

# JAPAN

This report and explanation is intended to help further your understanding of Mejiro University as well as Japan in general. It's not a step-by-step or a concrete guide, and every person's experiences are different. But it is intended to be a guideline to living in Japan. A one year exchange is not a 6 week "home-stay vacation". You are living in Japan, and that takes some foreknowledge and planning. This is my second time on exchange in Japan, and my first long term stay in the Tokyo area. First off, let me say that living in Japan is not easy in general, and being a foreigner (gaijin; you'll hear this term often) makes things somewhat more difficult.

Tokyo is one of the most, if not THE most, densely populated city in the world. Every day over 12 million people wake up in this city, and about another 3-4 million commute to it for their livelihood. That would not be so bad if the city size didn't rival that of just half of Los Angeles County. The best way to imagine it is a city like New York with 6 to 7 times the population density. That gives you some idea of what you're headed for. Tokyo can be the city of your dreams or your worst nightmares come to life; it just depends on your level of preparation and understanding of the system that governs it.

I intend to break this report down in to 7 basic sections. I will list them by heading for easy reference just in case you wish to review a particular section again at a later time. Assuming that no editing has been done, this report will culminate all the basic information and some useful tidbits necessary to make your stay in Tokyo a fun and rewarding one. When your time comes to write and review, please add and amend whatever is necessary to make this a complete guide. It is my hope that future students will be able to reap the benefits from a compendium of multiple experiences.

## 1 Before you leave

There are probably a lot of preparations that you have been asked or told to make before your trip. No doubt that you're probably overwhelmed at this point already, assuming that you've started the application process. I was too. But certain things are worth mentioning, even if you've already been told by everyone on the 4th floor of the Admin. Building.

First take the time, if you have any, to read about some basics of Japanese culture and language. (This includes the metric system) It seems obvious, but I meet plenty of non-Japanese on a daily basis who would benefit from such advice. Pick up books written by non-Japanese authors about culture; books by Japanese authors about language. I recommend the Kodansha series for learning Kanji, or the Chinese adapted alphabet. Don't worry so much about hiragana or katakana. They're useful, but in my humble opinion, Kanji is by far the most important aspect of Japanese language written and spoken. Japanese write, read, and even speak and think in Kanji, so its' best to memorize some basic ones if you have the chance. Kodansha has a complete guide as well as a learners' guide, both are useful and easy to carry. If you have the cash, they also have

electronic dictionaries in Japan that have all kinds of useful things packed into them, but they can run a bit on the expensive side so check any major bookstore before you go.

Make sure to bring plenty of medication with you. Any and all allergy pills, aspirin, and cold and cough medicine included. Codine is illegal here, so you can't get Nyquil. Also, most Western medicines require a prescription, and Japanese hospitals are not fun places to visit. You will be enrolled in the national health insurance program here when you arrive, making some medical care cheap. You really don't need extra insurance unless you already have some, so just make sure you have the on-hand medicine you need when packing.

Student discounts are the norm in most places here, but college students don't usually get much of a reduction, and you'll get a Japanese student ID when you start school. There's not much use in getting any other kind of official student ID from a third party, unless it carries some major benefit. Make sure to also bring plenty of international calling cards if you have them. You can get some types in Japanese convenient stores, but they are usually expensive and have connection charges. Rechargeable ones are best. That being said, next category would be packing.

## 2) Packing

Clothing in Japan is highly fashionable, but also highly expensive. The import duty on most clothing makes up most of the cost, also brands that are cheap back home are quite pricy, in Tokyo especially. For women there are a lot more options than for men, but men's styles here are quite different and some interesting pieces can be found if you look. Other than that, there are some things to watch out for. First, if your shoe size is bigger than an 8.5 for women and a 10.5 for men, you won't find anything here. I am a size 12, and I had to find someone to take me to the American military base to go shoe shopping. The sizes are also based in centimeters here, so a 12 is about 29-30 cm. Just work down one CM per American size and you'll find your fit. Pack a heavy jacket if you have one, winters here can get very cold. Snow is not uncommon, and there are long periods of quite cold weather, day in and day out. Long underwear is also a plus if you can get it. And if you plan on surviving the summer, linen is necessary. Temperatures can reach almost 100 degrees F, and humidity is about 90% on average. Shorts are uncommon for men, and women don't wear short sleeves. Both have somewhat bad connotations, so it's best to just pack light clothing. Tokyo is a big city, so if you don't have what you need or want, you can always do a little shopping; it's best to dress conservative when you're not sure. When you get to campus, you'll see what Japanese style fits you best and go from there.

## 3) Academic Life

Mejiro University is in flux. Several years ago this campus was an all girls 2 year college, and it's now a 4 year university. A new 10 story building was just built last month, complete with Internet Café and a lounge. There are a wide range of students here, and there are a lot of different course offerings. That being said, you as a one year exchange student are somewhat restricted but somewhat free at the same time.

Assuming that you know no Japanese, you will be taking all of your courses with the other non-Japanese students, all in English. This makes learning easy but your options for meeting students outside of this circle quite limited. Those who speak Japanese can enroll in some normal university classes if they choose, but you will be graded along with and expected to compete academically with native speakers at a collegiate level, so be ready. All of the course and program organization is done by the international exchange office, and they can help you with whatever preparations you need. You are required to take Japanese language and cultural studies, as well as a course on Japan's role in Asia, for two semesters.

Other courses are varied including classes on linguistics and religion. The grades are from teacher to teacher and on a case by case basis, so just do what you're asked to do and things should go smoothly. Since Mejiro is a new program, not many of the classes you are taking will line up for advanced credit, so don't expect to be able to skip taking Finance 350 or IBUS 690 at SF State to take it here. In time that may change, but for now most of the classes are on a case by case basis in terms of transfer credit. The classes, although not very major specific, are taught by some amazing people. The teachers here have some outstanding non-academic backgrounds, (several are published authors) and many of them have extensive credentials otherwise. If nothing else, it's worth sitting down once in a while and having a conversation with them.

Most of the students at Mejiro are English majors, but many of them are less than fluent. This is normal in Japan, and puts you at a big advantage. From the time you step on campus, you're practically a movie star.

Everyone will want to know you, or at least say hello. This campus is also majority female, and the students in general are much bubblier than at other school. The movie-star fame can fade fast though, when you start becoming a regular face. Try and make as many friends as possible, or at least get your name out. Just say hello to people in the hall and ask their name. Make your appearance a memorable one and you are guaranteed to make a name for yourself quickly. If you want to join a club to try and make contacts there are several, and as a one year student you will automatically be enrolled in the ICC, or International Communication Club. You are required to attend ICC events and meet members on a frequent basis, so sometimes commitment to another club can be a strain. But it's a good way to make an in with some students, and to help build your network. There is also an International Student Club called the Ryugaku-Sekai. It's a great place to meet a lot of non-Japanese long term exchange students, and they usually don't speak any English; so it's also good for getting your Japanese skills moving along quickly. The downside is of course if you don't speak Japanese, it will be hard to communicate. It's worth a shot if you're the adventurous type. Student life in a Japanese college is all about making connections, so remember that when your choosing who to hang out with.

#### 4) Housing

Housing in Tokyo, and Japan in general, is very hard to find. Japanese have been known to pay up to 5 or 6 months rent in advance to find a place that they like. Housing for foreigners is even more difficult. Some things about Japan will never change, and one of them is their fear of the unknown. Some 90% of places that I tried to rent from turned me down because I was a foreigner; it has no basis on funds or language ability. You could bring a pile of cash to their doorstep and they will still turn you down. There

are some options however, if you have the time. Websites can be found which help foreigners find apartments, and the school provides a dormitory option. My recommendation is to take a look at all your offers. The dormitory is not a bad place, but it's far from the train station and the city in general. (However there is a supermarket nearby called Belc, by the river. A great place with good deals.) Anywhere you live will probably be about an hour from school by train, so center your living criteria on three basics:

1. How close is the apartment to the train line you take to commute? This can make a big difference in price. Japanese daily life is governed by train lines/schedules, so be prepared.
2. How many rooms does it have? Space in Japan, and Tokyo especially, is at a premium and the bigger the room the higher the price. Don't expect a separate bathroom and shower, or a kitchen, unless you have really big bucks.
3. How much are the hidden costs? Many places seem attractive, but utilities, internet, and train passes (such as changing lines) can sky rocket the cost. Read carefully.

A big no-no is real estate agencies. Normal Japanese agents are great, but they don't have "foreigner friendly" apartments, and "foreign friendly" agents are quite keen on ripping you off. You're in a precarious position, and they know it. Most of them require 3 to 4 months rent up front, and the places offered are usually about 3 to 4 times what a Japanese person would pay for the same space. The places available to foreign renters have serious problems on top of it, and you will be expected to fix them once you move in. This practice is technically illegal but you don't have a lot of rights as a foreign renter, so once you move in it can be a real uphill battle. There are also "gaijin houses", or monthly spaces. Most of them are like dorms, and can have problems, but the big advantage is that you are only required to put up 1 months rent deposit when you move in, and you can terminate your contract anytime. It's a good temporary option if you don't have any place to go for a month or two while you're looking.

Connections are the key for foreign renters. If you have anyone in the Tokyo area that you know, contact them. There are websites which I'll mention later that have postings looking for foreign tenants, and most of the landlords speak fluent English. Call around and ask prior, otherwise the dorm is your easy option. Moving around is only really worth it if you plan on planting yourself there because of the up front cost. Choose carefully; remember the three questions, and happy hunting!

## 5) Money and Banking

Money in Japan is all over the place if you can find your niche market. It's practically falling from the sky, provided you know where to look up. Prices in Tokyo are quite high, but you as a foreigner and a native speaker of English and/or some other Western language have a lot of income potential. There are two ways to do it: You can join a school or you can look for students on your own and teach

privately. The first option is hard to find, but the hours are steady. The second option is easy to start, but it's hard to keep students. The website [www.findateacher.net](http://www.findateacher.net) is a good place to start. There is also [www.gaijinpot.com](http://www.gaijinpot.com) and [www.careercrossagent.com](http://www.careercrossagent.com). These sites are designed to help you find students or work in Japan. Each has a different focus, some being acting/modeling others are for business professionals.

FindaTeacher.net is an on-line community that Japanese use to find native speakers of a foreign language, and then meet them in a café or train station to have lessons. The average pay is between 1500-3000 yen per hour, and most lessons are about one hour. The rest is up to you and the student. If you have blonde hair, blue eyes, or speak Japanese fluently these can be huge advantages. It's all about image and skills, so if you sharpen up you'll be making money in no time. Attached to these sites are housing options, bulletin boards, and other resources for foreigners in Japan. The links are definitely worth checking into before or during your stay at Mejiro.

(A side note: Cell phones are great here and can do everything your PC does and more. AU gives a big student discount, but Vodaphone is also popular. The phone is an extension of your arm in Japan, and you'll need one if you want to work.)

Banking in Japan is difficult. Without going into too much detail, it can be hard(translation: impossible) to get a bank account without established residency. The laws have changed in the past few years, so most banks won't allow foreigners to open accounts unless they have been in country for over 6 months with the same address. The post office will open an account for you though, so that is an option. Post office ATM's can also draw on overseas accounts, provided you have a debit card; so you can get money from your home account if you need it.

Paying bills in Japan is all by wire transfer between banks(sometimes a small fee), but the post office isn't on the list of transferable institutions, so if you have a post office account you have to pay everything at the convenient store. Paying there is free, but its' only between certain hours of the day. The best thing to do is get all your bills in the mail and pay at them when the money comes in. If you do manage to get a bank account, everything can be directly drawn from there, rent included. Almost everything in Japan is paid by cash, but these days credit cards are becoming more popular. As a rule of thumb, expect to pay in cash when you walk in the door to avoid any embarrassing errors. Most stores offer point cards, which give you stamps for so much yen you spend. It's a big plus because they give you discounts, and there is no obligation for signing up. Its' an easy way to save money while shopping for things you need. Some of them look like credit cards, but most of them are not. Keep that in mind when you go shopping around the city.

#### 6) Transportation

Transportation in Japan is done all by train and bus. The trains are everywhere and lines intersect each other all over the city. The train can take you anywhere you want to go, but they usually stop around 12 am.

Japanese are accustomed to pulling the "I missed my train" all-nighter, and you will find various groups of business men and girls/boys out and about after dark in bars, clubs, and cafes. If you do get stuck, there are internet cafes with showers and comfortable chairs;

some even include free drinks if you get the all night package. Its an easy way to kill time till the first train, usually at 5am.

Your train pass can be used only on your company's line. So for example, if you go from overland to the subway, you will have to pay at least base fare. The trick is to find a way to get to where you want to go without changing companies and you'll save a lot of money in basic charges. The basic lines are the Yamanote, the Subway, and the East West Expresses to neighboring cities like Yokohama or Chiba (various companies). All the famous stations are on the Yamanote, and everyone knows them. Names like Shibuya (Lost in Translation) and Harajuku (Harajuku girls; check them out on Sunday) have become famous in popular culture. Many of these stations can also be reached by subway, but some cannot, so be careful if you go too far and can't find your way home. The important thing to remember is that trains are the major mode of transport in Japan, so respect them. Follow the rules and carry maps with you just in case and you'll be a pro in no time flat.

The rest is by foot or taxi.

Taxis are very expensive in Japan; base fare is about \$7 and it's about \$4 every mile. That means that if you live 10 minutes from the train station, a taxi door to door is about \$10. Most people opt for the 10 minute walk, except if you're trying to save time or you're heavily intoxicated. Bikes are a great thing to own, and help a lot in getting around. Bike parking and registration however are very strict in Japan; they follow the same rules as motor vehicles in the US. You can be ticketed and towed with max fines being usually about \$40. If you decide to own a bike, make sure you don't buy it from someone off the street. (Don't laugh, I've seen it happen.) If you do buy it second hand, have the registration changed to avoid being accused of theft. Regardless, some police in Japan will still harass you if they feel the need/desire, so keep a copy of your documents or receipt in your wallet just in case.

## 7) Travel

Travel in Japan can be fun and cheap. If you have the time and the means, tickets and tours to other Asian countries can be quite a good deal. Most require you to know some Japanese, but if you have the drive and the dough you can travel around for pretty cheap. Spring break at Mejiro is about a month and a half, and that's usually when the tickets are at an all time low. Try and find student fares or go as cheap as possible, just for the fun. I really loved Hong Kong, and total round trip, including hotel (which was not a bad at all), was less than \$300.

Travel inside Japan can be expensive or cheap, depending on what route you take. (Make sure to get a discount pass at the student office on campus, 20% off any JR line with student ID). The Seishin-JuHachi-Kippu is a nation wide JR pass that you can purchase at certain times of the year, which lets you use any JR line for free for a 24 hour period. The pass has 5 uses, so you can go back and fourth twice with a stopover in between. Except for the Super Expresses and Bullet train, it's a fast and fun way to see Japan. There are usually local inns that will put you up for a night or two and at cheap rates. Guidebooks to those can be found at the Japanese tourist office near Yamanote ShinBashi station, or in any guidebook in the US. The other way to go is with a rail company packaged tour, usually about \$300. They allow you to travel by bullet train, and you usually get a hotel room.

There are all kinds of options to all kinds of places, far too many to be listed here. If your Kanji is up to snuff you can find great deals. Take a look at your local JR or subway office for pamphlets.

Overall, Japan, Tokyo, and Mejiro university offer great opportunities for the right mind and the right person. With some hard work and some quick thinking, this can be one of the best academic experiences that you'll ever have. And with a little planning, it can be the perfect one.