

# Study-abroad at Kobe University

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My semester abroad in Kobe, Japan was one of the best experiences of my life. It was eye-opening and life-changing but more importantly, just a lot of fun. For those that are fortunate enough to be able to go on a study abroad, I highly recommend that you go for it. You can have eye-opening experiences anywhere. It doesn't necessarily need to be in Kobe because no matter where you are in the world, there are new things to discover and new people to meet. The advantage of a completely new environment and culture is that it makes it so easy to get into that mindset of exploring and having an open-mind, which is really amazing.

I hope that this following report (which describes how I prepared for Japan and my experience there) assists those that are either interested in or planning to study abroad. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

Before actually setting off on this journey, I began preparing for my semester abroad in the beginning of 2016. At this time, I saw an announcement for brand new CAU-Exchange-Scholarships for Kobe University in Japan on the Kiel university homepage. After seeing this, I contacted Andreas Ritter (from the international center) about the scholarships, and he then explained the application process to me in great detail. He proceeded to coordinate with Kobe University directly, and he really helped me a lot with the overall process.

I learned about two scholarships called PROMOS and JASSO, which are the two most popular scholarships for visits under a year. After being nominated by the CAU and accepted by Kobe university, it was necessary to apply for a student visa. For this process, I first had to call the Consulate General of Japan in Hamburg so that I could notify them that I would be applying and visiting for a student visa. I was required to bring in a letter of admission (sent to me by mail from Kobe University), a Certificate of Eligibility (which I got in my acceptance package from Kobe University), and my passport.

At this stage, don't forget to contact your assigned student tutor! This person will help you a lot and make your life in Japan a lot easier. Be extra nice to them (and bring them HARIBOs or chocolate). In addition, try to contact people that are going to Kobe at the same time or are already there! I was fortunate enough to fly from Frankfurt with a fellow student, and we had the long flight to get to know each other. Having another person to talk to on the flight makes it less scary and more enjoyable. In addition to this, you have someone you know by the time you first step foot into another country.

In regard to booking a flight to Japan, I suggest that you book as soon as possible. Through the PROMOS grant, my travel expenses were covered, and I booked my flight from Lufthansa, which was the cheapest option and had the additional benefit of allowing me to check in two suitcases. Be warned: do not pack too much because you will definitely have a lot of stuff to bring back. I was really glad I packed light when going. For having access to money in Japan, I highly suggest

getting a mastercard/visacard. There are options that have really cheap international withdrawal/ATM fees in convenience stores. In fact, for 7-11 ATMs in Japan, there are no fees for withdrawing money and for me, it was the best way to get Yen.

The first challenge in Japan was to get to Kobe University's International Dorm on Port Island. (There is a high chance that you will live here, as it is the standard accommodation for exchange students). I used an Airport Limousine service, which involved riding a big taxi/small bus directly to the front of the dorm.

Although this made traveling to the dorm for the first time a lot easier, the booking process was a bit difficult. Thus, I would suggest another route. You can take the ferry from Osaka airport (KIX) to Kobe Airport on Port Island. Then take the "Port Liner" to Kita Futo station. From there, the dorm is literally around the corner.

After arriving at the dorm, the managers in the dorm office helped me with the necessary registration forms. I then received my keys and proceeded to go to a nearby IKEA for sheets and other household goods. I finally felt as though I made it to Japan.

The Kobe University International Residence was my home for the entire duration of my stay in Japan. I was located in the smaller of the two room types. The room size was around 12qm<sup>2</sup>, including the bathroom and a cooking niche. Others definitely felt as though the room was too small, but I was actually ok with the limited amount of space. Since there was no internet in the rooms, I spend most of the time either in the

lobby or in one of the study rooms on the ground floor (where there was WIFI). It's important to understand that the dorm community is completely defined by how interested students are in maintaining one. After a friend and I invested in a pair of rackets and started inviting people to play with us, the ping pong table slowly started to be used more and more. The same was the case for the Nintendo Wii in the lobby that nobody took the time to set up. After getting the thing to work again and buying a few used controllers from Akihabara, there were always people playing together. Furthermore, regular movie nights on the TV became a thing. For all the nights spent going out going, there will be multiple of nights spent just in the dorm so spend them wisely.

The university (especially the economics faculty) offered well-kept facilities that turned out to be great environments for learning. Both the international student office and the student office for economics students were helpful and provided guidance whenever needed. The lectures that I could choose from were mainly the language and culture courses, the economics courses, and the SESAMI courses (which were held by visiting professors). Since transferring credits was not a priority for me, I opted for the classes that interested me the most. I especially liked the econometrics and portfolio management courses, which were taught by Clinton Watkins, a former professional from the finance industry. Hence, he was able to give direct insight in regard to the industry. Being exposed to different teaching styles and a different academic setting helped me expand my knowledge in new ways. It was definitely worthwhile to study at Kobe.

Kobe's city center around Sannomiya station had an international feel to it, with shopping (definitely check out the smaller, more hidden shops) and food places everywhere. There were karaoke places around every corner and cinemas. There was also a huge entertainment complex called Round 1 and multiple arcades to visit. My absolute favorite store in all of Japan was Donkihote, a chain that calls itself a shopping jungle. You can find everything there (just don't expect it to be of amazing quality). The more you venture outside the city center, the more you will see regular, quiet streets where residents are just going on about their lives. Going even further, Kobe has a lot of amazing nature to be explored. Hiking and going to the beach are a must.

It sounds counter intuitive, but one of the most amazing feelings settles in after the excitement and amazement of the first phase of the trip has settled in, and you experience some kind of routine. While taking the train to university, you begin to not focus on the fact that everybody is standing in neat lines to enter the train, a fact that amazed you for the first few weeks. The same goes for how you used to wonder how the train carts can be so silent and clean. Instead, you are only focused on not being late, and that it's you that has become an expert in maneuvering through the crowds. It's you that is getting annoyed by the people that are holding up the flow because they don't know how to use the ticket gates, even though it was you who did that a month ago.

I think the most important thing that made my Japan trip great was not having any expectations. This, of course, is different depending on the person, but for me, this really made my semester abroad a rewarding experience. Before going, I definitely did hear things here and there

about Japanese culture (like how it is difficult to find garbage cans in public), and I had a basic knowledge regarding its history and language. But I tried to not let previous assumptions influence my judgement, and I felt that it was important to experience everything as it was. This is how I was able to try everything with an open mind.

My experiences were broad and consisted of trips to Tokyo and Seoul alone (and again with a friend) and travelling in groups to Kyushu and Kyoto. I stayed in great and not so great Airbnbs, capsule hotels with no doors, and luxurious ryokans (traditional Japanese inns). I even had the opportunity to stay in a hotel that towered above Tokyo, with a bathroom that was double the size of the dorm room in Kobe.

In regard to food, I was also able to try some amazing stuff by not clinging onto assumptions and having restrictive thoughts. If I kept thinking about how foreign Japanese food was to me, I would have never tried a famous dish in Kumamoto that consisted of raw horse meat and fried lotus roots. If I had worried about staying up all night at a shabby internet cafe, I would have never visited a fish market in Tokyo for an amazingly fresh sushi breakfast. By being open-minded, I also experimented with every weird drink possible in vending machines, convenience stores, and supermarkets. I even found out that I did not like green ice-tea, one of the most ubiquitous things in Japan. Just by trying new foods in Japan, I eventually learned more about myself and Japanese culture.

It was the same with people. Some people I met along the way were interesting and fun while some were boring or irritating. There were also

others I really wished that I would have spent more time with. I, however, did not regret giving everybody a chance just by being open until the very end of my trip.

Here is something that people rarely talk about in these reports: Towards the end of the stay, a feeling of finality sets in. In a sense, you avoid the possibility of anything bad to tarnish your memories in the future because you see the trip as a closed of experience, like a chapter in a book. Thus, it becomes very easy to stop trying to add new experiences and to start preserving the good ones. For a few friends of mine, this feeling became overwhelming, and they even started to have doubts about whether the friendships they made in Japan meant anything, or they feared getting back to their “old lives”, which would mean that their “new selves” would be fading away.

I can safely say that at least for myself, this has not turned out to be true after coming back. I honestly feel like this is due to the view I expressed in the beginning of the report: No matter where you are in the world, there are new things to discover and new people to meet. To conclude, I would like to add the following: The things you discovered and the people that you met will always stay with you because they become a part of you.