

Memories of Japan — Destination of Great Minds

Dinh Duy Khanh

Time flies and it has been a year since my Fellowship Programme course ended in tears of joy and smiles of love. Honestly, 2 months studying in Japan was one of the most wonderful times in my life with many marvels, close feelings, and remarkable lessons. I still remember clearly the first day I landed at Narita Airport, met the JR East members, started to breathe the fresh air of a new country, met my new fellow trainees, and also tried to understand the new language of many conversations around Japan. After staying one night at a hotel near Narita and then taking the train to Omiya, my first impression was the cleanliness of surroundings and the well-ordered traffic. 'Japan has the things that many other countries still wish for', I thought. I had my first meeting with the managers and staff of the Omiya Dormitory where I would live for my whole student life. I was stunned by their hearty welcome and warm greetings showing great mutual respect. From Omiya, I took the Shonan-Shinjuku Line for daily classes at the JR East Headquarters near Shinjuku Station. This year, our course had six trainees: two from Indonesia, one from Mongolia, one from Thailand, and two from Viet Nam—my beloved home. To be honest, it is really hard to compare what we have in Viet Nam with what I learned in Japan in terms of technique and infrastructure. By giving many lessons ranging from the general view of Japan to a detailed introduction of JR East's systems, our JR East teachers provided a balanced and better understanding of Japan. I was able to visit track maintenance, train operation, and R&D centres, as well as fantastic shopping malls inside station buildings. To secure safe operations and deliver satisfying services, JR East focuses much attention on R&D into better

methods and technologies for their systems because the company plays a key role in the transport sector. Unlike many other countries, Japan suffers from natural disasters like earthquakes, typhoons, etc., so investing in disaster prevention systems is a priority, which was a comforting thought when riding the conventional lines and shinkansen.

Like many other foreign students, as well as studying and gathering knowledge, I spent my weekends on trips to historical and tourist destinations. Since 'historical places are traces of time', my first weekend began with a visit to the Imperial Palace. After 40 minutes by train from Omiya to Tokyo Station and 10 minutes of walking, I reached the stone walls and guard-towers in front of the Palace and then walked on to the East Garden—a beautiful green space in the middle of the bustling city. I am sure that spring must be a charming time to experience its poetic beauty. Next, I went to discover the beauty of modern Tokyo around Tokyo Station and Tokyo Bay. The many different shops, restaurants and



East Garden near Imperial Palace, Tokyo

(Author)



Tokyo Bay waterfront

(Author)



Shinjo in Yamagata Prefecture

(Author)

countries. As part of these studies, I moved to Shinjo to look for more suitable railway structures. Shinjo is in Yamagata Prefecture, near the hometown of O-shin, a famous character in a Japanese film of the same name. The autumn colours and perfectly natural combination of rivers clinging to the foothills of mountain ranges was especially impressive.

As well as sakura cherry blossom season, Mt Fuji is a well-known Japanese symbol, so I chose to explore this volcano. On a clear November Sunday, my counterpart and I took the train and then hired a car to drive part way up Mt Fuji to stage 5. Only the peak was snow-covered but the temperature there

cafés combine into an ‘underground city’ at Tokyo Station that is well worth a visit. Just 20 minutes by train from Tokyo Station to Tokyo Bay takes you from the busy populous areas to scenes of luxurious yachts, soft breezes, and the smell of the blue ocean.

To understand more about Japan’s railway system, not only did I ride trains around the Kanto region, but I also studied the rural railways, because they have so many things in common with railways in developing

was below 5°C and low enough to form ice in some places. Standing there, I felt like I was standing on the shoulder of a giant samurai who has a cool head and mysterious power to reign over his beloved land. Now I can proudly say ‘watashi wa Fuji-san e ikimashita’ (I visited Mt Fuji).

One of the greatest opportunities while in Japan was a 2-day visit to Nikko, a World Heritage Site. This place has many famous beauty spots like the Shinkyo Bridge, Kegon Waterfall, Toshogu Shrine, and Kinugawa River. I still



Stage 5 half way up Mt Fuji

(Author)



Shinkyo Bridge

(Author)



Kinugawa River near Nikko World Heritage Site

(Author)

remember clearly the thrill riding down the Kinugawa river in a small, flat-bottomed, wooden boat with a boatman in traditional blue clothes. All six trainees were continuously exclaiming 'beautiful, oh, beautiful' as we rode the whitewater between cliffs covered in autumn colours on both banks with romantic bridges overhead.

Besides beauty spots and historical places, I looked for new experience in Japanese foods. I tried many dishes like sashimi (raw fish), and udon (a kind of thick white noodle) ... sake rice wine is a worthwhile addition to my list of favourites. Drinking cups of warm sake in a small pub on winter nights was a special pleasure. Japan has many food styles to satisfy every personal taste, but the seafood was especially fresh, tasty and good for health.

During my 2 months in Japan, I experienced three small (thankfully) earthquakes as well as Japanese daily life, visited many beauty spots and historical places, tasted Japanese food and drink, chatted with Japanese friends, studied the railway systems, ... everything now reminding me again of a people with spirit supporting each other against disasters, watched over by my giant samurai Mt Fuji waiting for sakura season to come

around. If I have another chance to visit Japan, I'll start my first weekend at the Imperial Palace again and spend more time there. ■



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