

Sofia Panourgias - Technos International Week 2023 Report

My experience with Technos International Week was certainly a journey, and one I feel has helped me learn new skills, meet wonderful people, and blossom. It was also one which challenged me, forced me to adapt and master the use of Google Translate! My desire to take part in Technos International Week was founded in a longstanding desire to visit Japan. I had already visited Japan, in a sense, through reading the novels of Hakuri Murakami, watching anime, and eating at Japanese restaurants, which are in abundance where I live in London. Japan was one of the countries I had the strongest desire to visit, but which I probably wouldn't be able to for years – or perhaps ever – if not for Technos.

Yet travelling to Japan, and our first days of arrival, were certainly a shock to my system. Everything had moved so suddenly: the abrupt end of term at Oxford, then scurrying back to London, unpacking my bags while packing a new one for Japan, and leaving for the flight straightaway at 5am the next morning. I got to the airport and eventually on the 13.5-hour flight riddled by an unhappy combination of exhaustion, anxiety, and nausea. I had been having problems sleeping and fear flying, which made the moment far from ideal...

We arrived in Japan safe and sound, though. Despite being affected by jet lag which continued to make me feel under the weather for the next few days, I felt warmly welcomed by and quickly at home with the Technos students who greeted us at the airport. They already knew all our names and received us with much needed Japanese snacks, like dango (団子) and Oi Ocha green tea, which would become a recurring ritual of our stay. As we couldn't yet check into our hotel, the students treated us to lunch at a conveyor-belt sushi restaurant in one of the shopping centres nearby. I couldn't appreciate the delicious food in that moment as I still felt nauseous and was becoming overwhelmed by all the bright lights and automated voices that sprung from speakers. Yet from the very beginning, there was a sense of being looked after and cared for, which made everything feel a little less daunting.

On Monday, we swiftly moved into tackling the packed two-week itinerary which we had been sent as a neatly organised schedule. The first day was one of introductions and an elaborate welcome ceremony which felt as though we were on a TV show, as a very well-equipped camera crew was broadcasting us on the big screen in the courtyard! We were a group of over thirty internationals from different parts of the world, accompanied by an attentive and dynamic group of Technos students. It was strange to jump straight into such a large and close-knit group of people, but the sense of excitement for what was to come was undeniable.



This sense of excitement was certainly justified. We immediately embarked on a variety of activities in Technos, ranging from workshops with Technos professors about Japanese art and culture, to lessons in the animation drawing department. We were introduced to different sections of the school, from the hotel majors who practiced cocktails in a custom-built hotel room and lobby within Technos, to the airline and transport majors who modelled an airline service in a custom-built plane within Technos! My very favourite activity, though, was the yukata (浴衣) and tea ceremony experience on our last day of classes. We were attentively and tightly dressed up in yukatas of our choice – mine was a men's style but that posed no problem – and took part in a tea ceremony led by an experienced sensei and her assistant. We ate

brightly coloured traditional sweets and drank rich green matcha (抹茶) from delicately decorated

bowls. The Technos students helped us every step of the way, and documented the ceremony with polaroid pictures we could take home.

Everyone involved in the activities – staff and students alike – was eager not only to make us feel at home by providing a great sense of hospitality and accessible topics throughout the programme but wished to impart their knowledge and experience to us. Indeed, one of my fondest memories of International Week was the casual way in which I was able to speak to such a range of people. We would each relate the different ways in which we grew up and were used to living, but also found striking similarities – in favourite foods and films, for example.



We also spent time doing activities outside Technos, particularly going around Tokyo with the students. We were treated to a variety of lunches while exploring the city with the students, from hot-pot to sushi and bento-boxes. During the scavenger hunt, we passed through a variety of districts in Western Tokyo and were instructed to take pictures of objects and places from a detailed list. On the Tokyo sightseeing day, we spent time in the East, where one of my favourite views was from a rooftop where we saw the surrounding buildings of the Imperial Palace juxtaposed by the booming office district which framed it. These were some of the best days of the programme, as we traversed countless different districts in just a few hours, absorbing the sounds and smells of the city fuelled by ice-cream and drinks from the vending machines on each corner.



One of the highlights of the trip was our three-day retreat to Midorinomura (Green Village), in the neighbouring Nagano Province. On our way there, we visited Mount Fuji and were lucky that the weather was in our favour so we could see the peak – we even climbed some of it. Afterwards, I bought sweet melon bread shaped like the volcano from a stall and ate it still steaming hot on the bus. Our time spent in Midorinomura was packed and went by quickly, from our collective cafeteria lunches, to bonding in the onsen (温泉), to taking part in sports activities. We also took in the sun and the greenery, and I enjoyed a simple afternoon of laying down on a bench reading a book. The second night there, we celebrated our time together with a festive barbecue. We came together with music and dancing, cooking a feast of meat, vegetables, rice, and noodles on teppanyaki style grills.



On our way back to Tokyo, we stopped at Matsumoto Castle, one of the oldest monuments of the type remaining in Japan. We were allowed to enter it and climbed six storeys up very steep wooden stairs to admire the view of Matsumoto city at the top. One of my favourite meals came at the tail end of this trip. We visited a nearby miso factory, Ishii Miso Brewery, where the traditional method of fermentation in huge cedar barrels was still used. What struck me most here was the meal we had at the restaurant, which featured a stew with the dark, aromatic 3-year fermentation miso as its base. Even better, though, was trying the miso ice-cream in their shop, which tasted sweet, nutty and salty, similar to a deep and delicate caramel.



Amidst all the activities we did with Technos, we also had some time to ourselves to explore Tokyo. My favourite parts included the street food market under the railway arches at Ueno, the kitchenware street, matcha ice-cream and impressive Sensō-ji shrine in Asakusa, and eating a feast of wagyu (for only £17 per person) in Kōenji. In the evenings, I visited the lively neon lights of Shinjuku and was charmed by its crowded vibrancy, particularly in the historic gay district of Ni-Chōme. Another great, perhaps more alternative spot was Shimokitazawa, where I was tempted by vintage clothes and had a delicious warabimochi (蕨餅) milk tea. Overall, my favourite areas around Tokyo were those which were charming without being overwhelmingly fast paced. I loved losing myself in the parks and going to the photography museum in Ebisu, then walking along the canal towards the increasingly bustling centre. Yet the most enduring feeling I will take away from Tokyo is the way in which I was welcomed by Technos College and its wonderful students, and the memories I made which I will never forget.



On our last night, our Pembroke group alongside some Technos students returned to the conveyor-belt sushi restaurant we had been to on the first day. Unlike that first day, however, I was not overwhelmed but rather overjoyed at the beautiful experience I had had in Japan. It was bittersweet to leave the next day, but I knew I had made the most of everything, from talking to new people to trying new foods, and affronting new challenges.

