

EXPERIENCE REPORT GLOBAL EXCHANGE – RITSUMEIKAN UNIVERSITY KYOTO



First of all, writing this report seems very surreal right now as it reminds me that my time in Japan is about to come to an end. It is safe to say that my exchange year in Kyoto is the best year I ever got to experience, and I would make the decision to study abroad over and over again.

Starting off with organizing the whole study abroad – it is very manageable even though it might seem overwhelming at first. The organization of my study abroad started about a year and a half before I left Germany, where I attended the “Wege ins Ausland” event of the International Office. The International Office Freiburg truly does an amazing job and whenever there are questions arising, they are happy to help right away and support us students whenever and wherever – before and during the stay abroad. The information provided is more than enough and you know exactly what to do for the application process. After handing in all required documents by the end of October, it took about two months to get the results on whether you are chosen for an exchange or not – which I luckily was.

For Ritsumeikan University, the next step for the application began mid-March, where an online portal opened in which we had to fill out another application and had to upload documents (Letter of Motivation, etc.). The application was due mid-April, we received the results at the end of June. During that time, there is not a lot to do except for waiting. The university advises you to not book a flight before receiving the results. However, booking in advance with a free cancellation option should be fine, as waiting longer would only cause the flight to get more expensive. Regarding the visa, you can start applying after the university sends out the Certificate of Eligibility, which I received in early August. I then went to the Japanese Embassy in Munich to apply for the visa, which takes around a week to get done, so I had to go to Munich again the following week to pick up my visa.

You are also able to apply for the university’s scholarships, which are RUSSES (Ritsumeikan University Short-Term Exchange Student Scholarship), which offers 40.000 Yen each month, or JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization), which pays monthly 80.000 Yen. You apply for both, however, the partner university decides which one of the two you will receive, if any. You can also apply for the Baden Württemberg Stipendium, for which the application goes right

to the International Office. In case you receive the BW Stipendium, you cannot receive RUSSES or JASSO, too.

Ritsumeikan University offers three dormitories and three private apartment blocks to live in. You have to hand in a preference list of where you would want to live, however, the university decides where you end up. Generally, I can recommend the dormitory since it gives way more opportunities to meet other international students and find friends to hang out with and go on several adventures with. Especially in the first weeks in a whole new country, this will be extremely helpful as a lot of us students experience the same feelings of being homesick, adjusting to a new life, etc. I was able to live in the International House Taishogun, which is the most modern dormitories on Ritsumeikan's Campus in Kyoto. I found people to connect with in no time and all dormitories sometimes organize events and parties which are typically super fun. Also, the dormitories have RM's (Resident Mentors) who help us students out with all the paperwork we have to do – health insurance, becoming a resident, fire insurance, etc. I am glad they are willing to help out any time because especially when you are not fluent in Japanese, it is extremely difficult to understand what to do.

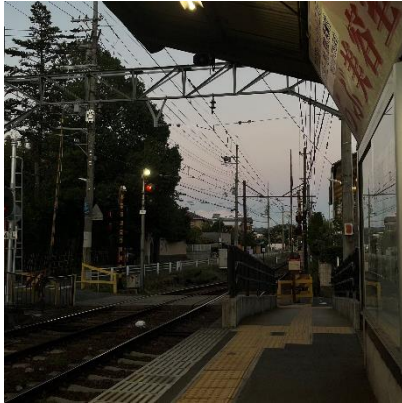
In Ritsumeikan's Study in Kansai Program, I chose the IJL (Intensive Japanese Language) Track for my exchange year. I had never learned Japanese before coming to Japan, except for six months of Duolingo, which at least helped me with basic sentences. Therefore, I started my first semester last fall in Japanese Level 1. For the IJL track there are eight Japanese classes a week, which are made up of Comprehensive, Listening and Speaking, and Writing classes. At first, classes were quite overwhelming, as all teachers speak only in Japanese and do not know a lot of English. I thought it was pretty difficult to understand anything at first as I did not know the language at all but it was taught in that exact language. However, over time I was able to adjust to it and looking back, I think it is helpful to do it that way. Now in my second semester, I am in Level 2, which is way more time consuming and difficult compared to Level 1. The number of assignments and tests is even higher than last semester. I cannot recommend taking any additional classes in English if it is not required for your studies back home.

In Ritsumeikan, students arrive in early September, but the semester starts about three to four weeks later. At first, I was a bit confused as to why we would have to arrive so early, but it makes actually so much sense. The time is more than needed to adjust to a whole different life and get to know how things work there. Also, there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be done in the first two weeks. Plus, it gives you the opportunity to travel to a lot of places prior semester start, as there is not that much time to travel while having classes. Our arriving period

was the first weekend of September, and on Monday there was a Welcome Day on campus for all the international students already, which was super cool as it gave us the opportunity to meet and befriend people already! We also got our SKP (Study in Kansai Program) Buddies who helped us with a bunch of procedures that needed to be done, for example, going to the ward office to receive our Residence Card. At first, the whole study abroad thing is extremely overwhelming after arriving in the host country. There are so many things to do, and it is quite hard to understand what actually needs to be done and how. However, there are so many other people going through the exact same thing which makes it a lot easier, and you can figure it out together. SKP Buddies went to the ward office with us, and to open a bank account, people in the international houses had their RM's (Resident Mentor) go with them, while in the private apartments, the landlord helped and accompanied the students to the post office.

In my opinion, Ritsumeikan University is a good university with an amazing campus. The Kinugasa Campus has two cafeterias, which offer tasty food, two convenience stores, a bento shop (which is my personal favorite) and cafes around campus! However, the food does get very repetitive over time as they have always the same food most of the time. Still very good, though. I also really like the curry rice with chicken – it tastes so good, and I already know I am going to miss it. :D They also have the so-called BBP (Beyond Borders Plaza). In the BBP are mostly international students and local students who are interested in the exchange with us internationals. It is generally hard to meet local students, which is why the BBP is the perfect place for that. They organize a lot of events each month where you can meet a lot of new people each time. Plus, there is also the possibility of finding a language exchange partner! Also, Ritsumeikan University offers a grand variety of club and circle activities, which you can join. They have a pamphlet each semester, which lists all club activities and how to contact them. It also states which level of Japanese you need, which is sometimes annoying because some clubs require a really high level of Japanese even though you do not really HAVE to communicate for those club activities. For sport clubs I feel like it is pretty difficult to get in. During my first semester I tried to contact and get into the Karate Club, from which I never received an answer. The same in my current semester, where I wanted to join the Taekwondo Club but never got an answer as well.

I have been living in Kyoto for ten months now and I am so glad I decided to do a study abroad and got the opportunity



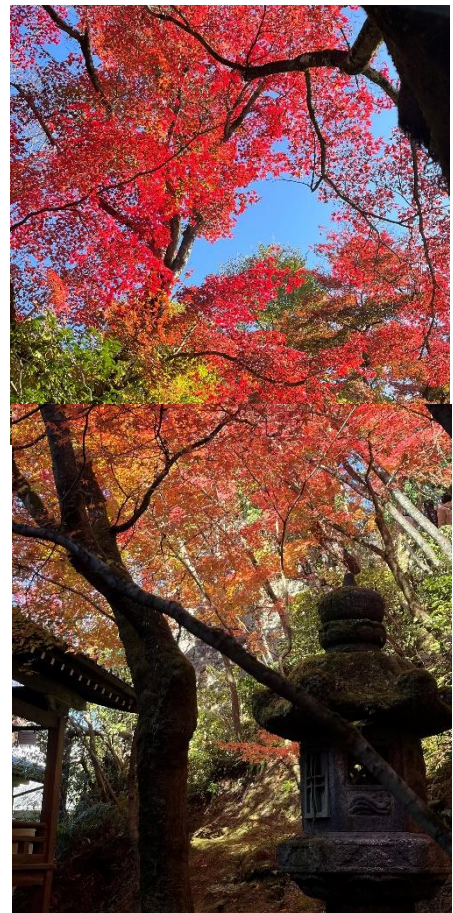
from the International Office to study at Ritsumeikan University. Kyoto is an amazing city with a lot of nature around, which I prefer compared to

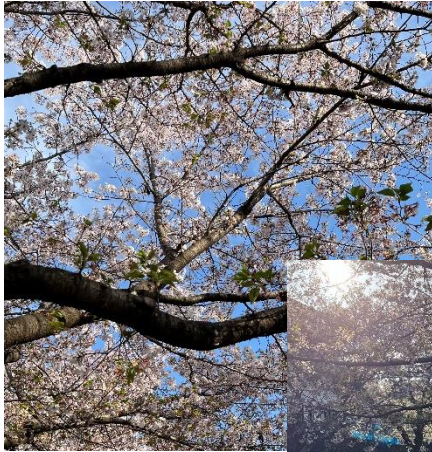


the “big city life”. The whole prefecture is just so beautiful and even after almost a year of living here, there is still so

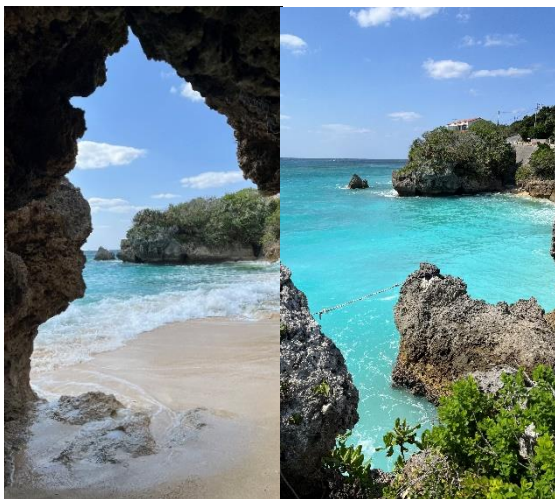
much I did not get to explore yet. My favorite cities around Kyoto are Kobe and Nara. Kobe is a really beautiful and rather quiet, not too crowded city. My favorite spot there is the Herb Garden, which I love to go to. It also has a port, which is especially beautiful at night, and sometimes there are even street musicians. Nara is known for its Deer Park which is also very nice but packed with tourists most of the times. There are temples and shrines around the park and up in the forest, which are extremely beautiful and peaceful.

On class-days there is often not a lot of time left to go and explore, unfortunately. However, it makes you more motivated to go out and do something productive on the weekends or just in general use all the free time you get. I usually try to do daytrips on the weekends to places that are a bit further away and go to temples and shrines in the city when I have time after my classes. I wish I could go on more weekend trips, however, the work we have to do for classes often does not allow to spend an entire weekend away. This is a reason why I can recommend a one-year stay instead of only a semester, as I feel like it goes by so fast and does not leave a lot of time to visit places further away. But maybe when you only got one semester you plan your time different to see as much as you can. Also, by staying for a whole year, I was able to see Japan during all





four seasons. In fall, I had the opportunity to witness the Momiji season, which was incredibly beautiful. I loved visiting temples during that time. Even though they were very packed with people at that time, it was still worth it going to all those places to see the leaves turn such a beautiful red. The same in spring, when the famous Sakura season started. It was just as beautiful – for people with allergies a bit hard, though... :D



The semester break from late January to early April was the best time for me to travel. Right after the fall semester ended in January, I went on a trip to Seoul which was super fun! In March, I even went to Okinawa and Ishigaki which were probably the most beautiful places I ever visited.

Just overall, I was able to go to so many places in Japan during my study abroad. I still have a month and a half left where I am planning to see a bunch

of places I have been missed to visit so far. What I like about Kyoto is, that it has so many other cities and amazing spots close around. Osaka is a great city to go shopping or especially in the evening in the city's Dotonbori, it is so beautiful with all the lights and the river. I already mentioned Nara and Kobe close around. Himeji is not too far as well. And Awaji, which is also about two hours away from Kyoto, got some pretty cool theme parks. Especially the Naruto theme park which I went to – it was so much fun. Nagoya is only a two-hour bus ride away, and it is actually quite cheap as well! I also did a two-day trip to Hiroshima, which was amazing. I really liked the city and I think it also might be one of my favorites of what I have seen in Japan so far. It is also not even two hours with the Shinkansen away from Kyoto – you can also choose the bus ride which takes about five hours and is of course the cheaper option!

Overall, I am more than happy with my study abroad experience and I can recommend it to everyone who has the opportunity to go as well. It helps you grow in so many ways, too. I was always pretty introverted and shy, but my year abroad helped me a lot in breaking out of my shell, being more spontaneous. I met amazing people that turned into even more amazing friends who I would not want to miss for anything in the world. ☺ The times we spent together and the number of memories we made and adventures we went on together are going to stick with me and I will cherish them forever.

I am so incredibly grateful to have gotten the chance to come to Japan for a whole year and make all these experiences – good and bad. Thank you to the International Center in Freiburg to have given me the chance to come here and for always being so fast to help and reach back out whenever there were issues and questions occurring – while still being in Freiburg during the application process, and especially during my stay on the other side of the world in Japan.

