

**Experience Report – Study Abroad in Japan, University of Tsukuba**  
**At FU: M.Sc. Planetary Sciences, 3rd Semester**  
**At Tsukuba: Master of Environmental Sciences**

### **Preparation**

For Master's students in natural sciences, the University of Tsukuba was the only realistic option for a study abroad semester. I enrolled as an exchange student and took regular courses at the university instead of as a research student, which is strongly advised as a Master's Student (there are pros and cons to both, it depends if you want to take more courses or work in a lab/research group). Before my departure, we were often advised against taking courses and were told that it would be easier to come as a research student. However, I personally did not experience any problems finding suitable courses, especially because I wanted to take several Japanese language classes (I took 6 per week). If you plan to take fewer language courses, it might be slightly more challenging to find enough classes to fulfill the minimum attendance time, but it is still manageable, particularly in environmental sciences where many courses are offered. If you go as a research student you can take the same language courses but your time requirements are based on research time instead of credits.

The preparation process was well organised. Most information was communicated through emails and later explained again in person after arrival. In most cases, exchange students were assigned a tutor who helped with administrative tasks and practical questions. One important piece of advice is to reply promptly to all emails and requests, as there is a significant amount of paperwork and correspondence to manage. Staying organised and keeping track of deadlines makes the process much easier. After receiving our acceptance from the university, we applied for our visas at the embassy the following week. We expected the process to take several weeks, but in reality, it only took about one week to get our passports back. Some students therefore travelled to Japan before the official arrival date set by the university. The university provides an arrival window of around three days for orientation and administrative procedures, but it is possible to arrive earlier and then attend these sessions as long as you already have your visa sorted (lots of friends did this and had already spent a week or two in Japan before coming to Tsukuba, although I'm not sure if it's advised).

Overall, the preparation requires patience due to the large amount of paperwork, but everything is clearly explained, and support is available every step of the way if you stay proactive.

### **Accommodation**

The university offers student housing for exchange students only in the Ichinoya Residence halls. Students can choose between different room sizes and price categories. During my stay, the rent was relatively affordable, although prices are expected to increase in the future (as of 2026). I would recommend choosing a smaller room with a private toilet, as larger rooms are significantly more expensive after the price adjustment and may not offer enough additional benefits to justify the cost. For furnishing and daily necessities, it is easy to purchase

second-hand items. Shops such as Second Street or Hard Off offer affordable used furniture and household goods. Additionally, students often leave items behind in Student Commons (in the centre of campus) that can be picked up and given back at the start and end of semester for free (look at the instagrams for info). For inexpensive everyday necessities, stores like Daiso are very useful.

## **Finances**

I received financial support through the DAAD PROMOS scholarship for six months. Depending on the funding scheme, the scholarship can cover travel expenses, living costs, or both. It is important to check the application deadlines early, as some students missed them. The cost of living in Japan was generally lower than in Germany, especially regarding food and eating out. Groceries and restaurant meals were relatively affordable. However, travel costs can be quite high. The Shinkansen (high-speed train) is very fast and convenient but has fixed and relatively expensive fares. Overnight buses provide a much cheaper alternative for long-distance travel. Renting a car is also possible in a group and German Driving Licenses can be translated online in Japan for about 20 euros.

## **The University System**

The academic year in Japan starts in spring rather than autumn, which meant that we arrived halfway through the academic year. This does not have a major impact, but there are typically more introductory courses available at the beginning of the academic year. The semester system at the university is divided into A, B, and C terms. It is advisable to take more courses in the A and B terms, as significantly fewer courses are offered in the C term. This also provides more time for travelling later. Many students choose to take short block courses during the C term, such as a two-day course on Olympic history. I personally attended a three-day block course called Design and Care. Although information varied, we were told that taking at least one course in the C term was necessary to ensure that our student visa remained valid until February instead of ending in December.

## **Daily Life**

Student life offers many opportunities for social and extracurricular activities. The university has various clubs and circles, although some can be difficult to join without Japanese language skills. Clubs such as volleyball (Spikers), taiko drumming, and dance appeared particularly open to international students. Sports classes are part of the academic program, but some are harder to join because they require participation in introductory sessions held in the spring semester. It took some tracking down but I found and befriended the frisbee team and played with them, there was a swimming group and a running group. I also went to a salsa group (run by Beto) outside of uni, which was really fun and the people there took me out to a salsa night in Tokyo. Keep your ears open and try things out. This is also a great way to make friends with non-exchange students.

There was also a German club, and many German students were present on campus, which made it easy to connect with others from a similar background. We met every Wednesday with a small group of German learners and usually went out to eat together afterward. This became a very enjoyable and regular part of my weekly routine. There were also other language exchange groups and I recommend going to all of them at the start and seeing where you want to spend the most time.

For transportation, I chose to rent a bicycle through Cyclechic, which is an affordable and simple option, although the quality of the bicycles is not particularly high. Nevertheless, it is sufficient for getting around the city. I did not purchase a bus pass because cycling was more convenient for me.

### **Culture and Cultural Differences**

One of the most noticeable cultural differences was the extensive amount of paperwork required for administrative processes. Japanese administration relies heavily on physical documents, so it is helpful to print all important documents in advance and keep them organised. I strongly recommend working together with other students or asking your tutor for help when dealing with bureaucratic tasks. Completing these procedures early reduces stress significantly. The first month involves a particularly high administrative workload, but the situation becomes much more relaxed afterward. I also recommend bringing several printed passport photos, as they are frequently required for different registrations and applications. I used at least four within the first month.

### **Other Useful Information**

It is better to bring fewer belongings than you initially expect. Many items can easily be purchased in Japan, and second-hand shops offer affordable options. Even though I consider myself a minimalist, I still felt that I brought too many clothes with me that I didn't need. For learning Japanese, I recommend using language-learning tools such as WaniKani or taking additional language courses before departure. It can also be helpful to enrol in a Japanese class at a slightly higher level than your current proficiency to improve more quickly (the test they made us take at the start of the semester often didn't reflect people's levels accurately so go talk to the teachers and don't be afraid to change levels up or down).

If you have a German driver's licence, you can obtain an official translation in Japan and print it at a convenience store, or you can arrange it before departure. Having access to a car is very useful for travelling outside major cities. For mobile data, I used a Roamless eSIM. Although having a Japanese phone number is not absolutely necessary, it is convenient and recommended for daily life and administrative matters. They use LINE as their main communication app here.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, my study abroad experience in Japan was amazing, and I would strongly recommend it. The experience offers excellent opportunities for personal growth, academic development, and

cultural exchange. I particularly recommend travelling as much as possible and participating in cultural activities. Visiting regions such as Kyushu and exploring Japan's natural landscapes, including hiking and mountain climbing, were highlights of my stay.

My main advice is to be open, make friends, talk to people, and say yes to as many opportunities as possible, especially at the beginning of your stay. Being proactive and curious helps you integrate quickly and makes the experience even more rewarding. Some people said they didn't make friends with any Japanese but that wasn't my experience at all. I think doing lots of sports helped and activities by myself meant I made a lot of friends on my own. Talk to people, invite them for lunch and don't be too reliant on socialising with the other internationals (unless that's what you want of course!).

Studying abroad in Japan was an unforgettable experience.