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Study Abroad Reflection

August 2025

Study Abroad Didn't Change Me

While looking for some inspiration for my study abroad reflection, I kept coming across the same kinds of stories—how Japan “changed” people, how different everything was, how the culture shock was overwhelming, and how the experience was completely transformative. And I don’t think that this isn’t true for many people. However, it made me realize that my time in Japan felt... surprisingly familiar. When I think back to my daily life as a university student in Nagoya, it wasn’t that different from my life in the States. Sure, the food was totally different (and better, honestly). Societal behavior had its own rhythm, like being more indirect in conversations, using cash instead of cards, or keeping quiet on public transportation, and more self-serve restaurants. But those things didn’t make me feel like I was living on another planet. They were differences, yes, but not barriers. In fact, the more time I spent with Japanese students, the more I realized how easy it was to connect to them. How we weren’t all that different. Beneath the surface, we were all just trying to figure out our lives, talk about boys, make last-minute study plans, and find cheap places to eat after class. The more I noticed the similarities, the smaller the world felt— which I happen to think was more meaningful than any culture shock I experienced.

I think part of the reason I felt this way was because of how my experience started. When I first arrived in Japan, two Chukyo University students I had met online, Shohei and Koshi, came to pick me up from the airport. They helped me check into my hotel, and later that night,

we went out to an izakaya for dinner and drinks. There was definitely a language barrier—my Japanese was clunky, and sometimes they couldn't find the English words they were looking for, but somehow, we still understood each other. Sometimes it was through laughter, a shared look, or even an awkward silence that felt more funny than uncomfortable. We talked about the differences I had already noticed, and I tried pork tongue for the first time (which got a good laugh out of them when I made a face). We talked about all the little things that felt new or different—just from my flight and the dinner alone. But as we sat around that table, I realized something: it reminded me of when my friends from New York picked me up from Laguardia airport when I was visiting them. The conversation was pretty much the exact same. My New York friends asked me about all the differences between South Carolina and Manhattan, just as Shohei and Koshi asked me about all the differences between the States and Japan. Despite the language barrier, I laughed just as much as I would've with my American friends. That moment pretty much shaped the way I viewed the rest of my experience—not through the lens of “how different everything is,” but through the ways we're all the same.

From that day on, I started feeling more and more comfortable in my discomfort. There were still challenges, of course. Going to the ward office and trying to figure out the paperwork was honestly miserable and stressful. But I wasn't alone, I had both other exchange students and Japanese students there to help me figure it out. Learning how to use the train system was confusing at first, but honestly, it wasn't that different from trying to navigate the subway in Manhattan. The Japanese students I met through the VOICE program at Chukyo—a program designed to help exchange students adjust to life in Japan—welcomed me so quickly and warmly. One of the students, Nana, took me to the mall, helped me shop for new clothes (some more modest ones, for the sake of fitting in) and we ended up gossiping over bowls of udon. The

one I ordered was something I'd never even heard of before: 山芋オクラ納豆ネバネバボール (Yamaimo okura natto nebaneba bo-ru)—a slimy mix of yamaimo, okra, and natto. It was weird... but weird in a good way. And the conversation I had with Nana was even better. On the drive back, we listened to Japanese pop, and that evening, we hung out on the dorm rooftop with other exchange students. We talked, laughed, and drank under the night sky. Everything around me felt unfamiliar—but the connection I felt with the people made it feel familiar at the same time.

Some people might think that I didn't really immerse myself—but I don't think that's true at all. I had Japanese class for three hours three days a week, and every week I participated in a Global Talk Hour where I spent time having one-on-one conversations with Japanese students. I went to festivals, joined a tea ceremony, wore a kimono to a fireworks event, and explored historic castles. I adjusted to everyday life in Japan, from sorting garbage into the correct categories to hanging my laundry to dry because my dorm didn't have a dryer. Every morning, I got used to eating rice with my breakfast. I started carrying an umbrella everywhere (something I never did in the States because I, like many Americans, avoid them at all costs). I got used to walking everywhere—way more than I ever did back home—which quickly became a normal part of my daily routine. I'd frequently stop by the coffee shop next to my dorm and have short conversations with the owner, even if my Japanese was clunky and simple. These small habits and routines might not seem life-changing, but they're a big part of what it means to live somewhere, not just visit.

But what stood out to me most wasn't how different everything was. It was how similar we all are beneath the surface. We procrastinate on our homework, go out on weekends, get excited over the new seasonal Starbucks drinks, do laundry on our days off, and talk about our

crushes and future dreams late at night. I saw it in my Japanese friends, and I saw it in myself. We come from different cultures, speak different languages, and have grown up with different social norms—but at the end of the day, we're all just university students trying to figure things out, have fun, and find out who we are. The culture may be different—but the human experience isn't. That's what stayed with me the most. Ultimately, studying abroad didn't "change me" in the way so many people describe. I didn't come back as a completely different person. I came back a stronger, more open-minded, more connected version of who I already was. I still got coffee every single morning. I still slept through classes sometimes (more than I would like to admit). I still did the same things I loved doing back in the States. But now, I do them with a deeper appreciation for how much connection can exist even when everything around you feels unfamiliar. My experience in Japan didn't flip my life upside down, it just quietly expanded it.