

Midterm report

by Simon Hilber



Tokyo, Japan

July 2011 – January 2012

Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Fund

attn. Mr. Paul Dudler

List of contents

| | |
|---|-------|
| - Introduction | P. 3 |
| - Why Japan? | P. 3 |
| - The great Tohoku earthquake | P. 4 |
| - Planning and administrative matters | P. 5 |
| - Visa | P. 5 |
| - Tourist Visa | P. 6 |
| - Pre-college Student Visa | P. 7 |
| - Designated activities Visa | P. 7 |
| - Changing your Visa status | P. 7 |
| - Accommodation | P. 8 |
| - School | P. 9 |
| - Alien Registration | P. 10 |
| - Cellular phone | P. 10 |
| - Bank account | P. 11 |
| - Finding an internship | P. 12 |
| - Looking for offers | P. 12 |
| - The interview | P. 13 |
| - Leisure | P. 14 |
| - JLPT | P. 15 |
| - Looking forward | P. 16 |

Introduction

Welcome to my midterm report which shall be analyzing and describing the experiences I made during the first half of my stay in Japan as part of the scholarship program of the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce. First of all I would like to thank the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce Scholarship Fund and especially Mr. Paul Dudler for allowing me to experience once again the Japanese lifestyle and culture by immersing into it.

In this report I tried to include advice for people who are planning a stay in Japan. Since I based my descriptions on my own experiences, actual situations in Japan as encountered by other people might vary from the descriptions given in this report. I would also like to mention that the given opinions and descriptions do not reflect the position of the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce, but are merely an expression of my own views and thoughts. It is also worthwhile noticing that the mentioned rules, laws and possibilities might vary through time and might not be valid anymore.

The experiences I made in Japan during the first six months of my stay were vast and overwhelming. I would therefore like to continue my descriptions without further introduction.

Why Japan?

Like everyone who plans on going to Japan for a year, I have been asked this question what felt about a thousand times. On this particular occasion my answer is rather simple: After I spent already a year in Japan during high-school, as an exchange student, I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the Japanese language and the society as a whole.

During the time I spent in Japan while doing my exchange year, I received insights into the life of a Japanese high-school student. During that time I also acquired a basic knowledge of the Japanese language, which unfortunately did not surpass the spectrum of daily conversation. This made me have some remorse when I was back home, that I had never been able to discuss more complex matters with my former classmates. Furthermore, while being in high-school myself, my interests were mainly focused on the life of high-school students. But growing up, I started to wonder what challenges and struggles the young adults in Japan had to face.

In addition, the fact that the scholarship program from the SJCC includes a mandatory internship period, met my intentions of doing an internship after acquiring the bachelors degree. Without wanting to sound too self-centered, I have to admit that when I saw the description of the SJCC-Scholarship program, I felt as if it had been made to meet all the wishes and desires I had at this time.

I therefore decided to apply to the scholarship, in hope I would receive once again the opportunity to get to know the Japanese lifestyle and to immerse myself into it.

The great Tohoku earthquake

After I had been accepted into the SJCC scholarship program in early January 2011, I started planning my stay in Japan. Further information on the planning steps will be given later on, however I shall first mention a major event, which influenced many aspects of my planning activities.

On March 11th, I had just finished my last day of work as a cashier for one of the major Swiss retailers. I would have two weeks now, to make the final preparations before flying to Japan on March 29th. As I sit down in the train and take a look at an evening newspaper I took for free, I see pictures and reports of devastation caused by an earthquake in Japan. As soon as I got home, I turned on the TV and wrote mails to my Japanese friends, to know if they were all ok.

The next days were mainly spent in front of the TV and on the internet, to gather information and to watch how the situation developed. However I still planned to go to Japan, to eventually not go to school for a few weeks and to go and help in the affected regions instead.

As I spent my days between the TV and the internet, the reports about the incident in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power-plant started to spread all over the news. As the days went by, the incidents around the nuclear power plant started to take over the news more than the devastation by the tsunami. My family and friends, whom I had told my intentions of going to Japan despite the earthquake and tsunami disaster, started to worry more and more. Even I started to have some second thoughts as well, but I felt bad for my friends living in Japan and I did not want to have to explain to them, who were staying in Tokyo, that I would not join them.

As the departure date came closer, I set myself a deadline whether I would fly to Japan on the 29th. I chose to decide a week before my departure date, which would give me enough time to cancel my accommodation, the school and the flight. During the week I gave myself to decide, I also contacted the language school and the company I chose my accommodation at, they all told me that considering the situation, they would charge no fees for a postponement. I also saw that I could rebook my flight to a later date even though it was not possible initially.

As the deadline came closer and the news seemed to get worse from day to day, many phone calls from my family imploring me not to go and even some mails from Japanese friends telling me that it would be better not to come right now, I decided to postpone everything to June of the same year.

In the following three months, I still had to decide whether to start my trip to Japan or not. I started to work for two months in a factory nearby to increase my budget and kept an eye on the developments in Japan. Even though I had some minor doubts for a while, I made up my mind rather soon to go to Japan in June. I also attended the Annual General Meeting of the SJCC Alumni Organization in April, where I could talk with other scholarship recipients and alumni, which helped me in clearing the last doubts I had.

On June 20th, with a delay of 3 months, I finally took off to Japan.

Planning and administrative matters

In the following section I shall present various steps I took while planning my stay in Japan. I will take a closer look how my preparations turned out to be and what I would do differently today, regarding the experiences I made so far. I hope this might be helpful to people who are preparing their stay in Japan whether it is as a recipient of the SJCC scholarship or not.

Visa

Like some other scholarship recipients I arrived in Japan with the plan to get into the country with a tourist visa and to apply for regular visa as soon as I found an internship. I did not have many troubles with that, but in hindsight it might have been a good idea to apply for a

pre-college-student visa with the help of my school. In the following parts I will discuss the pros and cons of the two visa types, and what you should look out for:

Tourist visa

As I said before, I arrived in Japan to enter it with a tourist visa. This is probably the easiest way, since it does not require any preparations. The tourist visa will be given for 90 days and can be extended to 180 days at the local immigration office easily if you are a Swiss citizen. However there are some points you might want to keep in mind.

If you want to enter Japan and you already have in mind to extend your visa for another 90 days, it is not a good idea to tell this to the authorities at the airport. Mostly they will not be aware of this possibility and they might take you aside for further questioning and to check up on this matter. In the end you will have to change the entry “desired length of stay:” from a 180 days to 90 days anyway. But if you write a 90 days from the beginning, this will spare you a lot of worrying whether you can enter Japan or not and approximately 45 minutes which would be spent better in any other way. Believe me, it is a way more comfortable way to start your stay in Japan.

The extension of the visa from 90 days to 180 is fairly easy too. If you live in Tokyo, you will have to go to the immigration office in Shinagawa. Also, there it is much quicker if you know where to go from the beginning. When you go into the immigration office, you might want to get the form you need, if you did not prepare them in advance. It won't take a lot of time to fill it out. You will get it pretty much if you walk straight after you get into the building. There will probably only be a few people there, but don't get too excited about that. When you filled out the form, take the stairs to the second floor. Now you might get surprised by all the people waiting there, however if you want to just extend your tourist visa you're lucky. If not, may god have mercy on your soul.

When you get onto the second floor, don't get tricked into standing in line for the yellow counters. If you look closely on your left, there are about two blue counters which are especially for tourist visas. Once you're there, you're almost done. Give them your application form and wait. One time you will have to go downstairs to the convenience store to buy stamps worth 4000 Yen and then you will get your extension.

The good point about the tourist visa is that it doesn't need any preparations and it can be extended easily. However bear in mind that it will only be valid for 180 days and if you cannot change your visa status until then you will have to leave the country. Especially if you arrive in Japan a week before your school starts, you might miss the last days of school.

Pre-college-student visa

This visa is a good alternative for the tourist visa. However depending on the school you will go to, you will not receive one if you don't go to this school for at least one year. As far as I know, you can get a 6 months pre-college-student visa at KAI Japanese language school if you stay there for 6 months. For other schools please refer to their websites. The good point about this visa is that you will not have to worry about anything at least for six months and you can even find a "baito" (part time job) with this visa.

The only bad point is that you have to apply for it through your school at least 3 months before coming to Japan.

Designated Activities visa

After you found an internship, you will most likely have to change your visa status. In other reports there are numerous types of visa which people chose to do their internship. The one I got is the "Designated Activities" visa. I was advised to apply for it from my company and they also helped me a lot with the application.

The main point for the designated activities visa is that you still have to be enrolled at your university at the time you apply for it. Further more you will have to obtain a letter from your university (at least from a professor or the dean's office) which states that you will stay enrolled in university and that the internship is part of your mandatory studies. Therefore it is very helpful to have good contacts to some of your professors, to receive such a letter quickly without undergoing a lot of bureaucratic procedures at university.

The designated activities visa will be issued for 6 months or a year and you will be able to make internships which are remunerated.

Changing your visa status

I often read that people went home in order to change their visa status. The following might contradict what my experiences were like, but as far as I know, you may apply for a new visa (change of status of residence) within Japan. There are two things you might keep in mind:

First, make your preparations in advance. If you apply for a certificate of eligibility (CoE), it will take more than one month until it is issued. If your current visa runs out before the CoE is issued you will have to leave the country. This happened in my case, even though my company applied for the CoE on the 13th of November, it was not issued by the 16th of December.

However, if you receive the CoE before your visa expires, you will be granted a temporary visa for as long as your demand of change status of residence has not been treated. However and this brings us to secondly, the issuing of a new visa will most likely take longer within Japan than in an embassy. In embassies it will mostly take five working days to process a visa application. However within Japan it takes longer, mostly time you will not be allowed to start your internship.

If you have to do this all by yourself it might take a few days at immigration and there are certainly many bureaucratic procedures involved but it will save you a plane ticket back home. For further information you should check the site of Japanese immigration bureau (<http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/english/index.html>).

Accommodation

Finding an accommodation will probably be one of the next big issues you will face before coming to Japan. A good idea will be to first find a school, in order to find an accommodation nearby. On information about schools please refer to the next paragraph. Assuming the school, or even the internship place was found, this paragraph will focus on the choice of accommodation I made.

There are probably countless ways to find a suitable accommodation. There might be a few questions you want to ask yourself first: Where do you want to live? If you don't have an internship yet you will probably end up in Tokyo, but it could be a good experience to stay in Kyoto, Osaka or even a "smaller" city. Would you like to live in your own apartment, in a guesthouse or in a shared house? Would you like to have your own room? How much are you ready to spend?

As for me, I considered for a while going to a smaller city to have more of the rural Japan experience, since I already spent a year in Tokyo area. However since I did not have an internship before coming to Japan I thought that it would be easier to find an internship while staying in Tokyo.

I also decided pretty soon that I didn't want to spend too much money on my accommodation and that I wanted to be in a house with mostly Japanese people. After browsing the internet and looking at the guide "how to get started in Tokyo", I opted for Borderless House. The points that made me choose Borderless House are that it tries to keep a ratio of at least 50/50 from Japanese and non-Japanese residents. They have houses pretty much

everywhere in Tokyo. They have also small houses with 5 to 13 residents in the house which can give a family like atmosphere. The rooms are fully furnished and have internet access. They have shared rooms, which are not that expensive.

For the first five months, I lived in a house in Shinagawa. The house had 12 residents and I was sleeping in a room with 4 other people. The residents were mostly Japanese, except for one Korean one Chinese, one Taiwanese and one American person. Thanks to this, I could speak Japanese all the time, what helped to increase my Japanese conversational skills a lot. In December I moved to another house near Ikebukuro to be closer to my future internship place and again I chose a Borderless House.

During my researches for my second house I also found good offers from Oakhouse, as they seemed reasonable in price and well furnished as well. Another site which looked interesting would be rmcafe.jp (see getting started in Tokyo), since there are mostly Japanese people looking for roommates. The whole site is in Japanese however.

School

As mentioned before, it might be a good idea to choose the language school before choosing an accommodation. The reason is fairly simple: Even though a commuting time of 45 minutes doesn't seem that much, it can get pretty annoying to do it for 3 or 6 months during rush-hour.

In the process of choosing my language school, I turned towards reports from previous scholarship recipients and to the guide on how to get started in Tokyo. After some additional research on the internet, I considered to go either to Naganuma or to KAI Japanese language school. The reason I opted for KAI, was that they were the first to answer a couple of questions I sent them by mail. Since I don't know how the situation in other schools looks like, I will only give an overview and some impressions I had while being in KAI Japanese language school.

KAI offers so called "general courses", which are separated in eight different stages. It takes approximately 3 months per stage. At the end of each stage there is a test you should pass in order to move to the next stage. Before entering school, you will have to take a "level check test" to see at what stage you can enter the school. One stage consists of four hours of class a day. You can choose to either go to class from 9 am to 1pm or from 1pm to 5pm.

A bit more than 50 percents of the students are “westerners”, which is not per se a bad thing. If you take morning classes (from 9am to 1pm) there are rooms available to study by yourself in the afternoon.

The staff at KAI is also very helpful. They will answer your questions and help you in about any matter of your life in Japan.

Alien registration

One of the first things you might want to do after you are installed in your new room is to make the alien registration at the local city office. If you entered Japan with a tourist visa this is not a mandatory step, however you can avoid carrying around your passport everywhere you go if you get your alien registration card. Furthermore this is a mandatory step if you want to get a cell phone and a bank account.

The process of alien registration in itself is quite simple. All you need to do is to go to the local city office with your passport and the contract for your accommodation and fill out some forms. You are also required to bring a picture of yourself, however in most of the city or ward offices there is a photo booth where you can take the pictures.

It usually takes about 2 to 3 weeks for your alien registration card to be issued. In the mean time you will receive a document stating that you applied for your card. However on this document your address is not written. Therefore you might consider to purchase one or two additional documents, which state your address. They cost about 300 Yen a piece and thanks to them you will not have to wait for two weeks before you can open a bank account or purchase a cell phone.

Cellular phone

Purchasing a cell phone might be an important step for most people staying in Japan. Since most guest or shared houses don't have a fix phone, you will probably need a cell phone number to write on job applications etc. Recently smartphones and other 3G phones purchased in Europe can also be used in Japan. Unfortunately I can't give much information

about this subject. I will therefore stick to what I know and write about how to purchase a prepaid cell phone.

As far as I know there is only Softbank selling prepaid phones in Japan for now. However they will not be on stock in most Softbank stores. You might want to go take a look in famous spots like Shinjuku, Roppongi or Shibuya if you can't find prepaid phones in your close by Softbank store. To purchase the phone, you will need your alien registration card or the document stating you made the request for foreigner registration together with the official document where your address is written on (see alien registration paragraph). The cell phone costs around 5000 or 10 000 Yen, depending on the model.

I have found a prepaid phone to be very useful. As for now Softbank charges 300 Yen a month for sending as many e-mails and sms's as you want. Making phone calls is a little bit expensive, but I could get through with writing mostly e-mails.

Bank account

Opening a bank account will probably be a priority for many scholarship recipients, since you will receive the first part of your payment only onto a Japanese bank account. This task might be a little difficult if you only entered Japan on a tourist visa. Difficult task indeed, but not impossible. I opened two bank accounts in my first two weeks in Japan, one account at the Japanese postal services and one at Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation. I will only explain the steps on how to open the account at Sumitomo Mitsui, since with the account at the postal service you are not able to receive payments from overseas.

As I have read in reports from other scholarship recipients, there are probably also other banks which allow you to open a bank account with a tourist visa. However it seems to be changing over the years and sometimes it might need a bit of persuasion from your side. As for me, I found the Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation quite easy to open the bank account at. All you will need is your passport, your alien registration card (or the two documents mentioned in the paragraph "Alien registration") and a hanko. The hanko (your personal seal), if not already purchased, will have to be made for this occasion. Unfortunately you will also not be able to use a hanko written in kanjis, but you will have to make one with either your first or last name written in katakana. The shops can be found about everywhere and it costs between 1000 and 1500 Yen and 30 minutes to get one done.

At Sumitomo Mitsui bank you will usually be able to open an account for residents who don't have a status of residency valid longer than 6 months. The name of the account type is 非居住者円 (hikyujusha en). It goes together with an account book and a cash card. With this account you may receive payments from overseas. However you cannot transfer money from your account to an account overseas. Furthermore you can withdraw money from the ATMs in convenience stores which is quite helpful, since many ATMs from banks have opening hours. Unfortunately this type of account does not have e-banking, which will make it a little bit more difficult to pay your bills.

At last I can give a short advice for paying bills which are to a bank other than the one you have your account at. In most cases you will be charged a pretty high fee (500 Yen or more) and it will take a considerable amount of time, if you want to make a payment by going to the counter of your bank. There is a way to save time and money, by going to the ATMs of the banks you want to make the payment to. There you can insert the account information of the recipient and pay in cash, for a much smaller fee. Furthermore you can make a little card with the information of the transfer, in order to not type in all the information a second time. This feature is very useful for your rents or other expenses occurring monthly.

Finding an internship

A big step for all SJCC scholarship recipients will be to find an internship. As you might have heard, it is not always a piece of cake. In the following part I will try to give some advice on where to find an internship and what to think of when going to an interview.

Looking for offers

If you don't already have found an internship before coming to Japan, you might want to start soon after you get there. You might encounter many difficulties, like internship offers which don't fit your schedule or sometimes an offer which is published a little late so you have to hurry to send in the required documents. A good advice to give is to always be flexible and prepared. At least after the second application you sent, you should have a good CV and cover letters which can be sent quickly as an answer to other job offers, if you are short

schedule. Of course you should adjust your CV and cover letter according to the job description.

Since most Japanese enterprises are not that familiar with internships, there are mainly offers in foreign firms with branches in Japan. Therefore you will mostly be able to send in your application in English. Should you however have to make an application in Japanese, consider that in Japan the form of the CV is mostly given. Traditionally the Japanese CVs should be written by hand. Recently however versions written on your computer will also be accepted. I think especially if you are a foreigner, they might be a little bit indulgent.

As of the where to find internship offers, I think kopra.org will be one of your best shots as long as you haven't found an internship. It is however important to not only rely on Kopra. Also check out the websites from the German or French chamber of commerce. Try to ask for help from your school, contacts back home or from the SJCC Alumni Organization. As said in the beginning, it might not always be easy, but if I also recall correctly Mr. Dudler's words: "So far, every scholarship recipient has come to find an internship."

The interview

The next step of your search for an internship will of course be the interview. You might have heard many frightening stories about Japanese job interviews. I was lucky to not end up in front of three people with nothing more than a chair to sit on. However I made some interesting experiences which might help you if you end up on an interview in Japan.

One mistake I made, which I will probably never do again was concerning the business cards received at the beginning of an interview. I was kindly advised by one of my interviewers that you should display the business cards in front of you in order of which your interviewers are sitting, for the length of the interview. This advice came after my third interview and believe me, it does not give you a great boost of self confidence for the rest of the interview. I should probably also mention, even though most of you will probably know it, that you should reach out with both hands for the business card when it is handed to you.

Another advice I might give you is to not worry too much about the Keigo (super honorific form of speech) during your interview. Of course it is a great bonus if you can use the Keigo fluently during a job interview. If the use of it however lowers your fluency considerably you might want to go with a decent ですーます (desu-masu) way of speaking. As said, it is a bonus to be able to speak Keigo, since it also proves that you have a certain ability in the Japanese language. Therefore you may want to get used to some of the common Keigo

words like いただく (itadaku, receive), まいる (mairu, to come), ごらんになる (goran ni naru, to see), ぞんじる (zonjiru, tu know) etc. These words might be difficult at first, but if you listen closely you will hear them almost every day and they can help you to make a good impression on your interview.

Other things are not that different from job interviews back in Europe. Of course you should inform yourself a little bit about the company's history beforehand and maybe a little bit about the branch the company works in. For the most of you the following comment might be useless, but here are two facts I will never forget again: 1) The Governor of the Bank of Japan is currently Mr. Shirakawa. 2) The difference between an American and a European option is that the European option can only be exercised at the expiry date, while an American option may be exercised any time before. As I said: not very interesting fact for most people, but I would have been very happy to know the answers during one of my interviews.

Leisure

As Mr. Dudler might have told you if you already had the interview, is that having an activity next to school and work is important for your stay in Japan. As for myself, I couldn't agree more. Since I am more the sporty type of person I can only give advice about how to find a sports related activity. However I think some of these suggestions might help you in also finding a non sport related leisure activity.

As for me, I was pretty lucky to have really nice house mates. I told them shortly after I arrived at the house that I used to play basketball back in Switzerland. One of my roommates showed up after one week with a site of a nearby basketball circle. This basketball "club" consisted of some people in their mid twenties who used to play basketball back in high school or university and who still played for fun about once every two weeks. I went to their practices and had some really good time with them. It felt also good to meet people outside of school and outside of the house I was living in.

It might not always be easy to find a sports club in your area, but to increase your chances you should try the following: Make your searches in Japanese. Mostly if you type "(name of desired activity) in Tokyo" you might not have that many results. Try to input location name and activity type in Japanese. It will probably take some time to decipher all the web pages, but you will be more likely to find something. Another way is to sign up on Mixi. Mixi is a type

of facebook which is almost exclusively used by the Japanese people. As for now Mixi is probably still more used than facebook in Japan, and many sport “clubs” can be found on there. However it is pretty difficult to handle without a good knowledge of the Japanese language, since there is no English version of it.

Finally you can always ask Japanese friends, housemates or the staff at school if they might help you to find something that suits you. Most of them will help you if you ask for it and consider, the worst they will say is, “Sorry I have no time right now” or “Of course, let’s look for it tomorrow.”

JLPT

Since you are in Japan and probably went to langue school you might want to take the Japanese language proficiency test. It is a good thing to do, since you will receive a document which is recognized by Japanese as well as foreign enterprises. However, there are a few things you should know about first:

In recent years there has been a change in the JLPT. If any one of you recalls to have taken a JLPT test with four levels in total, you did not experience the new test. Now there are five levels from which you can choose from when you sign up. Therefore, if you passed JLPT level 3 in 2005 and did not study since then and you go to a Japanese language school for 5 months, there is no guarantee that you will pass the new JLPT level 2 test. This story sounds quite familiar to me. I recently received my results from the test taken in December and believe me: missing by 2 points out of 180 really gets you. The new JLPT was mostly made by braking up the requirements from the old level 2 into the new level 2 and 3 and by packing some of the requirements from the old level 1 into level 2 and from the old level 3 (now level 4) into the new level 3.

Except for the change in the number of levels in the JLPT, it is pretty fun to do. On one hand it gives you a pretty direct goal to study your Japanese. On the other hand if you can pass the level 2 of the JLPT you will have a very good asset on your future CVs, since many firms require a JLPT 2 or more to be fully employed. As I say fully employed, so please do not worry about your internship if you don’t have a JLPT certificate.

Looking forward

I hope this report has helped you and provided you with some useful information for planning a stay in Japan. These past six months were a great experience for me and I would recommend such an experience to everyone who has the opportunity.

As for me, I started my internship at Robert Bosch Japan a while ago. I still need to get a good overview of the situation. Therefore I shall write more about my experiences in my internship in my final report. Please stay tuned, if you would like to learn more about further experiences I made in Japan.