

Being a Youth Ambassador in Japan - My Experiences in a Nutshell

A Report by Isa Begemann



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Anyone who has ever participated in an exchange program to a foreign country will agree that it is nearly impossible to sum up all the wonderful memories made and lessons learned in a plain text. I have experienced a broad range of feelings, from excitement when getting the news that going to Japan is no longer a faraway dream over anxiousness while imagining all the things that could possibly go wrong to reminiscing about my stay in hindsight.

But thinking about the time I spent in Japan I have also become aware that passing on my experiences could encourage other young people to apply and, with a bit of luck, go on the journey of their lives.

So here it goes, my report on sea squirts, bathroom slippers and *natto* sushi - my fellow travelers know what I am talking about and so will you if you keep reading.

Like so many other adolescents, I am more or less often spending time on the internet, and that is also where I first read about the Youth Ambassador program. Every year it enables 10-15 young people to spend two weeks in Japan, often during their fall break. Those “youth ambassadors“ spend the first week as a group in Tokyo and another place in Japan, for example Hiroshima or Ishinomaki, and live in host families during the second week.

Youth for Understanding, a non-profit organization offering exchanges to more than 40 countries all over the world, organizes the program on behalf of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is generously funding it. Hence, the program cost is almost entirely covered by the ministry.

If you are interested, have a look at the website of YFU:

<https://www.yfu.de/weitere-programme/waehrend-der-schulzeit/japan>

Even at first glance I was already thrilled with the idea of spending my fall break of 2016 in Japan, and since I was on vacation when I first discovered the program there was nothing to keep me from putting much effort into my application. This eventually paid off - I was invited to take part in a phone interview which I (back then) thought went horribly wrong but apparently did not, or else they I would have probably not been chosen for the program. The other participants subsequently told me they had also very much liked to crawl under a table and never face anyone again after that interview which they thought they failed terribly. But before I knew it, I was on my way to Berlin where the 3-day preparation seminar took place.

Frankly speaking, I was astonished by how fast all the participants connected with each other and by the pace at which we became a cohesive group as if we had known each other for a lot longer than barely 24 hours. This feeling of community and acceptance continued throughout the journey, and I am so grateful that we all got along so well and had so much fun together. Even though we all come from different backgrounds and places in Germany, we really bonded over our excitement to go on this journey and over our interest in foreign countries and cultures.

The content of the seminar in Berlin naturally revolved around our trip but was brought across in a more entertaining way than just boring lectures. On the contrary, we got to engage in the activities, discuss and ask plenty of questions. I would like to emphasize how much fun we had in a particular game that was supposed to make us understand how much cultures and manners differ: A small group of randomly picked group members embodying architects aimed at explaining bridge building techniques to a tribe of indigenous people impersonated by the other participants.

Even though this sounds simple, it proved to be rather a challenge: Upon entering the room, we noticed the “indigenous people” had very different customs from what we had expected, and therefore even talking to them was impossible before one had noticed they could only be spoken with if some kind of bodily contact persisted, e.g. touching their arm. Up until then, we were desperate trying to talk to seemingly deaf members of the tribe.

Even though it took some getting used to, we were very proud and relieved when we had successfully finished the bridge building before running out of time. It was certainly an eye-opener to how behavior and customs can differ from culture to culture, even unexpectedly, and how one can overcome these obstacles and still peacefully live beside others or, in our case, finish a joint project successfully and have a great time facing challenges such as who is allowed to use the glue stick (because not everyone is, and that is one of those unwritten rules almost impossible to uncover if you are unaware of it unless you violate it).

I, along with my fellow youth ambassadors of 2016, would like to thank our supervisors and motivators Rosa and Lukas for putting up with us over the course of those three days and for making the seminar so enjoyable, diversified and fun. I think all of us agree that we were even more excited for the journey after attending the seminar.

(And even though we thought we were tired back then, partly because we stayed up quite late, we were not at all aware yet of the fatigue and exhaustion we would have to combat once we were on the trip. :))

The first day we spent in Japan is best described by the recurring phrase “I am sooo tired” since we faced intense fatigue after a flight of 11 hours that was mainly



spent binge-watching TV shows and sneaking to the front of the airplane to get food. Upon arrival at the airport in Tokyo, however, many of us first went to a small nearby convenient store inside the airport building and gazed at all the products in amazement, especially the variety of beverages with green tea in them. We were subsequently picked up by a bus and drove past Disneyland which sparked even more excitement.

At lunchtime we went to a traditional, quite small Japanese restaurant and were astonished upon discovering that a hamburger in Japan is essentially just meat and does not come with bread or salad. The first attempts at eating with chopsticks were surprisingly successful once the proper technique had been explained, and I can confidently say that our handling of chopsticks vastly improved over the course of our stay.

Frankly, I do not remember the first day in great detail since the fatigue really started taking its toll in the afternoon. What I still know though is that we were amazed by our hostel close to the center of Tokyo which was truly an extraordinary place: We slept on *futons* (the Japanese equivalent to a European mattress, apart



from the fact that it lies on the floor) in *tatami* rooms in groups of 2-3 people. *Tatamis* are traditional mats made from rice straw and they are used as a flooring material.

Every morning, we gathered in a community room to have traditional Japanese breakfast which consists of rice, soup (which sometimes contained algae), meat or fish and often something made with egg - most of

us liked it (after getting used to it of course - the Japanese taste buds are apparently quite different from ours!).

Throughout our stay in central Tokyo, we saw and experienced so much that it is now hard to imagine we spent just a week there, it certainly feels more like a month!

On our first full day in Japan, having not quite overcome the jet-lag yet but being enthusiastic about discovering the city, we were invited to the office of Youth for Understanding Japan. Since the German branch of YFU organized and supervised our stay, we were very happy to meet the Japanese counterpart!

In the beginning, we were greeted with a welcome speech given by the National director of YFU Japan, Mrs. Enatsu, and then saw a presentation held by a Japanese student who spent a year at a German high school. He pointed out many differences, but also similarities between Germany and Japan and gave us advice concerning what we were to do and not to do in Japan which proved to be quite helpful during our stay.

For instance, we were introduced to the mystery of bathroom slippers, a common source of embarrassment for all foreign visitors. Whenever one enters or leaves a bathroom in Japan, bathroom slippers have to be put on (upon entering) or taken off (upon leaving). At the bathroom door, one puts on their “ordinary” slippers for inside the house once again. This is even done in some restaurants, especially the more traditional ones, and this rule had to be applied in our hostel as well. Even though most of us had mastered the art of not forgetting to put on the bathroom slippers by the end of the week, we basically always ran around in the wrong pair of slippers during the first couple of days.

I am sure we must have appeared quite strange to the Japanese hotel staff, given that we were essentially a group of teenagers which was constantly accidentally misbehaving in some way. Still, there were many other foreign visitors in our hostel, and one night I even encountered an elderly French lady who was looking for the light switch to the bathroom, and we had a nice little conversation in French.

Anyway, back to our first full day in Japan: At the YFU office, we attended a Japanese language lesson and learned to introduce ourselves. I had a lot of fun learning about this language I previously knew very little about and managed to be able to at least introduce myself properly by the end of the double lesson.

Our second activity on Tuesday was quite unusual: A workshop on how to play the traditional Japanese drum. We gathered in the basement of a building which looked like a gym at first glance but turned out to be exclusively dedicated to teaching people how to play that kind of drum. I am really glad we had the chance to try it as well, and all the drums being beaten in synchronicity sounded quite impressive!



After the workshop, our drum teacher demonstrated for us on an even bigger drum, and while he was playing, we barely dared to breathe. I have seen somebody play with such dedication while completely diving into the music only a couple of times in my life, and this was certainly one of those times!

That night, we had amazing dinner in a small restaurant serving us curry and *Calpis*, a milk-based beverage which tastes similar to plain yoghurt and that you can see a picture of on the right. *Calpis* is now definitely among my favorite soft drink! The curry was beyond delicious as well, but even though most of us ordered a 3 or 4 out of 10 on a “scale of spiciness”, it was surprisingly spicy, sometimes a tad bit too spicy for some of us. :)



Despite all the preparation I did in order not to commit any intercultural mishaps, I still encountered many things I would have never expected before traveling to

Japan. If you asked any of the youth ambassadors, I am almost certain they would mention the struggle of taking your shoes off at the right moment and in the right manner.

Even though this may sound ridiculous to somebody who has never been to Japan, Western visitors like our group are usually not accustomed to when to take their shoes off (which is 1. directly at the entrance of any private home, 2. in a *tatami* room, 3. at an *onsen* (a traditional bath that is fed by a hot spring) or 4. in a bathroom).

Even though everybody in our group takes their shoes off at home in Germany, none of us were used to paying attention to the toecap pointing toward the way out of the room, let alone wearing a designated pair of shoes when using the bathroom and, which proved to be an evenly challenging thing, taking them off when leaving the bathroom.

Still, reminiscing about our journey, I am glad to have been faced with this “struggle” since it has granted me lots of amusing moments whenever someone accidentally violated the rules.



On Wednesday during our first week in Japan we went to both the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the German Embassy and therefore dressed as formal as we could. The embassy even made us feel a little at home, given that everyone spoke German and everything was labeled in German and Japanese. At the ministry we were greeted in a friendly way as well and got to ask many questions on Japanese day-to-day politics and international relations.

Our visit to the Japanese Association of Shinto Shrines was scheduled for later that day, but since we were basically notoriously late to everything due to traffic and meetings taking a little longer than expected, we got to take a pass on using the subway and took a cab instead. We were beyond happy to relax our feet for once, and fortunately, every cab transporting several members of our group arrived at the shrine safe and sound.

Our visit to the Association of Shinto Shrines is definitely among my favorite things we did during the week we spent as a group. Firstly, we had the chance to listen to a very interesting talk given by a member of the association who provided us with an insight into the belief system of *Shinto*, which, alongside Buddhism, is the most prevalent religion in Japan.

Still, most Japanese would not consider it a religion like Christianity, but rather a part of their culture. I think it was invigorating to learn about a religion which does not claim to be the only and true one like



the majority of widespread religions nowadays do, and I especially enjoyed the discussion we engaged in afterwards.

Furthermore, I recommend to anyone reading this to visit a *Shinto shrine* if you ever get the chance to. The *Meiji Jingu*, a major shrine in Tokyo, is especially impressive and I am really glad we went there.

I have to admit that everybody in our group had some difficulties staying attentive at all times due to all of us lacking a lot of sleep, but whenever someone dozed off, the others covered for him or her and kept the discussion going.

However, during our university visit on Thursday, everybody was as awake as they possibly could be: We went to the Rikkyo University to meet up with some who are



pursuing a university degree there; and talking to them was our first real contact to Japanese more or less our age. We had lunch together, more specifically all kinds of sushi and other delicacies, and I was faced with the decision whether to try *nat-to* sushi, I dare say an almost infamous kind of sushi. *Natto* is made from soybeans fermented with bacteria. Wikipedia describes it as possessing a “powerful smell, strong flavor,

and slimy texture” - You may draw your own conclusions from that. Nevertheless, I recommend to anyone to at least try once. You might even end up liking it, multiple members of our group certainly did!

Another favorite place of mine we went to during our trip is the Ikebukuro Life Safety Learning Center. We had the chance to experience an earthquake simulation (see picture below - but remember the picture was taken before the simulated earthquake hit, that is why the people in the photo are still so calm). The simulation and experiencing what an earthquake feels like made me realize how powerful earthquakes actually are. We also got to extinguish a fake fire with the help of a fire drencher and even had to find our way out of an apartment which was filled



with artificial smoke, simulating a fire inside the house. In addition, we watched a movie portraying how much damage the tsunami in March 2011 and the earthquake preceding it did to several regions in Japan, especially the north east of Tohoku on the island of Honshu. I think the majority of us had not been aware of all the lives lost and the destruction caused by the earthquake and tsunami alone because all of Europe was worked up over the nuclear catastrophe in

Fukushima - which certainly did a lot of damage as well, but I personally had not known the extent to which areas farther away from Fukushima got destroyed, and I assume I am not the only one who was previously unaware of that.

I also consider our visit to the Ikebukuro Life Safety Center and the aforementioned movie to have been useful regarding our subsequent trip to the areas affected worst by the tsunami in 2011. But since I will come back to that later, let me first

elaborate on one of the last days we spent in Tokyo as a group and our appointment at the German Institute for Japanese Studies which sparked a new career aspiration in many of us.

At the DIJ (short for “Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien” I mentioned beforehand) we attended two presentations given by staff members of the institute. The first lecture was concerned with Japanese civil society and political participation, two topics which I was and still am very keen on, both in the Japanese and other societies all over the world.

The second presentation especially sparked our interest because it dealt with cultural differences between collective forms of society (like the Japanese) and rather individualistic ones (like the German). The way people think actually differs a lot depending on which kind of society they are exposed to when growing up, and the researcher presenting this topic to us told us his studies on intercultural psychology were majorly concerned with investigating different behavior and thinking patterns in collective and individualistic societies.

We would have loved to listen to what he had to say for hours on end and engaged in an animated discussion afterwards regarding how to get one’s grades up as quickly as possible so that studying psychology in university would still be possible. I would not be surprised if our appointment at the DIJ would lead to some among the Youth Ambassadors studying psychology and specializing in intercultural research and understanding afterwards.

That day we also talked to a Canadian journalist regarding Japanese energy politics and went to the neighborhood of *Asakusa* where we saw the popular Buddhist temple of *Senso-ji* (see picture below) and were free to walk around for a bit - which gave my companions and I the opportunity to search for a cat café (which is one of those kinds of places you keep reading about in magazines: Real actual cats running around freely while you are enjoying your latte macchiato). We eventually managed to find one but decided it was a bit too pricey and ended up having dinner at a restaurant where you could wear headbands with stuffed animals attached to them, more specifically chicken. I will certainly never forget that day.



On Saturday morning we met up at our hostel with a survivor of the atomic bombing in Nagasaki in 1945, Mr. Tanaka. It was really touching hearing him talk about this event and what he had had to go through when he was just 13 years old. He lost multiple family members in the bombing, and he himself was lucky to have survived since his house was merely 3.2km away from the epicenter of the nuclear bomb.

Ever since the atomic bombing took place, Mr. Tanaka has spoken multiple times at the UN and is committed to the complete abolition of all atomic bombs. Hearing somebody who has seen the terrible powers of atomic bombs talk about his experiences has had a lasting impression on all the members of our group.

Later that day we met the Japanese equivalent to our group, the Japanese youth ambassadors who went to Germany in the summer, at a restaurant to have lunch together. We also spent a lovely afternoon in the entertainment district of *Harajuku* which is known for being as bright, crowded and full of noises as it could possibly be, but which is also definitely worth paying a visit. Afterwards we had dinner at a truly remarkable place: The Sweets Paradise in *Harajuku* which serves all kinds of candy and sugary food buffet style, be it cake, ice cream or jello. Do pay attention, though: You might feel a little sick to your stomach after your visit...



The last few days as a group were spent in the neighborhood of Ishinomaki in the Tohoku region about three and a half hours by train from Tokyo. We were welcomed by a beautiful blue sky and went directly to the office of Peace Boat in Ishinomaki. This non-governmental organization is involved in projects all over the world which are supposed to promote peace and intercultural understanding and also does numerous projects in the regions where the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 struck

with all their destructive force, including Ishinomaki. Peace Boat staff members agreed on accompanying us during our visit to Ishinomaki and Onagawa which are about half an hour apart, and I wish to thank Peace Boat for showing us around. We owe you a great deal!



On the map on the right, the areas which were flooded by the Tsunami are shown.



An event which I still cannot quite wrap my mind around happened during an “augmented reality walk” through Ishinomaki, meaning we all carried iPads around which showed us pre-tsunami, post-tsunami and possible future images of the places we went to within the town, for example markets or the buildings at the coastline. Right as we were walking there, all of our phones

started beeping, showing some kind of alert on the screen in Japanese writing we were not able to read. Our guides told us it was an earthquake warning, and they honestly seemed a bit shocked as well. It felt quite surreal standing basically directly at the coastline where a huge earthquake and tsunami had struck a few years ago and anticipating something to happen.

Fortunately, the warning remained only a warning, and the earth did not start shaking violently. Still, many of us decided not to tell our parents about the alert out of fear they might want us to come back when they heard about the omnipresent threat of earthquakes hitting any moment - something the Japanese population has to live with every day. Thanks to the numerous precautions the government has taken, including the atomically generated alerts we all got on our phones, life has already become a lot safer, though.



A very touching thing happening during our visit was the climbing to the top of the hill close to the coast which serves as a tsunami evacuation point for the population. The stairs which you can see in the picture on the left were really steep and exhausting to climb, and it was touching to imagine people running up the stairs in complete panic when their lives are immediately endangered by the tsunami waves coming, possibly even carrying a child or elderly person up the stairs. In March 2011 when the huge tsunami hit it was even freezing, and some people having successfully made it to the top of the hill died from exposure to the cold temperatures.

Hearing that was certainly very hard on all of us, but I would not trade the knowledge I have gained about the fatal force of natural disasters.

The following day was a lot easier on us and rather joyful: We learned about sea squirts, a very unusual type of animal living in the sea which is best described by the picture below. A local fisherman who lives off of growing and harvesting sea squirts for the purpose of being processed into food gave us an insight into his day-to-day business. Some of us even dared to try raw sea squirt - the responses were rather mixed. In the picture below you can see some members of our group forming long chains out of oyster shells that can be lowered into the ocean. Sea squirt “babies“ are harvested in those shells.



As I have stated before, all of us spent the second week of our stay in host families and attended a local school for a couple of days. I was blessed with a wonderful host family in a suburb of Tokyo consisting of my host parents, my 15-year-old host sister and a host dog which could be mistaken for a remarkably cute, tiny ball of fluff. Even though I only stayed with them for a couple of days, my host family cared for me so well and I am still in touch with them.

Together with some members of the extended family living nearby we went to an *onsen*, a traditional Japanese bathing facility situated around a hot spring (sooo relaxing!) and climbed the Tokyo Tower which rewards you with a stunning view of Tokyo. From up there Tokyo resembles a futuristic city you expect to see in a sci-fi movie - but see for yourself, a photograph is inserted down below. In the adjacent picture you can see my host mother and host sister, some members of the extended family and me.



Since many relatives of my host family lived nearby, we often had delicious dinner together, and I also got to go to the flower shop which is owned jointly by multiple members of the family. A thing which I still think of as especially touching is the gift my host grandfather gave me: Even though he had known me for less than a week, he insisted on giving me two traditional, valuable Japanese dolls handmade from wood in northern Japan which are called *kokeshi*. My host mother also showed me how to perform a traditional tea ceremony and even gave me the necessary materials such as a tea whisk and a tea scoop to take home with me. I have yet to dare to try and perform a tea ceremony for my family, but I definitely will soon!



On Thursday and Friday of my second week in Japan I attended classes at a public secondary school. Since my all the students at my host sister's school had exam week, I went to a different school than her but still had a great time. Since I am fairly tall, I was actually approached quite often by students (and occasionally even teachers) asking me about my height and if everybody in Germany was as tall as me, which I could confidently reply to with a definite no. Another question I was asked frequently was whether German

universities have entrance exams, and I was honestly quite astonished at that question since I had not expected it to be of any interest. I assume people were curious about it since rumor still has it in many countries that studying at German universities is cheap and that it is easy to get in, and the people I have met were probably just wondering whether getting into university is really that easy.

Nevertheless, everybody I met at school was very friendly, polite and welcoming, and I was even given two small bags of Japanese candy when I left, which I was very surprised to receive since I had only been there for a couple of days. In addition, communication was sometimes an issue, given that many students spoke very little English, but conversations always worked out with a little help from a friendly fellow student translating or by just nodding and smiling (which is undoubtedly the best answer whenever you have no idea what the other person just said). Lunchtime in school was certainly very different from the school meals I am used to - many students just brought their lunches from home and everybody gathered in the classroom to have lunch together. I even took my personal Japanese lunch prepared by my host mother to school with me, two rice balls wrapped in seaweed which are called *onigiri* in Japan and which you can see in the picture below. Delicious!



All in all, the subjects in Japanese schools are fairly similar to the ones taught in German schools. One example of a lesson I attended during my stay is the Advanced English class which is exclusively for younger students who have returned to Japan after a stay abroad, e.g. due to their parents working in a foreign country for a couple of years. I was able to talk to the students for a little while which was definitely facilitated by their excellent knowledge of the English language. The English teacher was originally from the US and contributed greatly to the class being interesting and fun for all the students including me as a foreign visitor.



On Friday I also attended a German lesson. We played a game called "*fuku warai*" which was aiming at the students learning the terms for eyes, nose, mouth etc. We took turns being blindfolded and having to rely on the others in the group to tell us in German where to locate the piece of paper we were holding which had a nose or another part of the face on it. It was quite funny seeing where the parts of the face ended up on the huge drawing of a face in front of us (keep in mind that we were blindfolded) which can be seen in the picture at the top.

The time I spent at the school and my host family's house passed by so quickly and I have made too many precious memories during my stay to even get close to hav-



ing mentioned them all in this report. I could go on for pages on end telling about my experiences without difficulty!

Still, I will leave it at that and conclude by expressing my gratitude to YFU and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the generous funding and the organization and planning of our stay. Furthermore, I am grateful to Johannes and Rita for accompanying us to Japan (and making sure nobody gets lost) and my fellow youth ambassadors for being such great and inspiring people whom I have really bonded with over the course of our stay.

I would also like to thank all the people I met in Japan for welcoming my group and me and always making sure we were as snug as a bug in a rug.

Last but foremost I wish to thank my host family and their extended family who could not have been more caring, warm-hearted and wonderful.

All the memories I have made are very dear to me and I will certainly continue to cherish them. To anyone who is contemplating applying to the program, I can only urge you to. Nobody should miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get to know a completely different culture, language and traditions and to meet so many people you will keep in your heart even after you have left Japan!