

A semester in the biggest city in the world

General information

For the first half of my third year in the IBEB program I got to go to Japan, specifically Tokyo's renowned Hitotsubashi University. The road there was paved with some hardships, especially compared to other students who went to different cities in Asia. Japan requires you to go through quite some procedures until you are considered ready to enter the country and attend university. Besides arranging a visa, I had to fill out plenty of forms and had to get an extensive health checkup, including an X-ray scan of my chest.

On the other hand, looking for accommodation is quite uncomplicated: In one of the forms I filled out, there were some questions regarding housing preferences. Your answers are then used to find suitable and very cheap accommodation for you on campus. Also, a specific arrival day was given to the exchange students and we had to book our flights accordingly.

Arrival

The arrival went smoothly, as everything was planned out beforehand by the university. I arrived at the Narita Airport in Tokyo and was greeted by English-speaking Japanese students (this is important, because most people in Japan, including university students, do not speak English) who led me to the bus that was going to take us to the university campus. Upon arriving at the campus, we were shown our rooms, which were located in flats where six students shared a kitchen and two toilets and showers. After giving us some time to settle in we were given the option to buy some goods for the first couple days and have some food.

The next week was covered by introduction activities, so we got to know the two campuses and their respective surroundings, the buildings we would have classes in, opening bank accounts, the university's code of conduct and housing rules et cetera. Afterwards, actual university life started.

Courses

I took various courses at Hitotsubashi University, but the biggest one was "*Basic Japanese 1*", which is an intensive introductory Japanese language course that also covers writing and reading. It was worth 5 Japanese credits, which is 12 ECTS. I had Japanese class every day during the week and it definitely took up some of my time. However, if you are interested in the language and a beginner, it is probably the best way of quickly getting to a level where you can hold simple conversations and write things. It was immensely helpful and I got everything out of it that I wanted.

Another course I took was "*Japanese Arts: Ceramics*", which is a cultural class about the history of ceramics in Japan. This course was worth 5 ECTS. It also offered a practical part where we got to make our own ceremonial tea bowl together with a Japanese ceramics master, which was great. I recommend taking this class, because the group size is very small (we were three students), so you get to form a really good bond with your fellow students and also the professor.

I also took “*Value Investing*” and a “*Special Seminar Economics*”, which was about language use in economics. Both were worth 5 ECTS each. Another highlight that I recommend every exchange student to take was the “*Explore Japan Seminar*” which was also worth 5 ECTS. In this course you literally explore Japan by doing field trips every week with your fellow students. The professor, Abe sensei, is a great guy and very colloquial with students, which gives this course a relaxed atmosphere.

Because I filled up my elective space with my courses in Japan, I could choose classes quite freely which was good.

Finances

Japan is expensive. Even compared to Western standards. However, several things made it easier: Housing was very cheap at around 70 Euros per month (depends on utility usage). Also, the Japanese JASSO organization provided many students, including the two students from EUR, with a scholarship of 80.000 yen per month, which is around 650 Euros. This brings you a very long way, even in a country as expensive as Japan. The majority of my money was spent for food, which is quite expensive in Japan (especially fresh produce). I like to buy quality food and cooked myself every day, so I spent around 350-400 Euros per month on food. Going out is quite expensive, with entry fee to clubs being as high as 4000-5000 yen, so plan on spending at least 50 Euros per night. Transport costs for a day trip downtown is around 10 Euros.

All in all, due to the generous scholarship I received, I probably spent less of my own money in Tokyo than I would have in Rotterdam, even when accounting for the flights to and from Japan and the vacation I took in Okinawa.

Daily life

When going to Japan, be prepared for something entirely different. When explaining Japan to other people, I like to say that they have a parallel society that is as developed as ours, but used different solutions to get to where they are. I think the Japanese are the most civilized people in the world. Tokyo, despite its size, is extremely safe. Even when wandering around narrow alleys in the middle of the night, I never felt even a little bit in danger. Everyone is extremely polite and there is complete silence on the trains, as talking loudly is considered very rude.

However, I also tell people that the Japanese are the most polite “racists” in the world. As a foreigner (gaijin), you will never ever be Japanese, even if you grow up there and speak the language fluently. The Japanese were even more polite to me than they are in general, because I was a foreigner. Basically, as a foreigner you can get away with everything, because people just assume that you did not know, because you are a gaijin. When I asked for the way, I was frequently walked to the destination, because it was assumed that I will not find the place on my own, even with directions.

Also, be prepared to struggle with communication. As mentioned, the Japanese generally do not speak English. I recommend learning a few phrases before coming here. While I had plenty of friends who got around without speaking a word of the language, it will greatly improve your experience in my opinion.

Lastly, Japan's daily life is amazing, due to being entirely different. When I arrived in Tokyo downtown for the first time, I was overwhelmed, because there is just so much going on. Tokyo alone offers enough room to explore for the whole semester. If you can deal with the communication issues and being treated differently, I recommend going there, as it will be a truly unique and amazing experience.