Technos International Week Report

When I went to Japan, I hadn’t left Europe before. But even if I had been a hardened traveller, the excellent programme laid on by Technos College and the Tanaka Ikeukai Educational Foundations would have still been very impressive.

For the Tokyo section, we stayed in a hotel in Fuchu. Tokyo would be pretty brain-scrabbling due to its sheer size alone. Fuchu is a suburb of Tokyo, although technically a separate city. I live in London, and an equivalent area to Fuchu might be, say, Tottenham. Both are inner suburbs in the sense that it’s still a long way to the countryside. Except that because of Tokyo’s size, it takes an hour on the Keio line to get from Fuchu to central Tokyo, but just 15 minutes on the Victoria Line from Tottenham to central London. Indeed, I’m pretty sure that a Keio line express train goes a lot faster than the London Tube, and even then, it still takes four times longer!

The trip was a rich learning experience, made much richer by the efforts of the Technos students who were so kind and welcoming to us. They were very enthusiastic, attentive, yet also sincere. They did a much better job of welcoming us than, I suspect, we could have done in welcoming them.

When we went to the rural retreat, Midi no Mura, one of our Japanese companions, Shun, helpfully explained the cultural significance of Onsen to the Japanese, as well as the appropriate rituals we would have to carry out. Onsen bathing was probably the most ‘foreign’ thing we did in Japan, but ultimately one of the most enjoyable.

Indeed, at Midi no Mura I felt that the international students and the Japanese students connected and got to know each other properly. I felt that the Japanese students were quite brave in being willing to share their culture with us, and that beneath their enthusiasm there was also a, quite justified, pride in their way of life.

Sleeping on traditional futon at Midi No Mura, in communal rooms, was also enjoyable. It gave practical insight into a side of Japanese life imperceptible in the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. Midi No Mura is a serene place, and I think that we began to understand why the calm of the Onsen, the peace of the countryside, and the appreciation of the natural world go hand-in-hand as inseparable parts of Japanese culture.

When we visited Fujiyama one of my favourite things was the guide, Sho’s, insistence that we bought melonpan. It was worth the couple of hundred yen it cost, and it was the little things like this which made Sho’s tours so educational, but, of course, also highly entertaining.

While the structured part of the programme, such as guided tours of central Tokyo, activities at Technos College, etc., were excellent for the international students, the final thing I’d like to single out in this report was the free time we were given. The fact that we were given a fair amount of free time, and, moreover, trusted to use it wisely, was a risk that paid off. For example, it was only when wandering aimlessly around Fuchu that I discovered what is perhaps my favourite thing about Japanese life, the small local shrines.

Nestled in residential areas right across Tokyo, from Shinjuku to Fuchu, these oases of reflection are to be found everywhere. As it happens, Fuchu is host to the Okunitama Shrine, a massive one. But just 10 minutes’ walk from our hotel was a far smaller shrine, the name of which I never found out.

Walking down the main road toward central Fuchu, I noticed the beginning of a path in the distinctive
style which signifies that it leads to a shrine. I followed it to its end, over a railway track, and through
some light woodland. It led to modest, but very peaceful, local shrine. Nobody was there, and because
it was surrounded by woodland, it felt like I’d stepped out of the busyness of Fuchu, and into a Ghibli
film.

Despite being so close to the hotel, it felt like a real adventure. And because of its unexpectedness,
this experience was the most magical, and perhaps my favourite from my time in Japan.