

Japan-Denmark People to People Interchange 2012 Cultural Exchange Report

In this report I will discuss my thoughts on and experiences during my trip to Japan.

First I would like to share some of my overall thoughts on the program and program planning, and then I will walk through the schedule and elaborate on my impressions from the various activities. Last but not least I will comment on my fellow participants.

Overall comments

Since this was the first year to hold this interchange program there were some points that could be improved.

The biggest problem was the language issue. It is unfair to announce at the time of application that Japanese is not required and then make a program almost entirely in Japanese. The language was mostly not an issue for me, but I felt very bad towards Lars, and it was uncomfortable for all of us. So either the program must make it a requirement to have high language skills (which would drastically limit the possible applicants) or work out the language problem in the program, possibly by having an interpreter when necessary.

Another possible improvement would be to have an introduction sheet for applicants with info on the program, the sponsors, the goals and all the requirements and deadlines.

Once in Japan the program was busy, but actually that was very good. During our short stay we had a lot of precious experiences. In the evenings we were exhausted, but there were time for little breaks here and there. However if the program were to be extended, a little more free time would be necessary.

The program was varied, usually with contrast between the activities (E.g. Edo museum/Akihabara or lunch meetings on society/silk dying). At the end of the five days I felt I had been on a one month trip, simply because I had experienced so much.

Day to day impressions

Saturday the 11th February:

On our first day in Japan I was fairly tired, and therefore it was nice that the schedule was neither packed, nor too craving.

Upon arrival in Narita, Airport we were greeted very warmly by our hosts, professor Kusunose and her assistant Yuuki. After a short break we headed for Tokyo and visited the Tokyo Edo Museum for a guided tour.

The guide spoke English, so we didn't have to use a lot of energy on Japanese. The museum gave a very thorough introduction to old Edo, and it was a great way to start a study tour mainly focussed on the Tokyo area. In some sense it gave us a nice historic introduction, before we went to see anything else.



The museum also had a Showa-area corner, and I couldn't resist this poster of the first Japanese car. I love old cars, and this poster is both funny and charming.

After our tour we headed for Akihabara where Camilla, Lars and I had gyudon for lunch, and went for a small walk.



The scenery in Akihabara was a sudden contrast to the Edo museum we had just visited.



We bought refreshments in a convenience store: warm canned coffee and bottled tea. You can't get that in Denmark!

We met up with Kusunose and Yuuki and entered a shopping area called 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan, which has some very cosy stores with different kinds of craftsmanship and design, mostly handmade.



Lars applying paint.

In one store you could actually try out the paint! It was really simple to apply and the colours vivid and pretty. The store also had advertisements for the Japanese company SwedenHouse, which builds environmentally friendly houses. To us, they didn't look that Scandinavian, but it is a good idea anyway.



Camilla looking into a kaleidoscope.

We talked a bit with the owner of a small kaleidoscope shop. She was actually planning to make a kaleidoscope using a Danish coin! Danish and Japanese culture seemed very close somehow.

Sunday the 12th February:

On Sunday we visited Higashi Matsushima, one of the cities hit by the disaster of March 11 2011.

As an intern at the Danish Embassy to Japan during and after the disaster, I have worked on various projects with connection to the city of Higashi Matsushima, and through this work I felt some sort of connection to the place. Therefore it made a very big impact on me to actually be able to go and see the city with my own eyes.

We were showed around the devastated part of the town by Mr. Sato from the division of reconstruction, and it was almost unbelievable to hear him talk with such optimism about the work, while we where driving through areas with almost nothing left. It's very inspiring to meet a person with this kind of strength and will to move forward. The visit was very emotional, but it was a mixed experience, on the one hand I felt extremely saddened, on the other filled with hope for the future.



Sato and a colleague overlooking some of the worst hit areas.



Camilla and Lars with our Tohoku campaign scarfs.

The afternoon didn't have any activities, so I met up with two of my friends in Tokyo, Kanagawa Shingo and Nishimura Mitsuru. They are both young artist working with photography.



Kanagawa, Nishimura and me in Shibuya.

Afterwards I had dinner with two other friends, and went to see one of them play with his band DALLAX in Shimokitazawa.

Monday the 13th February:

Our first appointment on Monday was a lunch meeting with a student and a professor of law from Keio University. Before the meeting we had a little spare time and went for a walk in the Meguro area.



Camilla and Lars in Meguro.

This meeting itself was very interesting for me, as I'm studying modern society, with a minor in political science. Furthermore it's a great experience to hear the opinions of foreigners who study Denmark.

Having said that it seemed odd to me that Mr. Kurachi, who studies the Scandinavian economic system, did not know much about the culture or daily life of the people of Scandinavia. From a strictly economic point of view it might make sense just to study how the system works. But if the purpose of the study is to evaluate whether this system could apply to Japan, I believe it would be wise to study both the historic foundations, and the impact on the culture and quality of life of the Scandinavian peoples.

This made me remember some common misconceptions about Denmark that I have often heard in Japan:

1. Vikings are pirates (The entire population of Scandinavia in that period, from farmers, traders and, yes, plunderers, were Vikings)
2. In a welfare state everything is free (*Nothing* is free, we pay a very high price through taxes)
3. All Danes are blond and have blue eyes

I wonder what can be done to counter these stereotypes.

Later we visited Somemono Hakubutsukan, and after an interesting introduction we even had a chance to try our hand at traditional silk dyeing!



Lars applying colour to the silk using a pattern cut in Japanese paper.

In the evening we had a dinner meeting with Oda Hideaki, a member of the UNSC Advisory Board on Water Sanitation, who explained about the damage done by the tsunami using before and after photos



The Japanese garden.

We stayed at International House Japan, which was more relaxed than our first hotel and had a gorgeous garden. However it was inconvenient to have to split up our luggage (we left our suitcases at the first hotel). It would have been better to know this beforehand so we could have backed a suitable bag as well. Furthermore we didn't have that much time to enjoy the hotel since all three of us used the evening to write our speeches for the next day.

Tuesday the 14th February:

Tuesday was by far our longest day, and started off with a visit to the Kikkoman Soy plant in Noda. I was very surprised that Kikkoman has kept its factories in this town, and the traditional production methods for so many years. I was also happy to learn how they recycled the by-products for other uses.



Silos with fermenting soybeans in Noda.

From the factory we went to Gakubu – the music department of the Imperial Household Agency. We entered through a gate normally not open to public and walked through parts of the imperial grounds to get to the music department. Once there we were shown around and a musician demonstrated how one of the instruments sounded like. This was an exceptional look into a world that one wouldn't normally have access to and we felt very lucky.



A beautiful costume used in gagaku.

After a short break at the International House, we visited an traditional calligraphy, or shodo, workshop. We were seated in a tatami room with ikebana, and served tea and Japanese sweets before we began. I have tried shodo before at a high school, but the mood and skill at this workshop was at a completely different level, and I got a bit nervous. But the teacher was kind and it turned out to be a lot of fun.



Lars is preparing the ink.

Then we attended the yearly meeting at the Japan-Denmark association. We were going to give a speech but I had felt pressed for time to practice and was afraid to make mistakes. Especially because Prince Hitachi no Miya and his wife were present. But when we started talking in Japanese people seemed surprised, and we were received very warmly. The prince and princess even complimented our Japanese! This was an amazing experience that I don't think I'll ever forget.

Unfortunately, we could not stay long enough to talk to the other guest or eat, because we were going to be on Tokyo MXTV. I was a bit sad because I felt I disappointed the members at the Japan-Denmark association who were interested in talking with us. It was also my impression that this was the main event of the trip, so it felt weird to have to hurry out of the building.

At Tokyo MXTV we met with the staff and went through the program, rehearsed and then appeared on the live show. It was a lot of fun to actually be in the studio and see the planning of a TV program. Our appearance was made through a paper wall, which was strange but hilarious, and we got a chance to talk about the tour and our experiences so far. Japanese television is very different from Danish television, and the set-up with a panel of people reacting to different things (guest, video-clips, news, food etc.) always struck me as a bit odd, but entertaining.



Our group photo with the crew!

Wednesday the 15 February

Having completed our speeches and the TV show the day before, I felt a lot more relaxed on Wednesday.

We travelled to Fuchu city and visited the 900 year-old Shinto shrine Okunitama Jinja for a special ceremony in the inner shrine. I have never been to the inner shrine of any temple, and during the ceremony the atmosphere was almost magical and I felt very calm. After the ceremony a priest did an extra chant for our safe flight home, and we received talismans and gifts from the head priest. I felt lucky just to be in the inner shrine and was very surprised by the kind treatment we received.

The priest followed us around most of the day, and even drove us in his car.

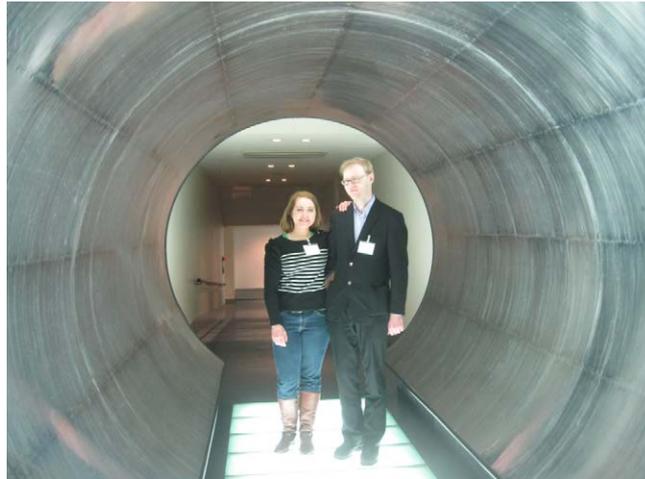
From the shrine we walked to the city hall and had an informal talk with the mayor of Fuchu. The mayor was 40, and the Japanese thought he was very young for a mayor. But in Denmark we've seen some very young mayors during the last ten years, the youngest being only 25!

Back at Okunitama Jinja the priests son showed us around the treasure house.



We even got to hold one of the 400-year-old katana kept at the shrine!

We then drove to the Suntory beer factory in Fuchu, and had a tour of the brewery followed by beer tasting. Danes love beer, and it was interesting to learn about the differences and similarities in the brewing process, marketing and beer culture in general.



Camilla and Lars during the tour.



The beer was very delicious!

We had lunch with the Fuchu Rotary Club members. This was a bit odd to me, since I'm not a member of Rotary. During the dinner a lot of speeches were made, including mentioning member birthdays and different news and events. It was interesting to see, but I would have preferred to have had more time to talk to the people there. In the end a exchange student from Colombia made a presentation about his country, which was a bit more interesting.

Then we visited the Tokyo Horseracing course. I'm not that interested in horse racing but the view was very nice and it was interesting to hear how popular the sport is in Japan.

We parted with the priest in front of Fuchus Kyodo no Mori museum. He had been with us the entire day, watching everything with a quiet smile, and his kindness and interest in our visit made an impression on all three of us.

The museum itself was very nice. It was refreshing to be outside and it was just at the very beginning of spring.

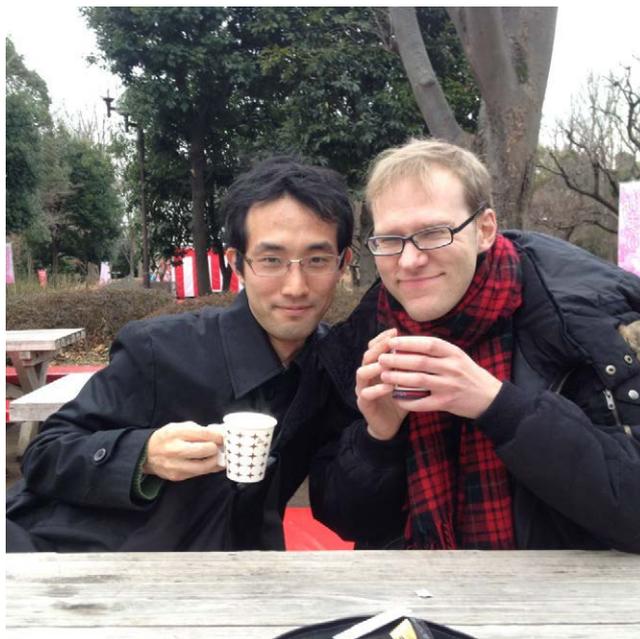


There were a number of gorgeous bonsai trees, most of them just about to bloom.



Camilla, Lars and the photographer.

A number of original buildings had been restored at the Kyodo no Mori museum, and the atmosphere was great. I really like this picture because of the guy taking photos of the Hina matsuri dolls. He looks very professional!



Yuuki and Lars.

Our break in the park is one of my fondest memories from the trip, simple because the five of us (Professor Kusunose, Yuuki, Camilla, Lars and I) had a moment to talk and laugh. We found a bench and had amazake and coffee.

The next activity was a visit to the Jinja Honcho, the central office managing Shinto affairs. We thought we were only going to go in very quickly, but we were showed to a meeting room and served tea. Then two officials entered, one of which spoke fluent English, and they engaged us in an informal conversation about Shinto. Lars is very knowledgeable and had a very interesting conversation. Camilla and I learned a lot just by listening!

Our last activity was a farewell dinner at Roppongi Hills with the chairman of the Japan-Denmark association. The view was amazing, but I were very tired and weren't as talkative as I would have liked to. Nevertheless it was still a cosy evening.

The participating group

The three of us had a very good time together, even though we have different interest and personalities.

We all study Japan, but our areas of expertise are very different, Camilla is educated in business, Lars studies religion and I study modern society and international relations, so we could learn a lot from each other and see our experiences in different contexts. I think this enriched our week.



Leaving for Japan!

Conclusion

All in all our tour was absolutely amazing. There may have been some room for improvement, especially on the language part, but it was a well-planned study tour that filled us with memories for life.

For me personally the trip has renewed my interest in Japan and inspired me to work harder in my studies. Both because of the many inspiring people we met, rebuilders, students and artists, and also because I feel it is a fitting way to respond to all the kindness I have received during my time in Japan.

On top of this my ambition to strengthen the relationship and cultural exchange between Denmark and Japan has been renewed and revitalised. I will continue to search for means to this goals through my studies and my personal life.

Lærke Pyndt Steinmann