



## Study Tour of Japan for European Youth

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One year ago I had never really thought much about going to Japan. Japanese culture had always seemed to me very interesting and different, but because it is so far away from Iceland and going there as an independent traveler would cost much more money than I could afford, I never thought going there was a realistic option.



*Japanese cuisine*

When I found out that there existed something called “Study Tour of Japan for European Youth” and that they were looking for applicants for that tour, I didn’t have to think twice. Then, a couple of months later I got to know that I had been selected as one of three Icelandic participants for the tour. Why they chose me is still unknown to me, but one thing is for sure; I will forever be thankful for that fantastic opportunity.

My first impression on Japan, when I got there, was somewhat according to my earlier ideas on the country. Tokyo was, indeed, a very big city, quite different from Reykjavík to say the least. All the big skyscrapers and the funny Japanese cars was the first thing I noticed. Then I noticed, that even though the city was bigger than anything I had ever seen before, everything was perfectly organized. I could never have imagined a city with 13 million habitants, where there were no queues, no chaos, no delays and no trash on the streets. That was when I had my first awakening on Japanese way of life. The Japanese are very efficient, and they need to be: for all these people to live together in a little space as in Tokyo, there has to be organization. Things have to work, be efficient, and they have to work well, because if anything goes wrong then it has a domino effect and everything stops. Tokyo is truly an amazing city that cities in Europe, way smaller even, can learn a lot from.



*Japan is very modern...*



*...yet traditional*

During the Study Tour we had many lectures and visits. We had insights in many different aspects of Japan and it’s relations to the world, and especially with Europe. We had lectures on Japan’s politics, it’s economy and trade routes and, most importantly, it’s culture. Mr. Fujita’s lecture on the Japanese phenomenon kaizen was very interesting and amusing and gave me a good insight in the Japanese society and on how Japanese people think. It made me understand how the Japanese have become world leader in technology and efficiency. One thing is for sure, this word will never be forgotten from my vocabulary: Kaizen!



We visited many temples and shrines and that sparked an my interest in Japan's religion, or rather lack of religion, but despite of the big number of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, most Japanese people claim not to be religious. After the trip, this became a subject of mine in a project I did at the University and remains to me as a quite interesting research topic.

I cannot forget to mention the home stay program. That was definitely the highlight of the whole trip and gave me a unique insight that I wouldn't have got as a regular tourist. Zirou and Shinae Honzane were and amazing elderly couple that showed me all the sites of Hiroshima and then welcomed me to their lovely Japanese-style house in the suburbs of the city. Even with no common language, me with no knowledge of the Japanese language and they with almost zero-level of English, we got along perfectly fine and had some great discussions and comparisons on Japanese and Icelandic ways of living. Shinae and me even did an hour jam session playing western pop music, me on the piano and she the flute!



*Zirou and Shinae*



*Peace!*

The most important thing about all this, is that the Study Tour gave me the opportunity to experience the Japanese way of life and to meet and interact with Japanese people in Japan, but not through books or the internet. I discovered some of the friendliest people I've met, welcoming and hospitable people, that are, after all, just not so different from the Icelandic people. The Japanese have the best sense

of humor I've encountered so far and they don't seem to take themselves too seriously. Some of the false ideas that I, and many Europeans, had about stereotypical Japan dropped dead during my Japan trip. In this way, the Study Tour certainly helped fighting the clichés and generalizations that we always make about countries that we are unfamiliar with. The Study Tour increased my interest and deepened my understanding in Japan a hundred times. I do hope I can build some cultural bridges between Iceland and Japan in near future.

Thank you so much for everything,

Haukur

