I was immensely grateful to be selected as a Pembroke College delegate to the Technos International Weeks this year. It had long been a dream of mine to visit Japan; I had studied Japanese in secondary school and had corresponded with Japanese family friends for my entire life, as my mother had lived there for some years before I was born. Those who had participated in the trip in the past had also highly recommended it, saying that it would be one of the most unforgettable experiences of our lives. They were not wrong.

Early on in the trip our tour guide, Sho, taught us a Japanese word that has no exact equivalent in English: “omotenashi” (おもてなし). The meaning, as Sho explained to us, roughly translates as “hospitality” in English, but it carries a much stronger meaning for the Japanese people than what we understand by “hospitality”. The word is a noun that relates to the entertaining of guests wholeheartedly, being considerate of their needs and wishes, and welcoming them with deep humility. This notion, I believe, sums up our experience in Japan better than any other words could.

We were introduced to the very best aspects of Japanese cultural heritage during our time there; cuisine, the arts, natural landscapes, manmade marvels, Buddhist and Shinto shrines and of course, karaoke. Our time in Japan was divided into time spent in a rural area of the Nagano prefecture in Midori Nomura, or the “Green Village”, trips in and around Tokyo, and cultural and educational activities with the Technos students. It felt as though, had we made a list of all the most important things to do and see in Japan, in just two weeks, we had ticked almost everything off of that list; we had attended a Kabuki performance at the National Theatre of Japan, visited Mount Fuji, bathed in natural hot springs, eaten conveyor belt sushi, tried our hand at Japanese calligraphy, visited the second largest Buddha statue in the world and perused a historic Japanese castle from the sixteenth century. And yet, despite the truly impressive category of marvels we were fortunate enough to experience, we were still left with the impression that we had merely scratched the surface, so vast are the depths of Japan’s seemingly unending cultural heritage.

All that I have mentioned thus far is only to speak of the trip as an organised collective activity, but the individual, personal experiences of the trip that we each cherish are perhaps what really made the International Weeks so special. When I moved back into Pembroke this term I brought with me cards and letters from some of the people I grew close to during the trip; over the summer I corresponded back and forth not only with Technos students, but also with Lara and Jocelyn, two of the Taiwanese students who had come from the China University of Science and Technology. I now have a collection of postcards from their summer travels to brighten up my room in Oxford and remind me of the opportunity that Technos gave us to make friends with people on the other side of the world.

On our very last day in Japan, Technos hosted a leaving party; we drank cold Chinese tea, were offered fans as gifts, played games, listened to speeches and joined together to sing a song about friendship and depending on others. That day will stick in my mind forever as it was the day that the results of the EU referendum were announced- our country had voted to leave the European Union. We Pembrokians felt strangely emotional as we joined together with people from distant corners of the world to celebrate the values of international co-operation, hospitality and friendship with other nations, for one last time.
Lydie Sheehan

Matsumoto Castle, Nagano Prefecture

Akihabara district, Tokyo

Shinjuku district, Tokyo

Our bedroom window, Midori Nomura, Nagano Prefecture

Technos students near a shrine at Mount Fuji

Technos student greeting Pembroke students at Narita Airport