

Oita University, Kyushu 2008

Overview

So you're going to study at Oita University. Congratulations! It's a great school, and Oita is a great town. It has a reputation for being a little bit countryside, and it is, but that doesn't mean you'll be sitting around watching the rice grow. There are lots to do if you look hard enough, from bars and clubs to historical sites. Anyway, the slower pace is good for studying, which is the whole reason you're going, right?

Hopefully this guide will cover most of the basics and help you get settled. Whatever isn't covered I'm sure you'll figure out. Japan may be a different country but it's not that dissimilar to America. A lot of the time, all that's required is a little common sense.

Geography:

Oita City is the capital of Oita Prefecture, which is located in the north-east corner of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands. Oita City (usually referred to as just "Oita") is as close to Seoul, South Korea as it is to Tokyo, which means it's far enough from central Japan to have a different culture than Tokyo, and close enough to Asia to make exploring the continent an easy and relatively inexpensive option.

Climate:

Japan has four seasons. No, really. Coming from California you may forget what living in a region that has four distinct seasons can be like, so be ready for just about everything. Spring is warm and temperate, while summer is hot and sticky. The fall brings colorful leaves and cool temperatures, while the winter is cold with the occasional snowfall. Also, it rains a lot in Japan, particularly in June. Bring appropriate clothing.

Cost of Living:

Oita is not nearly as expensive as Tokyo, but it's still Japan so the cost of living tends to be high. While your rent will be cheap (assuming you're living in the dorm) grocery shopping will be expensive. Expect to get half as much food for the same cost as in America. Electronics are also very pricey. No cheap Chinese goods or Wal-Marts here. That being said, you can eat yourself sick at some noodle places for about \$4.00. But in general, plan on things costing more than you expect them to.

Before You Leave

Visa:

You'll need a visa to stay in Japan for more than 3 months. You'll receive an acceptance packet from Oita University sometime before you're scheduled to leave. Take this packet to the Consulate-General of Japan in San Francisco.

50 Fremont St, Suite 2300
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 777-3533

http://www.sf.us.emb-japan.go.jp/e_top.htm

Bring the certificate, a passport-size photo, current passport (make sure it's valid!), and visa application, which you can download from the site or fill out while you're waiting. It takes a few days to receive your visa so plan accordingly.

International Office:

You'll likely be contacted by the Oita University International University by email before you leave but should you have any problems, here is contact information:

Center for International Education and Research (CIER), Oita University
700 Dannoharu, Oita-shi, 870-1192, Japan

Phone: 097-554-7444 or 097-554-7131

Fax: 097-554-7437

Useful emails:

Hoaki Masae: tankoury@ad.oita-u.ac.jp

Kumahara Yoshiko: ryugaku@ad.oita-u.ac.jp

Arrival

You'll either fly into Oita Airport or Fukuoka Airport. Either way, it's no problem reaching Oita. From Oita Airport, catch the airport bus and take it all the way to the end, Oita Station. If you land in Fukuoka, get on the train heading towards Oita from the main Hakata Station and disembark at Oita Station. From there it's a short cab ride to the Kaikan (or another few stops up the Hohi line to Oita University).

Before you arrive, you'll likely be contacted by your tutor, a Japanese student at Oita University who's been hired (it's a job for them) to help you out. Arrange to meet them when you arrive. They're going to be invaluable in helping you get settled.

The Dorm:

You have two dorm options at Oita University, the Kokusaikouryuukaikan (or Kaikan for short) in town, or the Kishukusha on campus. I lived at the Kaikan and loved it. The Kishukusha has a reputation for being dirty and frankly unhygienic. I recommend the Kaikan. Everything in this guide is geared towards Kaikan life. Do yourself a favor and live in the Kaikan. It may be a ways from campus, but what you lose in commuting time you'll make up for in cleanliness.

The address of the dorm:

Oita University International House

Nishiki-machi 1-7-36

Oita-shi, Oita-ken, Japan

870-0024

Office phone number: 097-532-0074

It's conceivable to send a box or two ahead of time to the general office address, just let them know it's coming. It might be more advisable to wait until you have a room number and then have boxes sent on.

House Wares:

At the Kaikan, you get a bed, desk, chair, fridge, range with two burners, lamp, wardrobe, and washing machine on your balcony. Everything else you need to buy: dishes, cups, silverware, towels, bedding, hangers, etc. The closest place to get this stuff is Home Wide, a house wares store. You can also get things like dishes and cups at Daiso, the 100-yen store, which is also in the downtown area.

Utilities:

Utilities should be hooked up without you having to do anything. (Of course, when you leave at the end you need to make sure they're disconnected.) You have Internet in your room, and may already have a LAN cable. If not, buy one at Applied, the electronics store a few blocks away.

Hanko/Inkan:

For important documents and forms (like the ones you're going to be dealing with in the next week) you need a hanko (also called an inkan). This is a stick with a stamp at the end bearing your name. You stamp, rather than sign, documents with this. You can get an inkan at any number of places, from specialty shops to department stores. Your tutor will know.

Photograph:

You're going to need a picture for your gaikokujin torokusho, your alien registration card (aka gaijin card). Once that's accomplished, it's time to get your...

Gaijin Card:

Go to City Hall with your tutor to do this. It takes a few weeks to create the card, so make sure to get a temporary card before you leave City Hall. You'll need it to do the other necessary things to live in Japan. Also, always carry your card with you. If you don't have it (or your passport) on you and are stopped by the police, you could have to sit in jail until a friend gets it for you.

Keep in mind that if you move while here, you have to register at your new neighborhood immigration office and have your new address printed on your card. They're serious about immigration here.

Health Insurance:

While at City Hall, go upstairs to the second floor to sign up for the national health system. The Japanese health system is not for profit, meaning it's affordable. You pay about 30% for each visit—the rest is covered by the government. You'll also have monthly payments (which you can do all at once if you wish). It's about \$200 for the year. Payment coupons will arrive about a month after you sign up.

Bank Account:

Next, you'll need a bank account so the school can automatically debit your account for rent (and make deposits if you have the Jasso scholarship). You'll likely get an account at a local bank, like Oita Bank. Your tutor will help you set up an account.

How much money should you bring with you? Good question. Depends on how much you're going to need, if you plan to work, if you'll be getting the Jasso scholarship, etc. Once you have your account, you can deposit it. You can either bring cash or traveler's checks, or have the money wire transferred from your home bank. I went with this option. The fees are slight, but keep in mind you will have to have a telephone conversation with your new Japanese bank about what the money is for. International money laundering is apparently a big problem. If you can't speak enough Japanese, have your tutor or someone else speak with the bank for you.

Cell Phone:

Now you can get a phone. Japan has the best cell phones in the world, so have fun choosing one. Keep in mind though that all contracts are for at least one year. As you'll likely be leaving before a full year, you'll have to pay a fee to break the contract. Make sure you understand how much that will be. Also, the plans here are really expensive for not a lot of talk time. Keep this in mind or your bill will be huge. Most people text rather than talk. It's also a good way to practice kanji. Again, your tutor will help you set this up.

Academics

Forget what you may have heard about Japanese colleges. The assumption is that it's all kick-back good times and no studying. Maybe it is for the Japanese students, but for those of you in the international program (IPOU) be prepared to work. In fact, don't be surprised if you work harder here for the same grade back home. These are serious teachers with high expectations.

Placement Test:

During the first week of school you'll take a placement test to determine your Japanese level. There's a written portion as well as an interview. Don't stress. You'll be placed in the appropriate level.

Classes:

As I said before, classes are difficult but they're also rewarding. Oita University offers its international students both classes to learn the Japanese language, and classes about Japan in English. You're required to take a minimum of seven classes per semester. Each class meets once a week for 90 minutes. This is great in terms of homework load, but terrible at test time.

As stated before, you'll be placed at the appropriate Japanese level. You're also allowed to take classes in the level above yours, providing there are no prerequisites (a few do have these, so check the syllabus you'll be given). There's a tendency to take as many

classes as you can because they only meet once a week, but be prepared for the midterm and finals slam. Most classes only test you twice a semester, so the bulk of your grade will come from these crucial tests.

Oh, and classes are Tuesday through Friday, meaning every weekend is a three-day weekend.

Textbooks & Supplies:

Textbooks and supplies are available on campus in the bookstore, which is in the same building as the seikyuu (cafeteria). Textbooks are extremely affordable, and many classes don't even require them. Often, teachers just use handouts.

Tutors:

You'll be assigned a tutor to help you get settled, navigate school life, and answer questions. You're also required to meet with your tutor once a week to go over homework, etc. Additionally, you and your tutor will meet with your advisor once a month to discuss how things are going. Tutors are a great resource. Be sure and take full advantage.

Cafeteria:

There's a cafeteria (known as the seikyuu) on campus for meals. It's open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and is pretty cheap. Be aware though that they only serve Japanese food. While there is a salad bar, you won't find things like sandwiches or tacos or whatever else you may be used to eating back home. On the other hand, the seikyuu does a good job of changing the food often, and tends to serve regional dishes from around Kyushu. There's also food available upstairs from the cafeteria, and in the conbini/bookstore across the hall.

Commuting to School:

You can bike ride to school if the weather is good. It's about a 45-minute ride (or 90-minute walk). However, you'll usually take the train. Trains leave from the main station, Oita Eki, every 30 minutes or so. Pick up a schedule at the station. It's also a good idea to get a schedule for when trains arrive to take you back to town from school. I took a picture of the schedule and made it the wallpaper for my phone—that way I can run for the train and check the departure time at the same time.

Each trip costs 240 yen, which makes it about \$5.00 a day. You can buy discount passes (good for up to 3 months) at the station by school. This will save you almost half, which is a great deal. Ask your tutor to help you with this if you can't speak enough Japanese to manage the transaction.

Scholarship:

If you were lucky enough to receive a Jasso scholarship, this will be distributed automatically to your bank account in the middle part of each month. Go to the International Office on campus during the first week of the month to sign for it.

Clubs and Circles:

Japan is a group-oriented society so clubs and circles (essentially the same thing except one tends to be more serious than the other) are really popular on campus. All kinds of sports and interests are represented. Joining one of these groups is a good way to make friends and practice your Japanese. However, keep in mind that if you commit to a group, you're expected to participate. Many groups meet numerous times a week as well as on weekends, and often do bonding things together like drinking parties.

If this is your thing, keep an eye out during the first few weeks of class for recruiters. They'll likely approach you, as having an international student in your group is pretty cool.

Daily Life

Life in Oita is pretty easy-going. It's big enough that you won't get (too) bored but it's also close to nature and interesting small towns. If you live in town at the Kaikan, pretty much everything you could need is within easy walking distance.

ATMs:

Japanese ATMs are functionally similar to those in America but are quite a bit less convenient. For one, they're not open 24 hours a day. Many close when the banks close (which is around 3pm) or are only open until 5 or 7pm. Also, you can't go to just any ATM—you must use the ATM that belongs to your bank. They also don't have any English. Hope you've been studying kanji!

There are a few exceptions to this: both the post office and 7-11 have ATMs that accept cards from most banks. These will also likely accept a card from your American bank. They also have English options. The post office ATM has bank-like hours, while the 7-11 ATM is open 24 hours a day. And, as most banks in Oita are local, don't expect to find an Oita Bank ATM in Tokyo or Osaka. Either bring lots of cash, or find a 7-11 or post office.

Actually, it's a good idea to carry more cash around than you would in the US. It's safe in Japan, for one, plus most places don't take credit cards, and there's no such thing as debit cards. It's a cash society, get used to it. (That being said, you can get robbed anywhere. Always use caution.)

Post Office:

There's a small post office right around the corner from the Kaikan with an ATM. This is where you'll pay your health insurance bills. Of course, the post office also can ship packages for you.

Paying Bills:

Aside from your health insurance bill (which you pay at the post office) all other bills are paid at the convenience store, aka combini. Just take your bill in, they scan it, and you pay it. Easy.

Bills look just like they do back home. They'll come in an envelope through the mail. You may also see something that looks like a printed receipt with a total on it show up in your mailbox. This is not a bill. It's just an advance warning of how much you owe. If you're unsure if it's a real bill or not, look for a barcode. Barcode equals bill.

Grocery Stores & Conbini:

There are two grocery stores within walking distance to the Kaikan where you can buy just about everything you may want, Marukyou and Marushoku. Keep in mind though that grocery stores tend to not have as much in the way of shampoos and stuff. For that (and things like cold medicine or contact lens solution) you need to go to a pharmacy, or kusuri (). There are a few biggish ones in the covered shopping area near the station.

Convenient stores (conbini) are everywhere, and really are convenient. Aside from junk food and paying your bills, you can also buy decent lunch food, like salads, onigiri, bento, etc. They also have some toiletries, as well as magazines, DVDs, sometimes even collectible toys.

Garbage:

The garbage system is frankly a pain in the ass in Japan, particularly in Oita where it seems designed to drive even the most detail-oriented person crazy. However, proper disposal of garbage is a BIG deal in Japan and if you ignore the system you will be scolded for it.

Here's how it works:

Separate your trash into burnable, non-burnable, plastic bottles, glass bottles and cans, etc. These go in transparent or semi-transparent bags like ones from the grocery store. You can also buy them. Put the trash out on the appropriate day in the little garbage hut on the street in front of the Kaikan, and make sure you put burnables on the right side of the hut, and non-burnables on the left. Don't put the trash out early, it'll mess everything up. I have piles of bags on my balcony. That's just the way it is.

Ask for a garbage schedule from the manager's office at the Kaikan.

Bike:

Oita is a very bike-friendly town and people ride around everywhere. There are rules to this of course but they seem loosely followed and laxly enforced. However, I recommend you follow the rules of the road. Ride with traffic, yield to pedestrians, etc. It may seem obvious but you'll probably be tempted to just do what everyone else does, which is frankly dangerous. At least one American got hit while riding a bike this semester, and another was hit while walking in a parking lot. People drive here differently than in America, so don't expect a driver to act like an American driver. I also recommend a helmet. No one wears them but doesn't mean you shouldn't.

If you decide you want a bike, ask at the manager's office. The bike man will come some weekend afternoon and deliver a refurbished bike to you. It will arrive with a license and lock, and will cost about half of what a new one would. Should it break down later, the bike man will come back and try to fix it for you. If you want a new one from a store, be sure and get it licensed. If you get stopped by the cops while riding an unlicensed bike, they will assume you stole it.

Transportation:

Aside from bikes, the best way to get around Oita is train. They go most everywhere. There's also a good bus system. That being said, there's still lots of stuff you can only see by car. All I can say about that is, make friends with a car owner.

Restaurants:

A question you'll often be asked by Japanese people is, "Can you eat Japanese food?" If your answer is no, well, you'd better learn to. Oita is no Tokyo when it comes to food. It's pretty much Japanese food (washoku) or nothing. There are a few Indian places, the stray Indonesian or Chinese restaurant, but it's almost exclusively Japanese food. Even the "ethnic" places tend to be owned by Japanese and the flavors have been altered to suit the Japanese palette.

If your answer to that question was yes, then you're in for a treat. These are lots of great places to choose from, most affordable (although a few not so much). There's lots of great regional cuisine to try too, like fugu (poisonous fish), dango jiru (dumpling soup), basashi (raw horse sashimi), etc.

Discount Shops:

Japan has a (deserved) reputation for being expensive but not everything is over-the-top outrageous. Case in point: Daiso, the 100-yen (hyaku-en) store. Located in the covered shopping area near the station, it's got something like 6 floors of cheap, cheap stuff—cleaning products, dishes and cups, even clothing (although I recommend sticking to the house wares—some of that stuff looks pretty uncomfortable).

Another good option is Don Quixote, an obnoxiously loud (but fun) place crammed from floor to ceiling with everything you might want (and quite a bit of stuff you could never imagine buying). Everything from groceries to furniture to DVDs, plus fireworks (legal!), Halloween costumes, gag gifts, etc. Go crazy.

Gym:

There's a free gym on campus, although it looks like the kind of place Rocky Balboa might have trained in if he was even poorer than he was in the movie. There's also a gym in town near the Kaikan that's a little better on the technology, but it still looks circa 1985. Pay 240 yen before each workout, and get 2 hours exercise time. On the fifth floor of the building across from the library.

Illness:

If you get sick enough to need a doctor in Japan, go to the hospital. Private practices are rare here. Everything is organized around the hospital. It's a pretty painless process but there will be a lot of form-filling-out and waiting around. Some doctors speak English although the staff will probably not. Bring a translator if you need to.

Emergencies:

Call 110, the equivalent of 911. Hope they understand you.

Leisure and Travel

Despite what everyone says, Japan is a pretty big place, with lots to see and do. And with all those three-day weekends you have lots of opportunities to travel. The shinkansen doesn't come to Oita but you can pick it up in Fukuoka and from there go all the way to Hokkaido if you want.

Kyushu and Oita are full of amazing things, so you don't even have to go so far. Here are some recommendations:

Bungotaketa: An hour past school on the Hohi line is Taketa, a small town with castle ruins perched high on a hill. The views are breathtaking.

Usuki: An hour south of Oita is Usuki, a small town with some beautiful, 1000-year-old stone Buddha carvings. (Oita City has some of these too. Look in the underground pedestrian passageway by the station for a map.)

Nakatsu: A castle town in northern Oita Prefecture, Nakatsu also has some interesting old buildings.

Usa: The head Hachiman shrine, Usa Jingu, is here in the countryside north of Oita City.

Kitsuki: You wouldn't know it from the tiny train station, but there's a castle here overlooking the ocean.

Kumamoto: On the west coast of Kyushu is Kumamoto, a decent-sized town with a gorgeous castle and good restaurants.

Kagoshima: Located at the southern tip of Kyushu, Kagoshima faces Sakurajima, an active volcano that has a constant plume of smoke above it. Ferries take you to the volcano where you can walk around in lava fields.

Drinking:

Drinking is a big part of Japanese culture and that's reflected in the amount of places to do this. Most of the time, you drink at an izakaya, a kind of Japanese tapas place. There are also bars, of course, which tend to all be clustered in one area, Miyako-machi. Most of these are karaoke bars (there's also lots of karaoke box places too if you prefer to warble in private).

There's a thing in Japan called nomihoudai. You pay a flat fee and get all you can drink for a pre-determined amount of time. These kinds of drinking parties (nomikai) are popular in Japan. You'll likely be invited to one. It's polite to go, particularly if you're part of a campus club or circle. Of course, you don't have to drink alcohol if you don't want to. Plenty of people just drink soda or tea or juice, with no teasing. If you do drink alcohol though, be prepared for lots of toasts.

Music:

If you're big into the clubs, too bad for you. There's only a handful of clubs and the majority of big name DJs never make it down here. Likewise for live music. Fukuoka, about 2 hours north on the train, is the closest likely stop for tours. Save that, it's Osaka or Tokyo.

Clothes & Shoes:

Clothes and shoes can be difficult to find if you're bigger than the average Japanese. Shoes over men's size 10.5 US are rare, as are XL shirts. Uniqlo, a chain store much like the Gap, tends to have decent clothes with larger waist sizes. That being said, their T-shirts still don't fit my shoulders.

Women may fare better but clothing still tends to be cut for narrow bodies.

Good thing we've got eBay and the Internet, huh?

Travel Outside of Japan:

Oita is as close to Seoul, South Korea as it is to Tokyo, making trips to the continent relatively affordable. Should you decide to leave the country, you have to get your visa stamped for re-entry. Do this at the immigration office in Oita. It costs 3000 yen for a single re-entry stamp, or 6000 yen for a multiple re-entry one. Also, you should notify the International Office on campus that you're leaving the country.

Going Home

Eventually you're going to have to go home. Psychologically, leaving will likely be harder than arriving, but in terms of practical things it's not that bad.

Utilities:

Inform the International Office of the day that you're leaving. They'll contact all of your utility companies and arrange to have workers come to your dorm room either the day before, or the day of, your departure. You'll pay your last bill directly to them. Don't pay your last bill like you normally would. Pay them directly.

Shipping Stuff Home:

You'll probably have a lot more stuff to take home than you brought, so you'll want to ship some. Surface (by boat) is the cheapest, although it's pretty slow. If you have too

much stuff to carry to the post office you can arrange with the post office to come pick it up at the dorm. They'll weigh it right there, so be ready with enough cash to pay.

Luggage Delivery:

If you have too much luggage to get to the airport by yourself, you can hire Kuroneko, a delivery company, to bring it directly to the ticket counter of your final Japan airport, which will likely be Narita. They'll need at least a few days to get it there so plan accordingly.

In Closing

That's about it. Hope you found this guide useful. Please feel free to add to it as policies change.