Technos International Trip Report – Victoria Robinson

Looking back on the two weeks we spent in Japan as part of the Technos International Exchange, I am still filled with bemusement and exceptional gratitude that I was actually lucky enough to visit the one country I have been longing to travel to for years. Any attempt to fully unpack the contents of what happened across the two weeks would be futile (as evidenced by my failed attempt to keep up a diary of each day’s events, because we simply did too much to record in sufficient detail), but I hope to shed light on some of what happened on the trip in this report.

Whenever my friends ask me what the premise of the trip was, it is difficult to convey briefly, but essentially I tell them that it is a cultural exchange whereby students from all around the world come together at Technos College and, for two weeks, take part in a range of fun classes (emphasis on ‘fun’, the classes are completely unlike anything we experience at Oxford, but I will explain this in more detail later), coach trips and activities both within and outside the college.

Technos College is an occupational college, where students from aged eighteen train towards a particular profession, and we were lucky enough to spend a few days alongside them in their classes. There were opportunities to take part in a bridal class, an airplane simulation, manga drawing, and traditional Japanese calligraphy. I got to try out voice dubbing on an short anime video that the students had animated themselves (it was about foxes who could transform into humans – a very similar vibe to the Studio Ghibli films). After watching the students who were training to become professional voice actors perform, we were told it was time for us to voice the parts. At first it was slightly awkward (having to make grunting noises for people fighting and actually saying the word ‘hop’ when someone hops does not feel natural at all) but we soon lost all self-consciousness and just relaxed into it. After about ten takes, due to our outbursts of laughter, we completed a recording that the teacher was ‘proud’ of, although comparing ourselves to the Technos students we were pretty sure that she was just being polite.

As well as taking part in activities within the college, there were also various organised day trips that allowed us to venture into Tokyo and beyond, with the Technos students as our ever-enthusiastic and lovely guides. In the first week, we had a three-day excursion that took us to see Mount Fuji (the clouds cleared for about two minutes, which was the first time that the Technos program had seen the top of Fuji-san for two years!), the beautiful countryside of the Nagano prefecture in rural Japan, and Matsumoto castle. We spent two nights in a traditional country retreat in Midori no Mura, the ‘Green Village’. During the course of our short stay, we did sports-day-esque activities in the gym, had a big water balloon fight, enjoyed a truly enormous Japanese BBQ outside watching the sunset, played with sparklers, made our own sushi, sang karaoke, and tried onsen – traditional indoor and outdoor spring water baths.

We also had ample opportunity over the two weeks to explore Tokyo itself, which was just as incredible as I imagined it to be. It was looking at London’s skyline a few days after we got back from Japan that I was struck by how Tokyo just completely shrinks our comparatively miniature capital city. The vastness of Tokyo is inconceivable and utterly fascinating. Each district (more akin to individual cities than districts) has its own distinct personality, ranging from the bustling streets and bright lights of Shinjuku, to the business district of Roppongi with its huge glass skyscrapers and shopping malls, and then to the smaller boutique shops and clothing stalls in the whimsical
Harajuku. Technos College itself is situated in Fuchu, a more residential suburb towards the west of Tokyo.

One aspect of Tokyo that was particularly interesting was the intermingling of the urban and the natural. Traditional Japanese gardens and Shinto shrines are sprinkled across the city, nestled in amongst the buildings. One of my favourite mornings was actually just spent exploring a garden in the Roppongi district which we stumbled upon by pure chance, and sitting for ages under a wooden canopy waiting for the rain to stop, appreciating the oasis we had found. The Shinto shrines dotted around Tokyo were also beautiful and one of the things we learnt on our first day in Higashifuchu was how to properly pray at the shrine, which includes various rituals such as washing one’s hands and rinsing one’s mouth, clapping before and after praying, and making sure to keep to the side of the path and not walk in the middle because that is where the gods are believed to walk.

Undoubtedly though, what made the trip so unique and special were the friendships we formed with the people we met across the two weeks. The Technos students were all so bubbly and enthusiastic, from the moment they met us at the airport to the teary-eyed goodbye ceremony at the end of the program. We also made friends with the other international students – and our friendships with both the other international students and the Technos students are ones that I will cherish forever. The organisers of the trip were extremely kind and accommodating, and made the entire trip two of the most enjoyable weeks I have experienced. I cannot recommend the trip highly enough, it is really a once-in-a-lifetime experience – and I feel like my experience of Japan would not have been a fraction as amazing if it had not been as part of the Technos trip, because it allows you to experience so much more than is available to the regular tourist, and to fully immerse yourself in Japanese culture.