

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Fund

Mr. Paul Dudler, Chairman

A year in Japan: Midterm report



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Preface

When I came back from Japan in September 2005, where I had been working as a guide on the Swiss Pavilion at the World Exposition in Aichi, my «dream » was to return to this beautiful country, in order to have another rich experience and deepen my knowledge of Japanese language and culture.

The SJCC scholarship enabled me to make this come true, while combining it with a professional training, and for that I am really grateful to the donors of the SJCC Scholarship Fund. I would like to thank especially Mr. Paul Dudler for the trust he put in me, as well as for his support and advices during these past months.

After having spent now more than half a year in Japan, I am looking behind me to what I have passed through during that time, and I can say that I lived many wonderful things but also went through some difficulties. I am glad to share, in this report, my experience with the future recipients of the SJCC scholarship.

Preparations

1. School

After having compared the internet sites of the schools mentioned on the SJCC list, I decided to chose Sendagaya Japanese Institute¹, in Tokyo. I have studied two terms at this school and would definitely recommend it. The school is in Takadanobaba, where many educational institutions are located, and thus a young and lively area. I took the everyday course, which is held from Monday to Friday from 9:30 to 12:50. On the first day, students have to take a placement test and an interview to join their appropriate class level. The teaching is given as follow: every morning is divided in two parts, the first one being dedicated to the study of a textbook focusing mainly on grammar, vocabulary and sentence patterns, and the second one consisting on special activities, such as reading newspaper articles, watching movies or television programs, listening, conversations on a wide range of topics and personal presentations.

The teaching is thus very varied, and given by experienced and friendly teachers, eager to make their lessons enjoyable. All of them have actually been following a special training in this school to become professionals. Once a textbook's chapter is finished, a kanji and grammar test is held, which, I found, was quite a good way to motivate me to study regularly. The classes include an average of ten to fifteen students, in my case mostly coming from western countries.

When I arrived in Japan, my conversation level was very low, and I understood quickly that the course level was a bit high for me, as almost all my classmates could

¹ http://www.jp-sji.org/sji_english/index.html

speak much better than I did. First, I wanted to change my class level, but my teachers recommended me to stay.

One major positive point of this school is precisely that the teachers were always keen on listening to us and tried to find the best solution to fit to our needs, while encouraging us to improve our language skills as much as we could. Indeed, even though it was a bit more stressful for me, I did not regret to have remained at my class level, as I made this way huge progresses. I also greatly appreciated the helpfulness of the school's staff, always willing to give us advices of any kind.

In my opinion, only the extracurricular activities are missing in this school. Besides, I should also mention that, for the people who are interested in applying for a Pre-college visa, this language school does not provide it.

After my two terms of everyday course, I decided to go on studying at Sendagaya Japanese Language Institute to follow one of the evening courses, a preparatory class for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test's grammar.

2. Accomodation

I started looking for my accomodation a short time before leaving for Japan, as I knew it was quite difficult to book a room in advance, in my case no more than two weeks before moving in. I found on internet an agency called Create Shared House², which provides quite a large choice of shared accomodations throughout Tokyo and reasonable prices. Like a number of agencies easy to access for foreigners, no deposit has to be paid and they only ask for 20.000 yen corresponding to cleaning and administration fees. Another advantage is that electric appliances and furniture are included in the rent, as well as all of the utilities and free internet access in the rooms. I went to their office on my first day in Tokyo to sign the contract, take the key and moved directly in. The English speaking staff was very welcoming, and they later on appeared to be very efficient in trying to find quick solutions to our problems. Flat sharing was for me a very nice way of meeting people and not feeling lonely when I

² <http://www.accommodation-japan.com/jpn/index.php>

first arrived in here. Moreover, when we need advices on some matters, it is also very convenient to know someone who has already been living in Tokyo for a while. Some months after, I changed my accomodation because a friend joined me here and we then decided to share a flat. This time, I booked a new accomodation through Fontana³, a quite popular agency among foreigners. In this case, a deposit corresponding to the rent of one month was requested. Fontana proposes fully furnished apartments, easy contract procedures, and the staff speaks English. The rents are not very high, but the utilities and the internet fees have to be paid separately.

3. Visa

Three months before leaving for Japan, I had been very fortunate and had already found, through connections, an internship in a museum in Tokyo. That was for me one of the best places to do a professional training, as I had graduated in art history. I had read about the difficulties encountered by the SJCC scholars to get their visa, and thus wanted to apply for it already in Switzerland, in order to obtain a proper one before my departure. Unfortunately, there was a problem of communication between my contact person and me, and I was not able to make the administrative steps on time. However, I was not extremely worried about that, having been certified that the necessary procedure would not take long to be made in Japan. I thus entered Japan with a Temporary Visitor visa, which allowed me to stay in the country for ninety days, and that could, if needed, easily be extended for another ninety days directly at the Immigration Office in Shinagawa.

In Japan

1. Mobile phone

One of the first things I did after my arrival in Japan was to buy a mobile phone. A Japanese friend nicely came with me to help understanding the different contract

³ <http://www.fontana-apt.co.jp/>

possibilities. After having gone to au KDDI and NTT DoCoMo, where we have been told that it was not possible, with a temporary visa, to apply for a telephone plan, and, furthermore, to purchase a prepaid mobile phone through these operators, I finally could buy one from Softbank. However, as I did not have my Certificate of Alien Registration⁴ yet, my friend had to sign the contract for me.

A shop attendant of Softbank recommended me to visit a couple of branch offices before buying the phone. Indeed, depending on the number of devices a shop has in stock, there appear to be quite significant differences between the prices of the prepaid phones. I could finally pay almost half of the price for the same phone.

2. Internship

Before coming to Japan, I had planned to take only a three-months intensive language course, before starting doing my internship. As I have mentioned before, I entered Japan on a temporary visa, and was hoping to apply for another visa just after my arrival, through the museum I was going to be an intern in. However, contrary to my expectations and after a difficult interview in Japanese, the museum that had agreed to hire me some months before finally decided that they would give up on it. The main reason seems to have been my poor level of Japanese, but another explanation could be that it was the first time for them to employ an intern, and they actually did not have the suitable structure to welcome me. After having taken notice of their decision, I applied for an extension of my permission as a Temporary Visitor, for another ninety days, at the Immigration Office. As I had read in the reports of other scholarship recipients, it was very easy, cost about 4.000 yen, and took me approximately an hour and a half. I also extended my Japanese language course to a second term. Now that I have finished my six-months course, I am actually happy to have had the opportunity to go on with my studies, because this second term brought me a lot. In fact, I have the feeling that the first term helped me get back to the level of Japanese I had some years ago and that I had quite forgotten, and I only started to see real improvements from the end of the first term on.

⁴ 外国人登録証明書, required when staying more than 90 days in Japan. This certificate takes about three weeks to be issued from the ward office, and is needed to get, for instance, a mobile phone and open a bank account, so I would recommend to ask for it as soon as possible.

The problem encountered with my first application in a museum appeared actually to be quite a recurring issue. Indeed, I realized that, in the cultural field where I was looking for an internship, and maybe especially in museums, there are not many possibilities for foreigners to be employed as interns. Firstly, I have the impression that this kind of institutions does not often offer real internships of six months or more. I saw on internet many proposals for « volunteer » jobs coming from museums, but these ones are temporary activities, for temporary events, and mostly consist in welcoming guests, distributing leaflets, etc. Secondly, other institutions do take interns, but only part-time, as internships are often intended for university students, who most probably could not work full-time. In this kind of work, it is usually requested to speak Japanese very well and to know all the technical terms related to it, as was specified in some of the answers that I received to my applications. Finally, some museums hire long-time interns, but their policy seems to be quite strict and there are special times in the year where the applications can be made. I would recommend to read carefully the web sites of the museums or cultural institutions to be able to apply within the time frame, and to send as much applications as possible. However, all things considered and as one of my Japanese acquaintances said, the surest way to find an internship is probably to make connections work, if you have the chance to have any.

Wherever possible, I would also suggest to try to find an internship as soon as possible, even when still in Switzerland. Indeed, finding an internship takes time, because of the process of applying itself, but also because there are sometimes, in my opinion, differences between the way Japanese express their thought and the way we do. This can lead to misunderstandings and, thus, delays. It happened to me when the first museum I applied to, instead of telling me immediately that they would not employ me, made me wait almost two months before doing it.

3. Bank account

As many scholarship recipients already pointed out in their reports, it is very difficult to open a bank account with a status of Temporary Visitor, that means with a permission of residence of less than six months. After an unsuccessful try in

Citibank, where it is very easy to apply on-line on their website, in sending a copy of the Certificate of Alien Registration, I decided to wait for my working visa and live during that time on my savings.

As soon as I received my new visa, I went to Shinsei Bank⁵, where the procedures turned out to be extremely simple: after a very short discussion, I only needed to give my registration card, and having a hanko (seal often replacing the signature on formal documents) was not necessary. Everything was done in less than one hour and I could already leave with my cashcard.

Another good point about Shinsei Bank is that they have a call center available in English, internet banking, and free of charge withdrawals are possible 24 hours from Shinsei Bank's ATM and convenient stores, like Seven Eleven. Money can also be withdrawn at post offices, among others.

4. Life in Tokyo

Tokyo is, of course, a huge, noisy and busy city. However, outside of the crowded avenues and the big centers, such as Shinjuku, Shibuya or Ginza, neighbourhoods are usually made of low residential buildings or individual houses, standing along narrow winding streets, with small restaurants and shops. We can find there a totally different atmosphere, and sometimes the feeling of old times and Japanese traditions. It is still, though, a bit tiring to face up the rush-hour in the morning or evening trains for example or to make its way through a street full of people, but, the well-known respectful way of interacting of the Japanese makes it actually quite easy to put up with.

One thing I especially like in Tokyo is the wide range of cultural possibilities, in particular the choice in art exhibitions, at galleries or museums, and concerts. The entrance price of a museum can vary from 200 to 1800 yen or more, and, as far as I know, there are no free entry days, contrary to other cities. A « Grutt Pass » (ぐるつとパス), which provides free admission or discount tickets in many museums in Tokyo and valid two months can however be purchased directly at the museums.

⁵ <http://www.shinseibank.com/english/>

Appart from my classmates and a few other people who were introduced to me by other friends, I have had only a few opportunities to meet new people here, yet. Although Japanese are always very friendly, I feel it quite difficult to make good friends among them. In order to meet new people and to improve my language ability, I joined one of the classes for foreigners proposed by Japanese volunteers and held once a week⁶. In the meantime, I also registered on a website specialized in language exchange⁷ and found some exchange partners in Tokyo, that I meet regularly. I think that both solutions can be a really good way to practice Japanese, make new friends and get to know Japanese culture better.



5. Trips

There are quite a lot of interesting places around Tokyo, where you can go only on a one-day trip. The first place I visited was Nikko, a very old religious center situated about two hours by train on the North of Tokyo. This place is especially famous for

⁶ <http://www.toshima.ne.jp/~tomonii/nihongo-circle.html>

⁷ <http://www.conversationexchange.com/>

the magnificent Toshogu, erected by Tokugawa Iemitsu in 1634 as mausoleum for his grand father, the famous shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. I visited Nikko in November, when the momiji (maple trees) were showing their beautiful red leaves, giving to the site an even more impressive atmosphere (fig. 1).

Kamakura (fig. 2) is also an important touristic spot near Tokyo. Capital of Japan during more than a century (1185-1333), it still holds a large number of temples, shrines and historical monuments, among which the famous Daibutsu (大仏, the Great Buddha) (fig. 3). Like Nikkô, I would recommend to visit these two spots during the week, to avoid the crowd of the week-ends.

Further than Kamakura, also in the prefecture of Kanagawa, Hakone is a small city situated in the national park of Fuji-Hakone-Izu, popular destination for hiking among Tokyoites. With a nice view on Mt Fuji (when the weather allows it), it is well-known for the onsen (Japanese hot springs). There is also an open-air museum, focusing on modern and contemporary art, with a good collection of Picasso and Henry Moore's works.

6. From now on

Despite the difficulties I encountered in finding an internship and after quite a few tries, I have finally been employed as intern at Tokyo Wonder Site, a contemporary art center that promotes young Japanese and foreign artists. I am really looking forward to this new experience, which will allow me discover the Japanese professional world, while getting knowledge in my field of studies and deepening my understanding of Japanese language.

Tokyo, June 2009

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3