



**JAPAN**

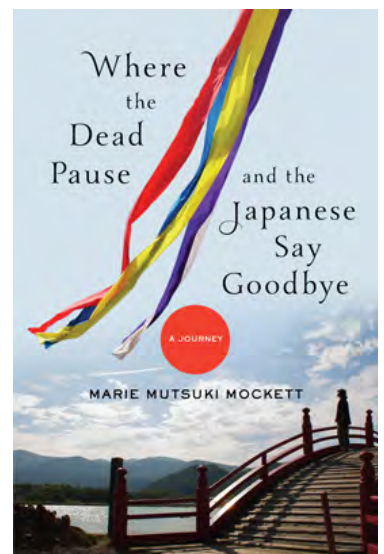


**2023-2024**

# **Common Read**

***Where the Dead Pause and the Japanese Say Goodbye:***

***A Journey***







On March 8, a select group of 15 Texas A&M International University students traveled to Japan as part of the University's "Reading the Globe Program."

Students participating in the program include: Mia Arguello, Guarino Cavazos, Ximena Del Campo López, Karla Gallardo, Barbara Garza, Lindsay Leal, Anna Ligart, Sierra Long, Lucio Martínez, Julian Ramírez, Paulina Salazar Salas, Daniela Sánchez Gomez, Evelyn Tovar, Daniel Trapero, and Marco Zapata.

During the trip, students visited historical sites and learned from educational lectures.

Take a look at pictures and and blog entries from the RTG Ambassadors during their trip. Visit [www.instagram.com/tamiureadingtheglobe](http://www.instagram.com/tamiureadingtheglobe) for more blog entries.

During the Spring semester of 2024, I embarked on an unforgettable journey to Japan, courtesy of TAMIU's esteemed Reading the Globe program.

Alongside fourteen fellow first-year students, I had the privilege of delving into the rich tapestry of Japanese culture, inspired by the pages of Marie Mutsuki Mockett's poignant work, *"Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye: A Journey."*



Anticipation bubbled within me as our departure date approached, fueled by a mix of excitement and eagerness to immerse myself in the landscapes and traditions depicted within the book's pages. Stepping foot on Japanese soil after nearly fourteen hours in transit brought a profound sense of relief and exhilaration, signaling the beginning of an extraordinary adventure. Expecting a landscape adorned with unfamiliar Japanese characters, I was pleasantly surprised by the prevalence of English signage, easing our navigation through bustling streets and tranquil temples alike. Each moment spent traversing Japan felt surreal, akin to walking through the vivid imagery of a cherished dream.

Amidst the myriad experiences etched into my memory, one stands out with vivid clarity: the transformative practice of sutra writing at Ninna-ji Temple in Kyoto. The serene moments spent copying a sutra left an indelible mark on me.



Before delving into my experience with sutra writing, let me share some background knowledge I learned. A Sutra is a profound beacon in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, with each stroke of ink encapsulating timeless wisdom, guiding seekers away from ignorance and the cycle of birth and death.

Sutras are revered as cornerstones, preserving sacred teachings and offering a path to spiritual emancipation. Just as threads bind fabric, sutras bind oral traditions into scriptures, ensuring knowledge continuity. Sutra writing, dating back to 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, is a sacred rite in Buddhism, embodying mindfulness and the art of Japanese calligraphy, known as Shakyō.

Through this synergy, practitioners transcend self, immersing in the dance of ink and parchment, where harmony resonates and ancient teachings find new life.



As we wandered through the Tokyo National Museum, I found myself utterly captivated by the intricate sutra writings that adorned the walls of various exhibition rooms. Each stroke seemed to echo with ancient wisdom, a testament to the enduring preservation of knowledge across the ages. When the chance arose to partake in sutra writing during our overnight stay at Ninnaji temple, excitement surged within me, fueled by the prospect of engaging in a practice deeply rooted in tradition. As anticipation mounted throughout the morning and afternoon preceding the activity, my eagerness intensified, mingled with a sense of reverence for the art I was about to undertake. Seated in the room, surrounded by the tranquil ambiance of the temple, I eagerly awaited the materials, my heart brimming with anticipation.

Under the patient guidance of a temple monk, we delicately traced light gray kanji on thin sheets of paper, each stroke a testament to our commitment to preserving this ancient tradition. Focused intently on perfecting the brush pen technique, I wrestled with nervousness at the outset, my hand trembling with uncertainty. Yet, with each stroke, guided by our instructor's gentle wisdom, I grew more adept, my movements gradually gaining confidence and fluidity. The weight of the brush became familiar in my hand, and the once-daunting task transformed into a graceful dance across the parchment. A sense of accomplishment washed over me as I gazed upon my finished piece.

Despite the initial trepidation, the result surpassed my expectations, a testament to the transformative power of practice and dedication. However, the experience left me yearning for more, a desire to delve deeper into the art of sutra writing, to refine my skills and unlock new depths of understanding.



Drawn to its soothing and immersive nature, I departed the temple with a renewed determination to continue honing this ancient art form, knowing that each stroke brings me closer to the heart of tradition and enlightenment. Overall, it was an unforgettable experience, and I will definitely practice this further!

**Evelyn Tovar**  
RTG Ambassador



Japan has many examples of its traditional architecture preserved into the modern era. While in Japan, we were able to visit many of their buildings. Still, the most interesting one was that of Osaka Castle, which played a significant role in Japanese history as it was once the site of a major battle that led to the unification of Japan.

The Castle was originally completed in 1597 but was burned down in the summer of 1615 by the attacking Tokugawa clan. Buildings burning down due to conflict or accidents is a pervasive theme in Japanese history, and many of these buildings have been destroyed and rebuilt over the years.

The current Osaka castle we visited had completed restoration in 1997 after the castle's final destruction during World War II. The castle has become a museum to highlight its role in Japanese history and how it has changed. It is also an excellent example of how Japan takes great measures to preserve their history and architectural works. The castle being repurposed as a museum ensures that it will be protected for centuries to come as well as the outside of the castle being repurposed into a public park which benefits the people living in Osaka while also allowing people to get a view into pre-modern Japan up close. Osaka Castle's location in the middle of a major metropolitan area also allows for a great observation of how Japanese architecture has changed as you compare this old building to the newer modern skyscrapers.

My experience in the castle was very memorable as we got a great tour of the interior and were given time to see the featured exhibits. The exhibits were mainly about the castle and the clans that once inhabited it.

On display were surviving artifacts from the time period, which allowed the viewer to not only see traditional Japanese art but also get a glimpse into the lives of the former inhabitants. An example of this was the reproductions of the armor worn by the samurai of the castle. This was a reminder that the area was once a bloody battlefield, and many died wearing armor similar to those in display.



Also on display, were traditional Japanese folding screens known as byōbu, which depicted scenes from the summer war. These screens are both artistic masterpieces and valuable historical documents that illustrate key events and daily life during the battle.

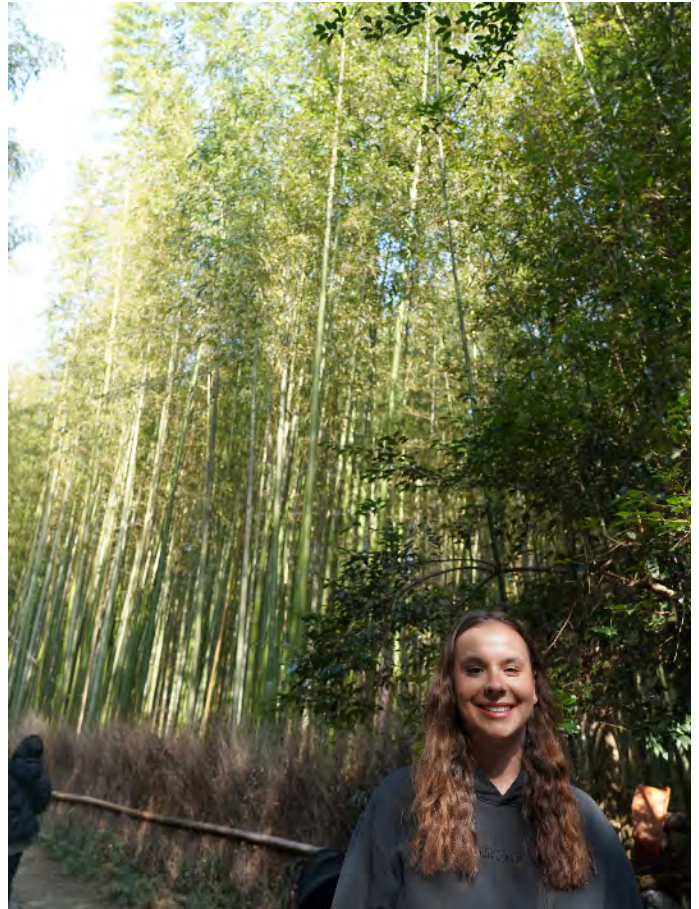
One of my favorite exhibits was the diorama of the summer of 1615, which featured detailed models of the samurai warriors of both sides as they attacked and defended Osaka Castle.



The museum has so many artifacts that you would have to spend hours on each floor to absorb all of them fully. Overall, the trip to Osaka Castle was a very culturally enriching experience. The museum and its exhibits allowed us to learn about Japan and its past and see how they preserve their past as they move into the future. I left with a profound appreciation for the history and culture of both Japan and Osaka, which has left me wanting to return for more.

**Julian Ramírez**  
RTG Ambassador

Visiting two of Kyoto's most famous spots, the Arashiyama Bamboo Grove and the Fushimi Inari Shrine, made for a day of discovery and reflection. Walking through the serene forest of Arashiyama Bamboo Grove felt like stepping into another world. The towering bamboo stalks created a peaceful atmosphere that's hard to describe. It was like something out of a fantasy world, with sunlight filtering through the leaves above. The Arashiyama Bamboo Grove is not just a feast for the eyes; it's an immersive experience that engages all your senses. As I wandered through the grove, I was truly amazed by the beauty of nature. This peaceful atmosphere was a much-needed break from the noisy and busy everyday life. After leaving the bamboo grove, we made our way to Fushimi Inari Shrine, another iconic landmark in Kyoto.



The first thing that caught my attention were the thousands of bright red torii gates stretching up the mountainside. Walking through them was like being on a journey through time. Each gate seemed to tell stories of centuries past, and I really felt a sense of respect as I explored this sacred place. The higher we climbed, the quieter and more serene it became, allowing us to fully appreciate the natural beauty and spiritual significance of the shrine.

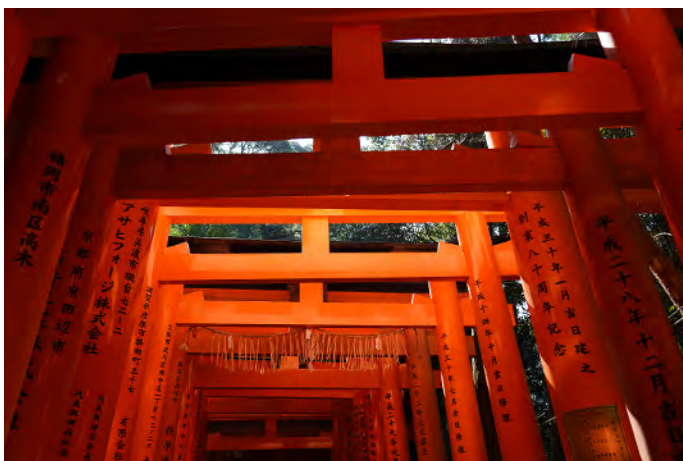


Looking back on that day, the contrast between the serene, unique atmosphere of the Arashiyama Bamboo Grove and the vibrant, historical significance of Fushimi Inari Shrine provided a great experience of Kyoto's cultural and natural wonders. Traveling through Japan has been incredibly enlightening by teaching me valuable lessons about culture, respect, and harmony.





The balance of tradition and modernity that I experienced in places like the futuristic cities of Tokyo and the historic temples of Kyoto was an interesting part of the trip. It highlighted the importance of preserving cultural heritage while embracing progress. Also, the mutual respect and politeness between people in Japanese society have made me more mindful of my own manners and the impact of my actions. Additionally, the deep spiritual connection to nature that I felt in sacred places like the Arashiyama Bamboo Grove and Fushimi Inari Shrine, underscored the importance of the natural world in our lives. Learning about Japan's history that is marked by resilience in the face of adversity, from natural disasters to economic challenges, made me realize how inspiring the country's ability is to rebuild and adapt while maintaining its cultural integrity.



This resilience is also reflected in the people, who approach challenges with a calm and determined spirit. It inspired me to approach life with greater thoughtfulness, cooperation, and perseverance.

Another eye-opening experience for me was how Japanese culture emphasizes the collective over the individual. This was evident in the efficiency and cleanliness of public spaces, the punctuality of public transportation, and the seamless flow of crowds in busy areas.

Their sense of community and mutual cooperation is really strong, demonstrating how collective effort and shared responsibility can lead to a well-organized and harmonious society.

This journey has not only broadened my cultural horizons but also taught me life-long lessons about living in harmony and gratitude.

**Anna Ligart**  
RTG Ambassador



During our RTG trip, I was surprised by how much I enjoyed learning about the country's main religions: Shintoism and Buddhism. Getting the opportunity to view massive Zen Buddhist temples and beautiful Shinto shrines was an experience that I will always cherish.

One destination that particularly caught my eye was the Kinkaku-ji Temple we visited in Kyoto. Covered in delicate gold leaf sheets, the Kinkaku-ji Temple — known as the "Gold Pavillion" — shined its extravagant exterior and welcomed us into its open arms. The stone path around the large monument was accompanied by lush gardens and gently flowing water, a testament to the influence of nature on Japanese religion. One of the most resounding features of the Kinkaku-ji Temple is the statue of a golden phoenix perched atop the roof of the main building. The installation represents the perseverance of the temple — after having burnt down in the past — and the strength of the Japanese people.





Although the building primarily associates itself with Zen Buddhism, the influences of Shintoism are very much present in the architecture and beliefs. The intertwining of religions at this destination is fascinating and has only increased my curiosity to know more!

Even outside of the temple, the bustling streets were lined with restaurants and vendors.

After going through the temple, our group immediately went to see what delicious food we could get our hands on, and we enjoyed browsing through hundreds of hand-made items. The homey aspect of the small market made our group feel welcomed, which I am very grateful for.

After reading about Japanese culture and religion through a book, it was hard to envision experiencing it for myself. However, thanks to the Reading the Globe program, I got to see hundreds of sights that I would have otherwise never gotten to see. This trip felt like visiting an entirely different world that I knew so little about. Getting the opportunity to see Japan for all its vibrant colors was life-changing.

During this trip, I discovered a new-found sense of independence after being so far away from home. Each day in Japan, I learned new lessons about communicating with others, solving problems — like the times we got lost — and being open to learning new ideas from a culture that is different from ours. Throughout our trip, I introspectively realized that although I was surrounded by people from a different culture, I was more alike to them than I expected. I got to see our similarities and acknowledge our differences, which allowed us to collaborate and better understand each other.



I am so happy that through this trip, I have made many new friends and have gotten closer to the staff that helped me get on my journey of international engagement. I can now say that I have learned the importance of being a part of a community on campus and having peers that I can rely on when I need help. I have learned and seen so much through TAMIU's Reading the Globe Program, and I encourage everyone to participate!

**Guarino Cavazos**  
RTG Ambassador

The Meiji-Jingu shrine was constructed in 1920, eight years after the death of Emperor Meiji (1852-1912), and five years after the death of Empress Shoken (1850-1914). The construction of this site is preceded by an important period in the history of modern Japan: the Meiji Restoration. Happening in 1868, the Meiji Restoration marked the end of the Shogunate era, and the reinstating of governing powers to the Emperor of Japan.



The village of Edo was renamed to Tokyo at this point, which is now the capital of Japan, and where the Meiji-Jingu shrine is located.

All places of Shinto worship are referred to as shrines. Shinto is the original religion in Japan, which is based on the worshiping of nature, rather than a scripture like other religions do. According to the Japanese, there are eight million gods (kami) in Shinto, a number which symbolizes eternity in Japanese culture and traditions. Shinto does not have a concept of religious conversion, so anyone is free to practice this religion. The emperor and empress's bodies are not in this shrine, but in Kyoto. However, it is said that, because this shrine was built in honor of them, their spirits inhabit this place.



The entrance to the shrine is guarded by two giant Torii gates made from ancient Cypress wood, which is estimated to be over 1,600 years old. These Torii gates are the largest in all of Tokyo. Torii gates are considered to be the division between the profane world, and the realm of the gods. To properly cross the gates, one must stand on either side, bow before crossing, and take a large step. One must not walk in the middle of the path, because it is reserved for the gods.

Following the path to the place of worship, an old growth forest can be appreciated. This forest is composed of over 100,000 trees that were donated from all over Japan, and it has the unique ability to regenerate itself overtime, ensuring that there will always be trees around this place. At some point through the long path, on one side, there is a wall with hundreds of Sake Barrels on display. Sake is a traditional Japanese beverage based from rice starch, and Japanese history traces its origins back to over 2,000 years. These barrels are empty and only for decoration.

Barrels with actual Sake inside of them are donated to the shrine every year and offered to the Shinto deities.

At last, at the end of the path is the shrine itself. There is a section where visitors must rinse their hands and mouth with water from a special fountain to enter the shrine in a purified manner. The main hall, which is the most sacred place in the site, has limited access. You can get a glimpse at it by offering a coin and bowing twice, clapping your hands twice, reciting a prayer in your mind, bowing again, and clapping your hands a final time.



During our visit to this place on March 10th, 2024, we were lucky enough to witness the procession of a traditional Japanese wedding. Some parts of Shinto weddings, like the procession, are witnessed by the visitors. The procession is led by a Shinto priest, the bride and the groom, and their families and close friends, as well as shrine maidens. Sake is used at some point in the ceremony, but we were not able to see that part of the ritual.



This was one of the many places of significance that we visited during our stay in Japan, and in my own words, I can only describe it as a breath of fresh air and a truly wonderful sight.

I even purchased my own booklet to obtain the shrine's unique stamp for my collection. It was quite a nice welcome experience to Japan and its culture and historical places.



During our trip to Japan, we had the fantastic opportunity to visit many different cities and cultural places in this country. One of the cities that we were able to visit was Nara, Japan. This city is known for its impressive shrines and temples that represent the Japanese culture, but it is also mainly known by locals and tourists for the abundance of wild deer that roam freely throughout the streets of this city.

As we arrived at the train station, it was notorious how deer were a significant characteristic of Nara. Many convenience stores were selling souvenirs portraying deer, and the station was decorated with many different figures and paintings of these creatures.

Many convenience stores were selling souvenirs with deers on the items, and the station was decorated with many different figures and paintings of these creatures. When we stepped out of the station and made our way to our destination place, the "Nara Deer Park," I was surprised at how the deer freely and peacefully walked between people passing through.



Despite having deer on campus at TAMIU, it was surprising to see the number of deer that were present not only in "Nara Deer Park" but also in the city in general. Some deer were passing by, while others were completely asleep or just serenely sitting on the grass, watching all the people that were close by as they were already used to all the people and attention they get on a regular basis.

Many local people were selling special food or treats that visitors could give to the deer. I had the opportunity to see wild deer in the past, this was my first time being able to pet and feed them by myself. As soon as I decided to buy some treats for the deer, I became really interesting to the deer. Many of them followed me around; as my walking speed increased, theirs did too. Some of them even started looking for the treats in my bag by themselves.



At first, I was a little bit nervous and scared as we needed to approach them with caution as they are wild creatures after all, capable of occasional nips or kicks. Nonetheless, my excitement to live this unique experience quickly overpowered these emotions. As I was offering the treats to the deer, I noticed that they were really delicate creatures with the visitors as they did not take the food desperately and instead took it slowly and with caution from my hands. This increased my excitement and made me keep buying more and more treats for them.

One important and captivating detail I discovered from the experience with these Nara wild creatures, is that they have mastered the art of politeness by themselves. As it is common in the Japanese culture to bow as a sign of respect to others, these deer learned to bow in order to ask and receive food from the people who visit them.

Overall, the visit to Nara Deer Park was an enriching and memorable experience since we were able to interact with these unique creatures up close.





Transportation in Japan was quite an adventure. Hoping on my first metro ride was exciting, and I was surprised by how everyone was always quiet and respectful, even when overcrowded. Being part of the calm and respectful culture Japanese people practice was interesting, as it allowed me to see the harmony experienced in everyday life, which contrasts with the often fast-paced and loud lifestyles Americans lead.

The Tokyo metro system, consisting of 9 lines and 180 stations, was challenging as we had to walk a lot to get to the correct stations on time. However, while going across the stations, we could see the meticulous attention to cleanliness and modernity that defines the city. The seamless blending of innovation and traditions across the city with high-speed trains and centuries-old temples demonstrated Japan's dynamic and progressive culture.

The famous Japanese bullet train, also known as the Shinkansen, was indeed a remarkable experience. Despite advancing at almost 200 miles per hour, I was able to enjoy the ride, admiring the beautiful scenery that passed through my window. Moving from one city to another was tiring, but riding the Shinkansen gave us time to rest and restore our energy to continue enjoying the trip. The high technology of the Shinkansen creates a modern atmosphere, while the metro transporting millions of passengers daily creates a calm and quiet atmosphere.







The modes of transportation also reflect the Japanese culture, with the metro and the Shinkansen being very punctual, demonstrating the values of discipline and respect for schedules.

I have to mention that walking is also an excellent way of transporting in Japan. I especially enjoyed late-night walks through Kyoto, which is one of the most walkable cities in Japan. By walking, I was able to explore different local markets, restaurants, and shops I would not have seen otherwise. Some of the best memories of this amazing trip include long walks across Japanese cities, and even though I ended up super tired, I appreciated exploring the land of the rising sun. I value the pedestrian-friendly infrastructure across Japanese cities, as car-oriented urban landscapes in the United States make walking a secondary mode of transportation.

All the modes of transportation we used in Japan were effective, and each had its charm, but I must admit that my favorite means of transportation was walking. Japan is great for pedestrians, as it is a safe and inclusive country with truncated domes almost everywhere. These truncated domes, known as Tenji blocks, can be found in almost every public space, such as subways, airports, and sidewalks, guide and facilitate walking for people with visual impairments.



Exploring cities on foot was also an activity that fostered a sense of community and friendliness among the ambassadors, helping us to create connections that will forever be engraved in our hearts. The attention Japanese people put into making safe transportation spaces for everyone is truly admirable, and I would go back a hundred percent for another walk through the beautiful cities of Japan.



"Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?" Rooted in Buddhism, this saying reflects Japan's social culture, profoundly shaped by both Buddhism and Shintoism. During my time in Japan, I discovered the significant impact of these two religions on the daily lives of the Japanese community.



While in Japan, I explored various temples where people pray and meditate. Among them are Ginkaku-ji and Kiyomizu-dera. Kiyomizu-dera, also known as the Water Temple due to its location at the base of a mountain waterfall, exemplifies the coexistence of Buddhism and Shintoism.

Meanwhile, Ginkaku-ji, the Silver Pavilion, derives its name from its unfinished silver covering. This incompleteness gave rise to the concept of wabi-sabi—an appreciation of beauty in imperfection. Japanese people embrace wabi-sabi in their daily interactions with nature, finding harmony in every aspect of trees, grass, water, and animals.

Even mistakes are seen through the lens of wabi-sabi, as they contribute to personal growth and improvement.



Buddhist monks lead a simple life dedicated to meditation and the pursuit of nirvana. During my stay in a Buddhist temple, I witnessed their strict and sacred lifestyle, from their choice of footwear to their meticulously structured daily routines.

Monks engage in synchronized morning sessions, chanting praises to the Buddhas—an embodiment of their devotion. Buddhism holds immense significance in their earthly existence and spiritual journey.

While Buddhism and Shintoism share spiritual principles, they diverge in their beliefs about the afterlife. Buddhism connects with the spiritual realm through prayers and purification practices, while Shintoism occasionally challenges courage and strength.

Both religions play a vital role in Japanese culture, offering pathways to a fulfilling life. Regardless of individual religious choices, temples and rituals provide tranquility in their day-to-day lives.



One of the first things I did when I learned I was selected as an RTG Ambassador was to search Tiktok and find places to taste fabulous food. I had a mission to taste thousands of new flavors, and I can thankfully say that my mission was accomplished during the trip! Each spoon was full of incredible spices and finding restaurants became a new adventure.

In the beginning, I was scared of trying new flavors. Especially since Japan's food is very different from what I am familiar with. The closest I had tried before was sushi, and to be completely honest, the sushi I ordered usually involved cream cheese, avocado, and sometimes, Takis. Flavors that may not be typically found in Japan.

As I ventured into trying new food, I was pleasantly surprised with all the different dishes and food available in Japan.



The first thing that I tried was the Harajuku corn dogs. Getting those corn dogs took a while due to a long line, but it was more than worth it. To this day, I dream of having another bite. While this type of corn dog can have sausage in it, there are different versions of it. Some of them have cheese, others have sausage, and you can even find a version with both sausage and cheese inside.

The experience of the Harajuku corn dogs became one of my favorites moments on the trip. Food can connect people together, and the universe reminded me at that moment of the importance food has in my life. While eating the delicious corn dogs, a girl asked us which country we were visiting. We started talking and realized we had a lot of things in common, and after a few minutes into the conversation, we exchanged social media information. I kept in touch with her, and she made the cordial offer that if I ever visit Germany, we can see each other again!





Another instance where food was the medium to connect with others was when Anna (fellow ambassador) and I were determined to get the famous Riko's cheesecake in Kyoto, which is a fluffy, and wiggly famous dessert in Japan. We were lucky to have found a Riko's cheesecake store, even though it had a very long line. While we waited in line, Anna and I really got to know each other and have since developed a meaningful friendship.

My culinary journey in Japan was more than a quest to taste new flavors; it was an adventure that enriched my understanding of culture and human connection.

From the spicy, flavorful bites to the delightfully unexpected conversations, each meal became a memorable experience. The Harajuku corn dogs and Riko's cheesecake in Kyoto were delicious treats and gateways to new friendships and shared moments of joy.

This trip taught me that food transcends boundaries, offering a universal language that connects us all, no matter where we come from. My adventure in Japan reminded me of the power of food to bring people together and create lasting memories.



**Ximena Del Campo López**

RTG Ambassador



When you think of Akihabara, you likely envision Japan's cultural hotspot, brimming with manga, video games, and anime. Yet, did you know it's also dubbed "Electric Town" for its incredible tech offerings and unbeatable deals? Akihabara merges shopping, culture, and creativity on a whole other level, filled with endless possibilities and, what feels like, endless walking. There is much to learn from Akihabara such as: delving into Japanese pop culture, experiencing the intersection between entertainment and technology, and contrasting modernity with other traditional areas in Japan.

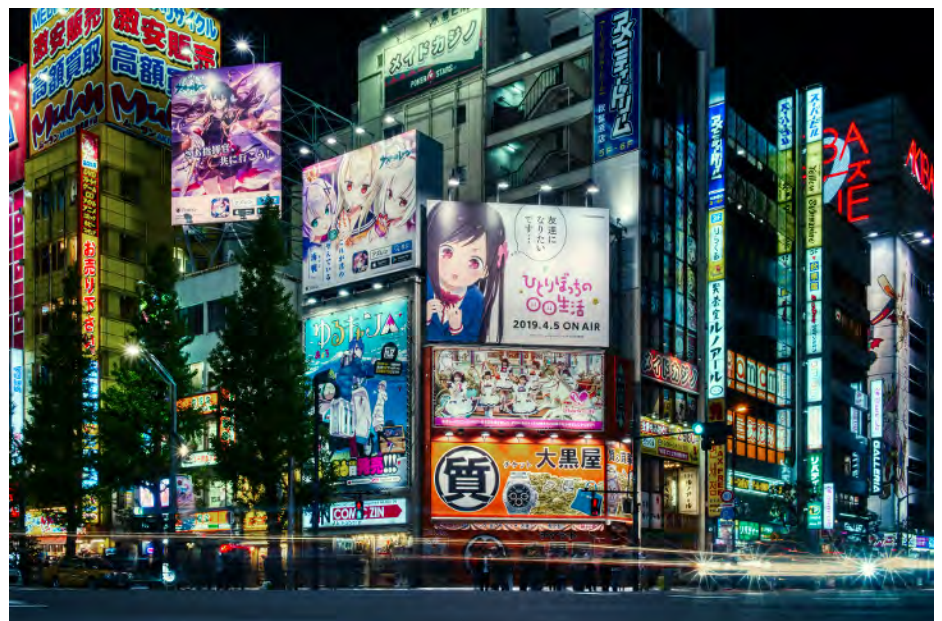
J-pop culture has been a vast part of who I am. For as long as I can remember, I have loved anime and video games dearly and have always yearned to visit the place where it all started, where it all came to life.

Akihabara was packed with massive billboards and advertisements with lettering I did not understand

due to my lack of understanding of the language, however, I was able to use and develop my skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication along with the help of apps which proved useful in getting around. On top of that, I learned to appreciate a different culture other than my own and indulge in a myriad of activities. For instance, while walking along the crowded streets, figurine shops frequently captured my attention; I was beaming with excitement, unfortunately, my wallet begged to differ.

I had the opportunity to interact with countless locals who were tremendously sweet which demonstrated that Japanese culture embodies a deep-rooted foundation of respect, ethical values, and intelligence. The societal norms in Japan emphasize respect for others, etiquette,

and a strong sense of honor that resonates with me and inspires me to strive for those qualities in my own life. The fusion of entertainment and technology is a widely known combination that Japan masters to not only bring amusement but efficiency into a variety of things. Akihabara featured an abundance of cutting-edge technology, making it a treasure trove for all the tech enthusiasts looking for rare and exclusive items.



It also showcased things not normally found in the US such as vending machines along streets, cafes of all sorts, and advanced utilities that showcase not only efficiency but creativity as well! As I delved deeper into Japan's latest tech trends, my ability to adeptly harness these sophisticated tools grew, which in turn, significantly improved my ability to navigate both Akihabara and the wider expanse of Japan.

Akihabara flaunts modernity in a way that not only depicts their culture beautifully but also demonstrates their progression through the years. Japan is commonly given the phrase "living in the future" to express the idea that the level of technological advancement, and infrastructure seems so advanced that it feels like stepping into what one might



imagine the future to be like. After spending time in Japan, I agree with this phrase since Akihabara displayed a lively performance of vivid imagery compared to other parts of country that are considered more traditional when it comes to design and historical significance. For example, Akihabara paraded eye-catching signs and novelties while other areas such as Sensō-ji and the Imperial Palace contained elements of history and traditional Japanese architecture, offering a glimpse into the country's rich cultural past. As a result, this goes to show the wide spectrum Japan showcases, making it diverse, with a little bit of everything.



Akihabara portrayed elements of Japanese culture, entertainment, technology, tradition, and modernism that allowed me to enhance my skill-building techniques and experience the beauty of a culture utterly different from my own.

My journey to Japan was an unforgettable experience that brought me joy all while educating me on the importance of cultural awareness. Nonetheless, my journey does not end here, as I am planning to educate my community on the importance of cultural awareness and how it can change their lives as it did mine.

**Lindsay Leal**  
RTG Ambassador

During our last few days in Japan, we visited Kyoto and participated in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony, which was a memorable experience. This ritual embodied Japanese art and philosophy. The ceremony experience was a lesson in having an appreciation for harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility.

The Japanese tea ceremony is more than just a way of preparing and drinking tea. It is an art form consisting of a choreographed ritual, with each action symbolizing harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility.



Additionally, the ceremony is an ancient meditation technique that has been refined over generations, with roots in Zen Buddhism. Upon entering the tea house, we were told to remove our shoes and taken to a room with tatami mats covering the floor. There, our hostess, who was wearing a beautiful kimono, greeted us with a bow.

Before she started preparing the green tea, also known as matcha, she gave us a Japanese confection. Confections are traditionally given before making the tea so that by the time the guests get the tea, they will have already finished the treat. The confection's purpose is to balance the bitterness of the matcha.

After that, the hostess briefly explained the process of making the tea. She explained that there was a purpose behind the arrangement of her supplies, one of which was that the engraved image on the matcha container needed to face the guests.





Once she was done making the tea, she taught us the etiquette of how to drink it. You need to thank the hostess for the tea and apologize for going before others, and after that, you rotate the bowl slightly to avoid drinking from the front, take a sip, and do a silent bow. Then, the next guest repeats the procedure until each guest has sipped the tea.

Participating in this culture-enriching ritual made me feel more connected to Japanese culture. Moreover, we had the privilege of preparing matcha tea ourselves. We had to carefully whisk the matcha until it bubbled up, using a traditional bamboo whisk and bowl, making the process fun and relaxing. After we finished preparing it, we had the opportunity to drink our own matcha tea.



Personally, I got carried away and put too much matcha in my bowl, making it a little stronger than the hostess's. Nevertheless, I liked both versions, and I've been drinking matcha tea since returning from Japan. This whole experience taught me valuable lessons about mindfulness and simplicity, highlighting the beauty of slowing down and appreciating the present moment.

Ultimately, this experience not only deepened my understanding of Japanese culture but also inspired me to be more mindful and to begin living in the present moment.



**Mia Arguello**

RTG Ambassador



Traveling to Japan during the transition from winter to spring allowed us to endure varied weather patterns throughout the trip. However, the cold climate remained constant throughout the majority of our stay. During the first week, we experienced rainy and cold conditions while we traveled through the city of Tokyo. Despite the cold weather that defined most of our trip, the cherry blossoms were beginning to bloom. As the southern parts of Japan grew warmer during this spring transition, the first signs of cherry blossoms, or sakura, began blooming by the end of the month. These blossoms capture the much-anticipated cherry blossom season, a significant cultural event that draws tourists and locals alike to parks and gardens.

During our trip, we could see vast landscapes and mountains lined with these cherry blossom trees still waiting to bloom. It really allowed us to imagine just how much more mythical the scenery would've been with the trees fully in bloom.

Japan's famous Mount Fuji during the trip really demonstrated the lingering winter temperatures still existent in Japan during this time.

As we traveled higher up the heights of Kyoto, the air was colder and thinner. Traveling up the high staircases was a challenge for me, even as an athlete.





Despite the harsh weather conditions, many locals sold ice cream and other odd food choices that didn't quite match the theme of the weather, which was an interesting culture shock for our group. Another interesting fact about the weather in Japan is the winds we experienced. The windy conditions made the temperature feel much cooler than it actually was, causing our group to have to put on extra layers.

These winds were particularly challenging when we were viewing Mount Fuji, making the temperature feel freezing. Once we traveled further into Kyoto and Osaka, the weather was more humid and warm due to our close proximity to the coast. This warmer weather allowed us to travel with fewer layers, and made the outdoor activities more comfortable. Most of the rain we experienced was in Tokyo, so our trip to these coastal cities was quite enjoyable in terms of climate and weather. Despite the predominant cold temperatures we were exposed to, the trip educated us on the varying seasons and weather patterns that Japan experiences.

For instance, Tokyo's climate is marked by significant seasonal changes, each bringing unique weather patterns and experiences. Spring is mild and blooming, summer is hot and humid, autumn is cool and colorful, and winter is mild and clear. These seasonal variations offer a dynamic and diverse climate that shapes the lifestyle and activities of Tokyo's residents and visitors. Whether it's the cherry blossoms in spring, summer festivals, autumn foliage, or crisp winter days, Tokyo's weather plays a crucial role in the city's cultural and social vibrancy.



Overall, Japan's weather is unique, demonstrating varying climates and seasons despite being an island off of Asia. Experiencing this varied weather and climate really allowed us to fully experience Japan's culture which is dependent on its unique weather.

**Sierra Long**  
RTG Ambassador



During our time in Tokyo, we had the privilege of staying overnight at the Ninna-ji Temple. I was overly excited to get to experience a day in the life of a Buddhist monk.

When we arrived, everything exceeded my expectations. It was incredible to partake in the activities that go on in a monk's training. One of our first activities included sutra writing with a first-year Buddhist monk. Not only were we eager to see our brush stroke skills but learning that the monk was in his first year just like us made it much more exciting.

During our activity, we learned that sutras are sacred texts that represent sacred truths. In Buddhist culture, sutra writing has profound significance. By incorporating the teachings and beliefs of the Buddha and serving as a guide for spiritual belief, it embodies

compassion and mindfulness, fostering a deeper understanding of the nature of existence and the human condition.



As the day came to an end, we settled into our rooms, and although it was completely different from what we were used to, we felt right at home. A monk's room typically reflects tranquility and minimalism; the room was sparsely furnished with essentials for spiritual practice. There were simple bed mats that, although they looked quite uncomfortable, were very cozy and were great for a good night's rest and meditation. The walls were decorated with simple decorations with symbols and images of revered figures.

There were big windows for natural light and ventilation, which fostered a close connection with the surrounding environment. We experienced a peaceful night and woke up well rested after a busy day full of great experiences.

The morning after, we woke up bright and early to join the morning prayer. We walked past beautiful gardens and experienced the feeling of wearing a monk's outdoor sandals. As the prayer began, I was enlightened by the physical details of the building and the monk's routine, but also, by the feeling of peace that rushed through me.



In Buddhism, meditation and prayer are two of the most important aspects. The prayer is a sacred ritual that helps set the tone for the day's spiritual practice. With palms pressed together in reverence, they receive traditional chants or prayers, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to pursue the path of awakening and seeking blessings for the day ahead. The prayer concluded with a period of silent reflection, and after that, we got a paper that described Kukai's method of meditation.



We made our way down to the communal dining area to take part in the morning meal. It was a simple nourishment meal that consisted of vegetarian dishes filled with foods like rice, grains, and vegetables. The meal is eaten in silence, focusing on each bite to appreciate what has been provided. As we all ate together, I felt grateful for the community and solidarity I felt with my peers, sharing simple joys and an amazing experience.

**Daniela Sánchez Gomez**  
RTG Ambassador

In Japan, I had the opportunity to admire the country's stunning landscapes and deeply engage with its rich cultural heritage. This extraordinary adventure provided me with the space to flourish as a person and served as a gateway to a new worldview. Furthermore, the moments spent connecting with my peers and professors in Japan created memories that will forever be glittering in gold.

Throughout our adventures in Japan, we were fortunate enough to admire the country's lovely cherry blossom trees. The radiant white blossoms, kissed with hues of pink, are an integral part of and symbolize Japanese culture. The iconic sight of the national flower alone attracts tourists from around the globe. Although our stay in Japan was prior to the peak blooming season, we were still lucky enough to encounter these magnificent trees. However, many foreigners are unaware of the meaning behind Japan's cherry blossoms. The blossoms are seen as a metaphor for human existence, mirroring life, death, and rebirth in the tree's blooming cycle. The blooming flowers signify the beginning of spring and life itself.

They are glorious, beautiful, and fragile, representing the vibrancy of youth. Tragically, after blooming, they begin to age and slowly wither within two weeks. They fall gracefully from the branches and are carried away by the wind, symbolizing death. For centuries, these flowers have represented mortality, linked to the lives of samurai in feudal Japan. The samurai, warriors with a moral code, preserved the virtues of life while facing the inevitable end without fear. During the battles of feudal Japan, the short lives of samurai led to the falling petals symbolizing a warrior's fall in combat. When the cherry trees bloom anew, they herald rebirth and new beginnings, marking a beacon of hope and the return of life after the cold winter. The trees continuously repeat this metaphorical cycle we call life.



The brief lifespan of these blooms serves as a reminder of our fleeting time here.

My personal experience with each encounter with the blossoms served as a reminder of my life and stood as a checkpoint for me to assess my personal growth throughout the adventure. It was the silent ticking of life's clock that sparked me to start living fully.

Before the first cherry blossom sightings in our travels, I made a personal challenge to venture out of my comfort zone and to be more engaged socially with others. Prior to Japan, my personality was more introverted which had often led me to isolation, but this trip marked a turning point.



The initial days of the journey were filled with eye opening experiences that enhanced my knowledge of the country and fostered connections with my peers. The unique feeling everyone felt of being in a foreign country and marveling at every moment toward the beauty of Japan provided the perfect environment to create friendships and bonds that would last a lifetime. These experiences began to dissolve my shyness while igniting a desire within me to continue blooming.

By the time we encountered the first cherry blossom in Tokyo, it marked a milestone in my personal growth from the beginning of the trip.

I hope to inspire those who read this to let their dreams flourish like the beautiful, delicate blossoms, for we have only this one life.

**Marco Zapata**  
RTG Ambassador

