know that this interest will greatly affect the career decision I make in the future. My experience in Japan will also urge employers hire me as their employee because of my exposure to diversity through my exchange trip. I am so privileged to have experienced at trip that is unique and life altering.

I am so thankful to my God and the people He placed in my path for making this trip a possibility. It was such an honor to be a part of the 2010 Sister City student delegation. The fond memories that I received during our trip will always stay close to my heart. Thank you again for the trip of a lifetime! I pray that many students in the future have the possibility to participate in the unique opportunity that I was fortunate enough to experience.

Asian Studies

Taylor Hornsby

In September 2010, I along with ten other students and our chaperones departed from little Rock and traveled over four thousand miles to Hanamaki, Japan. The fourteen-hour flight ended up to be well worth it.

When inside the Tokyo Narita Airport, I was amazed by how quiet it was for the amount of people there. It was also very clean; in fact, I did not see a single piece of litter during the entire trip. We boarded the bullet train and within three hours, we were finally in Hanamaki! For the first night, we stayed in the Grand Ciel Hotel. When we were checking in, we received the first of many gifts, a happi coat of our choice. The next morning, we woke up early and helped ourselves to a buffet breakfast. Afterwards we headed to the first of many schools we would visit.

That evening, we finally got to meet our host families. I stayed with the Sato family. Mitski, the oldest of three children, was my host student. She was 15 years old. Her family consisted of a mom - whose name I cannot spell; a dad – Manabu; a 9-year-old brother Shuya; and a 12-year-old sister, Akiha. They also had a cat. My family did not speak English very well, but we were still able to communicate through what seemed like a mixture of Pictionary and charades. During my stay there, I



used Facebook to show them pictures of my friends and family and YouTube to introduce them to my favorite artist.

On Tuesday evening, the opening ceremony was held at this very nice hotel. It was definitely a highlight of my experience. We ate amazing food; the mayor gave a speech; a group of girls -- one of them being my "sister"-- performed a jump rope routine; and the Deer Dancers performed their dance and Simon held a part as the scarecrow. A few of us went on the stage and asked our "trivia" questions, then we all were presented with blue happi coats that had our names and Hot Springs printed on them. Once all of that was finished, we took I don't know how many pictures! My face actually hurt from smiling so much. During that time I met Koga Ichihara and Kazuki Owaga whom I have become good friends with.

Throughout the week we continued visiting schools and trying new foods; also, we took part in a Soba eating contest, visited some temples and interacted with other students. Friday night, the Hanamaki Festival was here! This was my favorite part of the trip. At the beginning of the festival I carried the Hanamaki flag and chanted "let's go" in Japanese. Jill, Ashley and I also helped carry three different shrines throughout the festival, they were very heavy and my shoulder hurt for days afterwards. When we were not carrying shrines, the three of us along with Koga watched the parade, collected wooden necklaces, tried fish jerky and took many pictures. Koga spoke English very well and him and his mom, Kieto taught us how to say words such as "stoplight" in Japanese.

Saturday, I spent the day with my host family. Since my parents train racehorses, my family drove two and a half hours so I could watch live Japanese horse racing. Afterwards, they took me shopping at this huge mall, and then we headed back to Hanamaki. Once we were back, we hung out at a "group house" with a group of people whom were carrying shrines later that night in the festival. We did not stay due to the rain; instead, we went to Julia's host family's house for a cookout. There were a lot of people there and the food was so good.

When it was time to depart on Sunday I was not ready to go. I think almost everyone was in tears. I learned so much from the people there. Everyone I met was very humble and kind. I wish to go back one day. Before the trip I was unsure what I wanted to study in college, but now I have decided on international relations with a minor in Asian studies. To this day I still keep in contact with my host family, Koga and his family and Kazuki through the use of mail, facebook and a few phone calls. I will never forget this trip and the people I met.

My Japan Experience

Taylor Werst, Lake Hamilton High School

The life changing experience I had in Japan was the whole trip!! No one in my family has done something like this except me. I have the great ability now to tell everyone about another culture and how they live day by day. I get to tell everyone about all the friends I've made and all the fascinating things I got to do.

But the one thing that really changed my point of view was how nice and caring the Japanese were. They would take the time no matter how long it took to help you out in any way they could. For example, my host family wanted to take me out to dinner, but they didn't know what I liked to eat and what I didn't. So they went through all the trouble to translate the options I had and the food variety. This doesn't sound like much, but it takes a lot to communicate even with translators. They took me out to this self-cook restaurant to try different kinds of meat that they had to offer. It was delicious to say the least. They would keep offering me food and appetizers to make sure I had plenty to eat. Then to make the night even more fun they took me out bowling! It was a ton of fun even though I didn't bowl well that day. We even had a friendly game of pool afterwards.

One of the nicest things they did was take me to see the ocean!! It was the first time I have ever seen it, and I got to have the great experience in Japan. They drove 2 hours out of their way to show me the great sea. They would even pull over to the side of the road to let me get a picture of something. That just is a little bit of what they did for me.

Even when it came to food when we were at the festival, they would offer me anything. The same thing with the games they would let me try anything I wanted, or they would just offer me the chance to play. My host brother would always offer to play his games with me; it was a great time playing his games with him. These are all just examples that really surprised me, mostly because it was all at their expense. On the last day I had with them, they wanted to buy me one gift, and to tell me this they called our translator to tell me to make the gift expensive, cause I only get one. So they bought me these brand new shoes that reflect the light at night so that a runner can be seen. They were around 180 dollars in American. So all this just goes to show how the Japanese are so nice to each other and to Americans. They are the nicest people I have ever met, and I would love to go back to see them all again one of these days.



My Trip of a Lifetime

Ashley Lewis, Lake Hamilton High School

Being chosen to be one of the students to go to Hanamaki, Japan was the most exciting thing to have ever happened to me. On September 4, 2010, I left from Hot Springs travel to Little Rock airport and board the puddle jumper plane to Dallas, TX. When we arrived at 4:58 I was full of butterflies; this was the first step to my journey to Japan. I checked a bag and one carry-on, and had



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plenty of room still weighing at 33 pounds. We had a 2-hour wait till the plane took off, so the other students and I wandered in groups, safety first ☺, around the airport looking at shops and getting last-minute gifts. Finally the plane was boarding, and we were leaving Arkansas. The plane was small because it was just a 45-minute flight to Dallas; I was seated next to a woman headed to a nurse conference. Sadly I got the window seat; this being the first flight for me, I was very nervous. When we began to take off into the sky this feeling like everything in me was going up and it made me laugh even though I was very nervous, but it was overall very interesting and calm.

When we arrived to the airport we were welcomed with another lengthy layover, so we decided to get some food. Good thing...great food...bad thing....big prices, but I got a single deli sandwich for 7.99...yea, scary. We took lots of pictures of us and the plane out the window and just chilled for a bit. Then the plane began to board, this plane bigger and more comfortable for all of us. I sat next to one of the delegates Julia Ross, and as soon as I sat down I picked up the remote for the personal screen. Whenever I sat it back down I put it in the wrong way and umm...kind of broke it. So future notice don't put it in backwards; better yet, don't touch it ha-ha. The plane trip was 12-13 hrs...ughh...but I was going to Japan, so it's all good. Over 6000 miles to go, but we had another delay, something up with the plane. In the end it was paperwork, can you believe that. The plane taking off was a bit louder but pretty much the same feel and, yay, once again I had the window seat. We went left, and left, and another left, and up, and up, and left, and left, and down, and more down, and left. I watched almost all the movies, fell asleep 9 times. Watched the mountains go from dry to snowy, watched flat land elevate to mountain ranges. It. Was. Beautiful. The food was good too; my favorite was the pizza we had before we landed, yum yum. Last bit of American food for awhile...cherish it☺.

Narita Airport, let's just say just because we were gawking at the Asians, they were not the strange people in this scenario. We were handed tickets and train passes and more passes and cards. Pulling suitcases, flying through the place, we were on the move. It was deathly hot, crowded and loud, but in the mass of all of it I found it beautiful. We rode 3-4 trains that were not too long, but the last one was 3 hours, better than 13 anyday. Ichiro Fudai was our guide throughout the whole thing. He was my lifesaver; I focused on him the entire time. On the last train he gave us a little kind of party bag, with lots of little Japanese sweets. We got to Hanamaki Station around 9-ish, and waiting for us was delegate Cassie Sheets' host family and maybe one other. They welcomed us and were wearing Arkansas shirts that were gifts from previous delegations.

They had a bus for us to be driven to the hotel we were staying at the first night, ahhh so cold, very welcoming and comfy. When we got to the hotel Mr. Fudai had happi coats as gifts for us from the mayor, I think. I chose a cool red and black one, very traditional; we were given one roommate and a key. I was roomed with Cassie, we both headed to the room to get ready for bed. The rooms were not much different from an ordinary American hotel to me, but the bathroom was amazing. They have these awesome toilets that clean you, but only if you want it to, I didn't. The bathtubs were also very cool, and deep. So we got ready for bed and sorted out our host family gifts, and went to sleep.

Over the time span of eight days we went everywhere that we could go in a day, every day. We went to so many schools, from junior high to high school and elementary. We played basketball with the junior high girls, letting them know that not all tall people can play basketball. We went to English classes, played word games and read aloud, and ate lunch with the students. We learned how to write our name in calligraphy from the Hanamaki Minami High School calligraphy club. We had a sample of judo and kendo, some of the delegates being Jill, Cassie, Julia, Taylor W., and Simon got to throw one of the champions on the floor, with help of course. The students were thrilled to have us as we were to be there and share memories with them. One of the schools did unicycling; they were from either kindergarten or first grade to sixth grade. The special thing was that it wasn't taught to them by coaches or teachers, but by the older students themselves. It was a sight to see this, the way they moved with such grace. I enjoyed every minute of it.

The temples were my favorite, because even though I don't practice their religions, I thought the beauty of their pieces were so extraordinary; every room amazed me. The care they brought for their archetypes was phenomenal. The gold and jade were so precious. We were not allowed to have cameras, which was a downer to me because words cannot express the beauty of the statues. We went to shrines, rang bells, cleansed ourselves, but I did not pray and it did not offend them whatsoever. After the temples we went to this traditional Japanese restaurant and had the best meal ever. My favorite was the dumplings soup and rice, yummy, it was very beautiful to be there.

Another memorable event was the soba eating contest...the only thing I can say is that I will never have another soba noodle. They gave you a bib and you had bowls with flavoring stuff. The

basic aspect of the game was you had to eat as many noodles as you could, counting the bowls with matches. So I ate 31, bad choice, but the winners were, Julia with I think 42 or 43, and one of our guides, a very nice man who ate like 47.

We also had a boat tour which, once again, was too beautiful for words. The fish were humongous and awesome, and the breeze felt great. We saw shrines inside the mountain, and saw other boats. We went to this mountain and you bought wish tokens for 100 yen which was like \$1, and you got five. So you threw them at this mountain that had a hole in it. If you got one in you could make a wish. On the way back to the dock our boat lady, who was the only female boat person, sang us this song. At first I didn't know what to do, but then it really went with the scenery and was beyond relaxing. I absolutely loved it, everything.

The Chibas were my host family, Dad, Mom, Miki, Mizuki, and Midori. Sadly I don't remember the parents name because I never had to call their name for anything. Miki was my host student. She was very sweet, a junior in high school, who was the manager for her school's track team. Midori didn't speak much English, so we didn't talk much. Mizuki was 9 yrs old and was the cutest little boy ever. We got along well, even though he didn't speak English. The parents were so sweet and generous. I always had orange juice because that's what I said I wanted the first day, so every day breakfast and dinner I had orange juice, orange flavored water, candy. It was the funniest thing to me, but I appreciated it more than anything. My room was sort of the traditional Japanese room but slightly Americanized, I had AC, and a bed, and normal toilets. I got lucky, I had a TV in my room that I didn't use but once. Mizuki introduced me to Usavich which is this show with episodes that are five minutes each, and he had season sets. The show was the funniest thing I have ever seen, it was a silent show so I didn't have to worry about understanding it. I will always have a special place for my family in my heart, because they were involved in making my trip the best ever.

The day we left my family and I didn't cry, but I could tell that the mother was a little teary 😊. We had had a great time and it seemed to end so short with them, but the week happily did not fly by, but lasted and I cherished every moment of it happily.

Thank you, if you are a student picked to go on this trip you may try to prepare for what you will experience but when you finally do experience this it will blow your mind how this culture works and the way the people live. It will change the way you think about your life and how you live. This was the best thing that I could have ever been a part of, and I have so many people to thank for making my dream come true. Just keep this in your mind during the trip..."Onward!!" -- Mrs. Janis Bremer.

I'll Never Forget Hanamaki

Paige Morphew, Hot Springs High School

During my time in Japan I and most of the other delegation experienced many different things from the atmosphere to the emotions of the people. There are many things that I've taken from this trip, but the one thing I'll never forget is how openminded the people are.



Many of our students in the United States wouldn't ever think of being so open as to host a child they had never met, let alone make them feel so welcome in their schools. Yui, my host sister, was so amazing; going there, you worry about things like living with someone you don't know who doesn't even speak your language. But in Japan, it felt like a second home. Even the kids and adults we didn't know, but made some sort of contacts which were beyond polite. In every school that the delegation visited, we were greeted with smiles.

Tuesday when we visited the high school, the student council held a massive assembly welcoming us with the band and a question-answer segment, which blew my mind. All of the students in every high school where so interested in us and our culture. To see their faces light up when we said anything in English or even when we tried to speak Japanese, it just made everything that was happening really special.

Friday when they allowed us to partake in the harvest festival, it was the first time any foreigners had taken part in this traditional ceremony; this was in fact a great honor. I would like to think that the reason we were asked to take part in the festival was because for them, having us was an honor all its own.

In every high school, we visited the principal, would talk to us about his students making their way to the United States in January; hearing this made it clear that everyone wanted to connect to the United States; they all wanted to bridge the gap that has kept us apart. This is the way everyone should think in the U.S., but so few do. With the effort of all of Hanamaki, I can only hope that the gap will be bridged.

Seeing all of this in everyone in Hanamaki has made me want to go back and help bridge the gap that simple-minded people have made. From a young age we Americans are pushed into the concept that America is the greatest culture, but in Japan the students are very well rounded; they can see that Japan isn't the only country in the world. They have pride in their country, but they also

appreciate others' differences. More Americans should experience the feeling that you get when you step foot in Japan; with the hospitality of everyone, along with the peaceful atmosphere, there is nothing that I don't think about or wish to see more of. I'll always want to go back and even more so, I plan on sharing that kind of mind set with my family and friends.

Hanamaki Experiences

Marina Sweeten, Jessieville High School

Going from Jessieville, Arkansas, to Hanamaki, Japan, was complete culture shock. Everything, from the language, to manners, to the food, was different. The week that I spent in Japan was filled with experiences that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

My host family was absolutely wonderful. They were so kind and welcoming to me; they made sure I felt right at home. My host student was

Reona Takahashi, who I still talk to. She was very nice and spoke good English, which made it easier to communicate with her and her family. Her father also spoke English. We spent most of our time there going to schools to tour the campus and visit with students. I learned that despite the drastic cultural differences, teenagers are really the same all over the world.

The schools were very different from here in the United States. The respect of all the students shocked me. At one school, Hanamaki Higashi, we got to spend an entire class period with students and then eat lunch with them. It was neat to have one-on-one time with the students. Also, at many of the schools, we were able to participate in their gym class, playing volleyball or basketball. One thing we were able to do was the Japanese tea ceremony. It was neat that students are in a club that preserves this Japanese tradition. I think my favorite part of the trip was the time spent with my host family.

The Hanamaki Festival was great. My host family let me wear their Yukata, a summer kimono. It took a long time for the lady to dress me in it. I even got to wear the shoes that went with it. It was hard to walk and I had to learn to take small steps, but I really enjoyed getting to wear it to the festival. I walked around with Reona and her father and took in the festival, watching the shrines and floats along with looking at the stands. Reona and I got to play a game where you catch goldfish, and we took them home and set up a tank for them the next day.



On family day, the Saturday before we came home, my host family took me to Morioka. On the way, we watched Ponyo, a movie by Studio Ghibli. I am a huge fan of Studio Ghibli, and it was great to see their products all over because it is not so popular in America. In Morioka, we went to a big mall, and I got some presents for people back home. We even got to take pictures in a photo booth. Their photo booths are so much more high-tech than here. Well, everything is more high-tech there. I will never forget my trip to Japan, and I hope to go back someday. The people were so nice and helpful.

The Sister City Foundation is an amazing program, and I hope other students like me from Hot Springs get to visit Hanamaki and have the same experience as we did.

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