This past summer was a very special one for ten UTSA students who were fortunate enough to participate on a summer study program in Kyoto, Japan. This three-week program was created by Kyoto University of Foreign Studies (KUFS) to help foreign students immerse themselves in both Japanese language and culture. A total of 32 students from KUFS's agreement schools worldwide, including students from the U.S., Canada, England, Mexico, Costa Rica, Netherlands, Vietnam, and Thailand were part of this very unique global experience.

When the students first arrived, they were greeted by their KUFS student assistant whose main responsibility was to make sure the summer program participants checked in. They also answered any questions the participants might have. Some assistants even showed the participants around the city of Kyoto on the first day. Summer program participants were able to hit the ground running practicing their Japanese in authentic settings immediately.

The very next day co-lead faculty Mimi Yu, associate director of the East Asia Institute (EAI) and Erina Romanowich, program coordinator of the EAI took UTSA students on a field trip to Fushimi Inari Taisha, a Shinto shrine located in southeast Kyoto with many trails leading up to 700 feet above sea level. There are various small shrines along the trails. Fushimi Inari Shrine is famous for its tori
gates since there are approximately 10,000 of them. With some of the Torii gates dated back in 710 AD, many businesses, merchants, and manufactures visit the shrine to pray and donate funds to erect their Torii on the compound for good luck.

Afterwards everyone visited Gion, a district of Kyoto in front of Yasaka Shrine. Also known as the geisha district, Gion is full of modern and traditional shops, as well as traditional Japanese-style restaurants that serve the famous Kyo ryori (Kyoto cuisine). After a long day of travel, students enjoyed dinner at an izakaya, a Japanese-style pub that serves assortments of tapas and drinks.

Over the following three weeks, the 32 students according to their Japanese proficiency level were divided into four classes. While they attended Japanese language classes almost on a daily-basis, they also took part in tea ceremony and calligraphy lesson. Several field trips were also arranged by KUFS to introduce Japanese history, religion, culture, and nature to the summer program participants.

The first field trip was to the city of Nara, the birthplace of Buddhism in Japan. The students visited Horyuji Temple. The ground houses the world’s oldest surviving wooden structures built more than 1,300 years ago. Next the students visiting Todaiji Temple,
inside a 50-foot wooden Buddha statue was housed. The students went to Nara Park where deer roam free interacting with the people while they are given rice crackers.

The second trip, KUFS took all the participants to Arashiyama, a town located next Kyoto separated by the Hozu River. The students took a train called the Sagano Romantic Train through the river and mountains while savoring natural landscapes in Arashiyama.

After the train ride, participant rode a boat down the Hozu River. During the ride, students experienced rapids, saw fishermen, and also enjoyed the magnificent river gorge created by the Hozu River. Not far from the river lies the famous Chikurin bamboo forest. With thousands of bamboo trees around, visitors are able to walk and see the tall bamboo trees in a very serene setting. The next destination was Monkey Park Iwatayama. Located in the mountains, visitors first need to hike up the hill towards the peak. Monkeys young and old roam free around the top of the hill in an open plaza. The students were able to buy food and feed the monkeys while enjoying the city of view of Kyoto from the mountain top.

Another treat was for the students to experience Gion Matsuri first hand, one of the most famous three festivals in Japan! Gion Matsuri is a festival of Yasaka-jinja Shrine, and the highlight is the splendid pageant of float proceeding along the main streets of Kyoto. Thanks to KUFS’s arrangement, the students were blessed for having the opportunity to climb the Kiku (chrysanthemum) float, one of the some 20 floats usually adorned with exquisite craftwork such as woven fabric, dyed textiles and sculptures. These floats are so gorgeous that they are sometimes even described as ‘mobile art museums’.

On the last week of classes, students were assigned to a host family to practice Japanese intensively and to live and experience Japanese family life. On the first day, students were introduced to their host families and from there, went on their way home. Some of these families lived outside Kyoto, some even were an hour away,

"I’ll never forget how accepting the students at KUFS were to us, or the bonds of friendship I made with both Japanese and other foreign exchange students. The food was amazing, the people are amazing, and the full immersion into the culture and the language completely changed my view on the world and myself.”

Mathieu Gregg
UTSA student
so students must be able to get to class using public transportation and also return home.

Some families had outings with their student to visit temples and other places. This experience taught the students to speak Japanese frequently and to see everyday Japanese life first hand. In addition, students also experienced delicious home cooked meals while some students also cooked to spread their own culture. “一期一会, one chance in a lifetime,” said Yvette Palacios, one of the UTSA students who was on this summer program, “Even if I study abroad again, the experiences and knowledge I gained, the people I met and the friendships I acquired this one time, will never be the same, and that’s why my time in Japan with everyone will always be so precious.”

On the last day of the program, a graduation ceremony was held for both the summer program students and for the students who had studied at KUFS for one semester or a year. Dr. Takeshi Matsuda, president of KUFS addressed the crowd with words of encouragement and then every student received a certificate for completing the program. “It was quite an experience to see what it was like to graduate from a Japanese school,” said Luis Nunez, “While on the program, I was able to befriend many Japanese students and I still talk to them up to this day. This global education experience has taught me how to be adaptable as well as gaining respect and appreciation for the world cultures! I would recommend this program to anyone that would like to experience Japanese culture!”

“UTSA has had an ongoing academic exchange with Kyoto University of Foreign Studies since 1995. Kyoto is an ideal study abroad destination in Japan as it is a historical city with more than 2,000 shrines, temples, and gardens surrounded by beautiful mountains and nature.”

Mimi Yu
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