

## YFU Experience in Japan

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One of my favorite Disney characters, Winnie the Pooh, once said, “How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.” I never knew that I would relate to this quote until the day I boarded the airplane departing from Japan, since my three-week cultural exchange

program had finally come to an end. Having to say “Goodbye!” or in Japanese, “Sayonara!” or “Matane!” to all the people I had met along my Youth For Understanding journey was more difficult than I expected. What made my experience so unforgettable and meaningful was learning what it meant to belong in a place that once felt unfamiliar.

On the day of all the exchange students’ arrival, we gathered in the National Olympics Memorial Youth Center in Tokyo for our orientation. There, we met other Youth For Understanding exchange students from South Korea, India, and Thailand. Together, we learned what to expect in Japan, such as its customs, etiquette, and daily practices. We also learned how to speak and write in the Japanese language to become more comfortable when communicating with the locals. I was taught that there was no problem in making mistakes, especially when trying to learn a new language, because they are stepping stones to improvement.



On the final night at the center, each country presented a cultural presentation. My fellow Filipino exchange students and I proudly shared our Philippine history, food, and values. Towards the end of our presentation, we introduced a popular and traditional party game called

*Hampas Palayok*, in which a blindfolded person is spun around and attempts to break a hanging clay pot filled with treats using a stick. During the game, everyone laughed and cheered for one another. My heart felt so full seeing all of us, the exchange students, enjoying our time together, even if we were all from completely different countries. It was truly a joyful and memorable evening for everybody, and that was just the beginning of our cultural immersion journey.

I met my host family at Kofu Train Station in Yamanashi the next day. I was so excited, yet also very nervous. When I noticed a kind lady and a young girl approaching me, I immediately knew it was finally them. They welcomed me with big smiles and hugs, which I thought was a very kind and thoughtful gesture. I bowed and greeted them, “Konnichiwa!” From that moment on, I was no longer just a visitor to them; I was going to be their daughter and sister for the next three weeks.



My host family and I created amazing memories together. I remember wrapping gyoza together with my host sister, Nene, while my *okasan* cooked them. After dinner, we would always watch a Disney movie or play video games together. Nene loves Pokémon, Stitch, and Yoshi, so she and I always played with her stuffed toys until it was time to sleep. I made an effort to play with her because I wanted to get to

know her as much as I could, and I do not regret it one bit. Seeing the sweet smile on her face after making her laugh was worth all the time I spent with her. My *okasan* also looked really happy that her daughter, Nene, finally had an older sister to look up to, and I was just grateful to have a loving and caring host family like them.

One of my favorite parts of my stay there was attending a Japanese High School. For the first time, I experienced cleaning the classrooms, hallways, and even the chemistry rooms using a broom, dustpan, cloth, and mop. It was very nice to see that everyone maintained cleanliness in their environment and possessed values of humility and discipline in doing so. Not to mention, I made new friends whom I want to stay in touch with for the rest of my life. Although it was sometimes difficult to communicate with them because of the language barrier, we were

still able to grow close and share many memorable moments. It taught me that cultural exchange stems from human connection and relationships, and it is about being open-minded to the thoughts and ideas of others.

Finally, came the end of my cultural exchange program. I felt a wave of emotions. I felt incredibly grateful to have met such wonderful people along my journey, yet so saddened by the fact that I had to say goodbye so soon. All the memories started playing in my head-- from meeting my host family for the first time to sharing stories with my classmates. It was truly a bittersweet moment.



My three-week cultural exchange program was a journey of transformation and learning. I returned home with more confidence, independence, and open-mindedness because I was able to see the world from a completely different perspective. Youth For Understanding showed me that cultural understanding begins when we open our hearts to others, because even the shortest experiences can leave lasting marks on who we become.

モンカショウとワイエフユー・ファウンデーション、ありがとうございます！

“Thank you, MONKASHO and the YFU Foundation!”

