

National Diet Building, Tokyo, Japan, illuminated at night. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y64eh64u>.

## Leading a Short-Term Study Trip for Students in Japan

By Daniel A. Métraux

The best way for students to study the history, culture, and livelihoods of another country is through an organized in-country experience. There are various benefits that can accrue through such an endeavor. One can learn about a part of the world away from home while at the same time gaining a deeper appreciation of one's own culture by looking at it from the outside.

Ideally, a student will spend a full semester or year studying abroad, but that is a luxury that many cannot afford in terms of time or money. Another possibility is a carefully orchestrated group trip of ten to fifteen college-age students who travel with an informed instructor to a specific locale for two or three weeks of intensive study. The instruction should include the study of the host nation's history, culture, and contemporary institutions and population. Efforts must be made to visit important historical or cultural sites, and to mingle with and especially have the chance for conversations with residents of the country. A short visit of two to three weeks can produce a fairly superficial view of another people and their culture, but even a brief encounter can give students a greater appreciation of the world around them.

Taking student groups abroad for short study courses was the most satisfying experience in my almost four decades of teaching at Mary Baldwin University (MBU) in Virginia. MBU has a short three-week "May term" every spring where it is possible for professors to take small groups of students abroad for mini-study tours. Over the years, I took students to Japan, China, Korea, Russia, Australia and New Zealand, Israel–Palestine, and all over Europe, including Switzerland, Italy, and Croatia. Because I am a Japan specialist who lived, worked, and studied in that country for several years as a student and young scholar, my most effective study abroad courses involved a dozen or more experiences in Japan from the early 1980s through 2015. The major goal of the essay that follows is to provide a nonspecialist undergraduate or high school instructor who might have the opportunity to take students to Japan (or visit Japan alone or with a partner) with what I believe to be an optimal Japan experience given limited time.

### Developing a Brief Study Visit to Japan

A meaningful study trip to Japan must incorporate three elements: introducing the student to the natural beauty of the land, visiting important historical and cultural sites, and encountering modern institutions such as schools and government buildings. My colleagues and I also included visits to various businesses to allow students to see Japanese at work. Such visits included a stop at the news office of a major television station where students could watch a full noon news broadcast. We also included visits

to a major Tokyo newspaper, department stores, and a recruiting office for Japanese students who wish to study in the United States.

Planning a study tour involves visits to many sites of interest, but there is also a realization that the students need at least two or three free days spread out throughout the trip to allow them to rest or go out on their own individually crafted experiences. Japan, with its justly deserved reputation as a safe place to travel and urban areas that consistently provide English-language signs for public transport and tourist attractions, is particularly appropriate for student-generated side trips. Students looked forward to these days off and found their own way to such places as Tokyo Disneyland, the Ghibli Art Museum in the Tokyo suburb of Mitaka to study Japanese animation, and Tokyo's early morning fish market.

Each of these Japan study tours was listed in my college's catalog as a three-credit-hour May term course titled Introduction to Asia. Students had to register for the course and subsequent trip by the beginning of February. The faculty included myself and another colleague who went on all Japan study tours with me. We met with our ten to fourteen students for six two-hour sessions during the spring semester, where we got to know each other as a group and we familiarized the students with the dynamics of the trip. Students received a brief overview of traditional and modern Japanese history, religion, and aspects of modern culture, including the role of education, the changing status of women, and modern Japanese pop culture. Students gained a lot by viewing the 2005 movie *Nana* about contemporary pop stars in Japan. Given the continued popularity of Japanese popular culture, more recent movies might be substituted for the one we used. We always invited exchange students from Japan to visit the class to talk about youth culture in Japan.

We also assigned students various readings on Japanese history and culture, and required a series of essays responding to questions concerning the readings. Students read Christopher Goto's excellent 2009 book *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction*, my own 2001 book *Under the Gaijin Gaze* about education and the changing status of women, and selected articles on Japanese culture from past issues of *Education About Asia*. We developed essay questions asking students to discuss various Japan topics such as the role of Shinto as a religion of thanksgiving, who the students felt was responsible for Pearl Harbor, and to compare and contrast the worldviews of young women in Japan and the United States. Since the course was open to all Mary Baldwin students, including those who had never taken a course in Asian studies, this preparatory work



*Buddha daibutsu*, Kamakura, Japan. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y3lp2hcy>. Photo by Dirk Beyer.

meant that every participant had some background understanding of Japan before going there.

Another advantage of our six meetings before the actual trip was that we got to know each other as a group. We spent a lot of time with group discussions and listening to student questions, which always created a greater sense of group cohesion, which is vital for the success of the trip. By the end of this preparatory class, everybody knew each other's names and personalities, which allowed us to work more as a cohesive group when in Japan.

### Travel and Lodging

Taking off from Dulles International Airport was always an exciting time, especially for those two or three students who had never flown before and who, when they arrived in Japan, were riding trains for the first time. There were always students who had never really been away from Virginia but who were on their way to Tokyo. We always tried to travel on a Japanese airline, where our students could become acquainted with Japanese service and watch select Japanese movies en route.

When we began making these study trips to Japan in the mid-1980s, we found that it was most economical in terms of cost and time to choose one base of operations rather than moving students from one hotel to another. This led to our decision to focus our trips on Tokyo, which offered, along with some day trips, all the sites that we wanted students to experience while in Japan: nearby historical sites such as Kamakura, Hakone, and Nikkō would give students a sense of Japan's heritage and natural beauty, while Tokyo itself would provide opportunities to visit museums, a couple of schools, the National Diet (parliament), and various Tokyo-area businesses.

There are many fine, efficient hotels in central Tokyo that cater to foreign student groups. We always chose the Hotel Asia Center of Japan (*Ajia*



View of Mount Fuji from Lake Ashinoko. Source: 123RF stock photo. © Sakarin Sawasdinaka.

*Kaikan*) in Akasaka, very close to the Roppongi area of central Tokyo. The Hotel Asia Center of Japan still caters to foreign study tour groups with inexpensive but clean rooms and individual baths. We got double and triple rooms at very reasonable rates, which included a sumptuous breakfast that always included fresh fruit and some of the best croissants I have ever eaten. The center was very near several major subway lines that could take us anywhere we wished to travel in the city. Students soon became quite adept at using the Tokyo subways and made full use of them on their own during their free days.

We always timed our trips for May just after the crush of the national holiday Golden Week (late April and early May) and before the dreary and muggy monsoon rainy season that makes portions of summers so wet and miserable in Japan. May in Japan offers cool, sunny days and the glory of beautiful gardens in full bloom.

### Historic and Scenic Sites Relatively Near Tokyo

The Tokyo area is blessed with a number of important cultural and historic sites that were not destroyed during the Pacific War. The most important of these places is the coastal city of Kamakura, which from 1185 to 1333 was the shogunal capital of Japan. Visitors to Kamakura, only about an hour from Tokyo station by train, can see a great number of stunning Buddhist temples and shrines that rival many of those found in Nara and Kyoto. I always took my students to the Hase temple complex, which includes caves, beautiful gardens, historic temples, and stunning mountain views of Kamakura's beaches and harbor. We also visited the big Buddha (*daibutsu*) and Hachimangu Shrine, and hiked across the island of Enoshima to enjoy the caves, rocky coastline, and crashing waves on the far side of the island. Enoshima is connected to the mainland by a short causeway and is located just west of Kamakura, a few minutes by train from Kamakura station.

Another historic site that all visitors to Japan should visit is Nikko National Park deep in the mountains of central Japan but only two hours one way from downtown Tokyo. There is a large temple and Shinto shrine complex that honors the Tokugawa shoguns, as well as spectacular natural scenery, including Lake Chuzenji with its famous waterfall, which enthralled each of my student groups.

Students always got a thrill when we traveled from Tokyo to nearby Fuji Hakone National Park, roughly ninety minutes, and about fifty miles west by train from Shinjuku station in Tokyo. The trip includes a good haul on the Hakone Tozan railway, several cable car rides, and a lengthy boat ride across Lake Ashinoko with spectacular views of Mount Fuji. This trip also includes a visit to various thermal hot springs, where tourists can experience the beauty of Japan's mountain scenery.



The Seimon Ishibashi bridge crosses over the moat and leads to the main gate of the Imperial Palace.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y2wmaoxn>. Author: Kakidai.



Meiji Jingu Stadium. Source: Screen capture from the video *TIA&TW: Behind the Scenes—Meiji Jingu Stadium* by This America & The World video on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/yykpekzf>.

### Opportunities in Tokyo

Tokyo is a vast, very modern city with a virtually infinite number of interesting opportunities to pursue. In order to deepen historical understanding of the city, I always took my students first to the outer moat and views of the Imperial Palace (once the residence of the Tokugawa Era shoguns from 1600 to 1868), which are spectacular. Another must-visit is the Meiji Shrine in the Harajuku section of Tokyo. Students always took a special liking for the Inner Garden, with its beautiful iris garden that was always in full bloom when we visited. I always took the students to the huge Edo Museum, which gives a very colorful and comprehensive view of Tokyo history from the Edo period (1600–1868) to the Pacific War bombing and rebirth of Tokyo after the war.

Some students always asked me to take them to the Yasukuni War Memorial Shrine and associated war museum. Before visiting Yasukuni Shrine, I explained that it was a memorial to honor Japanese war dead and that several of Japan's notorious wartime leaders were honored there. The adjoining museum's focus is Japan's modern military history and includes a brief movie honoring Japan's war dead.

When I was a full-time faculty member, Mary Baldwin College had two sister school relationships with a small college outside of Tokyo and with Soka University in Hachioji, a Tokyo suburb. Instructors and students on a study tour of Japan should make every effort to visit one or more Japanese schools. We spent a full day visiting the Soka primary, middle, and high schools in Tokyo, which gave my students ample time to meet and mingle with Japanese students of all ages. There was also a visit with students at our other sister school.

Another must-visit is the National Diet in Tokyo. I had long ago befriended a leading member of the Diet, who always met with our students and personally guided them through some of the inner sanctums of Japan's parliament. This is not a likely one-to-one relationship many study tour leaders might have, but there are also public tours that foreigners are welcome to join. Lunch in the parliamentary dining room is also highly recommended.

### Nara and Kyoto

As described earlier, because of severe time limits and the abundance of things to see and do in Tokyo, we made the Tokyo (Kantō) region the hub of our activities. However, I offered an optional one-day trip to Nara and Kyoto for those students interested in getting a glimpse of these historic cities. We left on the first morning *shinkansen* (bullet train) headed to Kyoto from Tokyo Station, arrived at 8:30 a.m. We spent a full morning in Nara visiting Tōdaiji temple and associated temples and shrines in the morning, as well as a variety of temples and Nijo Palace in the afternoon, in Kyoto, we paid a courtesy visit to our sister college in Kyoto, Doshisha Women's College. We caught the last train back to Tokyo after dinner.

Our students got a very good taste of Japan in two and a half weeks and were always reluctant to leave. It was fascinating to learn what they had done on their free days. A number always made the trek to Tokyo Disneyland or went with me to see a Japanese baseball game at the Tokyo Dome or at Meiji Jingu Stadium near our hotel. Others found their way to the morning fish market, and all of them spent countless hours in various large department stores in Shinjuku and Harajuku and at various youth hangouts in Shibuya. I was always amazed at how adept even the shiest student became at mastering the maze of Tokyo subways.

Students were obliged to keep a detailed journal of their impressions of Japanese life, which also became the basis of their final grade for the Introduction to Asia course.

Two to three weeks is a very short time to visit another country, but it was a very welcome opportunity for students with limited time and budgets. They always commented that their own culture was in itself unique, and they expressed greater respect and tolerance for people from other places. A number of these students later returned to Japan to spend a full semester at one of our sister schools in Japan. Many became teachers in Japan's JET Program, and even today, years after my retirement from full-time teaching, there are a half-dozen or more former students who have made Japan their permanent homes.

Mary Baldwin's unique relationship with Japanese schools has brought dozens of Japanese students to study at our Virginia campus for a semester or a full year. We also receive students from India, Taiwan, China, and Korea, which allows American students to encounter young Asians on their own turf. I am grateful to have been part of the international exchanges that have occurred because of the college.

I also hope this essay is helpful to those instructors and students who wish to maximize their opportunities in Japan given limited time. ■

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