

My Experience in Asahikawa, Japan by Amanda Poore

March, 2011

apoore09 {at} gmail {dot} com

My name is Amanda Poore, and I spent a year in Asahikawa, Japan from 2007 to 2008. I applied on a whim, looking for an adventure, and that is exactly what I found. More importantly, my year in Japan was a defining moment in my life that shaped my worldview and future goals.

I was one of six applicants in 2007, and at the young age of fifteen, I wasn't sure if I'd be accepted. Luckily, I had taken the initiative to begin studying Japanese on my own with a tutor for a year before I applied. (If you are reading this and are planning to apply for the exchange program in the next couple of years, I would suggest you begin researching the language and possibly find a tutor to teach you the basics. The more Japanese you know before you go, the better your experience becomes!) I think it was my slight knowledge of Japanese that helped me to stand out among the applicants that year. I was so excited when I received an acceptance letter from the Sister Cities committee!

I was so young, and very scared to leave my family to fly halfway across the world by myself. Somehow I made it, and though I felt homesick the first night in the airport hotel, all homesickness disappeared when I met my host family the next day. They welcomed me into their home and I never looked back.

While in Japan, I lived with four host families (moving every three months, per Sister Cities custom) and attended Asahikawa Kita High School. These experiences meeting new people and adjusting to customs different from my own helped me to grow and mature. I was able to discover and develop my own values and learn about my own culture.

I experienced so many things in Japan! I made many friends, both Japanese and foreign (other exchange students like me, from all over the world). I learned and became fluent in Japanese. I represented Bloomington-Normal and the United States to my high school and the city of Asahikawa and spoke at Sister Cities events. As a representative of Bloomington-Normal, I got to meet the mayor and other city officials. Culturally speaking, I was able to visit an Ainu village (similar to a Native American reservation here), learn and perform the Japanese tea ceremony, wear a kimono, and attend many cultural festivals throughout the year. I was also able to travel around Japan: Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka on a school trip, and several cities in Hokkaido with my host family. When I wasn't experiencing these special events, I was attending school, studying, or shopping and singing karaoke downtown with my friends. In short, it was an amazing year! Here is a list of some other things I did (in no particular order):

- Met a member of Japanese Diet (interesting story)

- Spoke at my school
- Went to a formal tea ceremony in Tokyo
- Went skiing for the first time (and was terrible at it)
- Participated in my school sports and culture festivals
- Attended Asahikawa's Winter Festival
- Celebrated Bon-Odori, Tanabata, summer firework festival, New Year's
- Ate lots of ramen
- Learned how to make mochi (Japanese rice cakes), and ate it freshly-made
- Took Japanese Language Proficiency Test
- Practiced calligraphy
- Visited small towns surrounding Asahikawa
- Took a trip to an onsen (hot springs)
- Visited public baths
- Discovered Japanese music, TV, and movies that I liked
- Ate delicious food
- Visited Asahikawa's Asahiyama Zoo
- Helped with English classes at school
- Visited Japanese grade school and junior high

Of course, your year will differ greatly from mine, depending on your school and host families, and the way you choose to spend your time! Many of these experiences were made possible by the graciousness of my host families, so they are not guaranteed in every case. However, it is certain that there are a multitude of opportunities waiting for you in Asahikawa, and they will open your eyes to a wider world than the one you see now.

My year in Japan led me to choose the plan of study I'm now pursuing at the University of Illinois. I'm a sophomore majoring in Linguistics with a focus in Japanese and pursuing a certificate in Translation Studies. I hope to become a Japanese-English translator in the future, or possibly go to graduate school to become an interpreter. My prior knowledge of the Japanese language and culture makes me stand out among my classmates, and also makes Japanese class a breeze! I'm even applying to study abroad in Japan again next year, this time in Tokyo to study linguistics and translation at International Christian University. Yes, studying abroad is that good!

The opportunity to study abroad in Asahikawa is not one to pass up. Almost no one studies abroad in high school, and the distinction will earn you the attention of colleges and employers. Most importantly, the experience will change your life. This is not something to be taken lightly, but if you're willing to put in the work of studying a new language and actively pursuing relationships with others, your year in Japan will be a life-changing experience, and a memory to cherish for the rest of your life.

For more information about my experience, or if you have any questions for me, please feel free to email me at apoore09 {at} gmail {dot} com.

Good luck!

Amanda Poore



