

# OVERCOMING CULTURE SHOCK

Visiting a new place can be exciting but also scary—you're introduced and have to adapt to a totally different language and way of living. High school students from Toronto had the trip of a lifetime to Japan, but that's not to say it didn't come with its obstacles.

by Naomi Leange

Field trips are always fun, but imagine traveling over 10,000 kilometres to the other side of the world with your classmates. That's exactly what 23 lucky students from Riverdale Collegiate in Toronto did, including Kiya Alexis, Katie Bell, Annika Lautens and Adam Meluyk. They visited Japan as part of the Kakehashi Project, an initiative created to develop a mutual understanding and friendship between Japan and Canada.

"To be honest, Japan wasn't even on my radar. You always hear about Paris, London, or Rome; those are kind of the big cities people go to, but I didn't really expect to fall in love with Japan as much as I did," says Annika.

Spending 10 days in Japan, they did all the usual tourist attractions like touring Harijuku, shopping in Giza and visiting ancient temples, but what made this trip extra special was the chance to spend a couple days with a Japanese family.

It's common for most people when visiting a different country to experience what is described as culture shock, a feeling of disorientation, insecurity and anxiety when in unfamiliar surroundings.

However, the students of Riverdale found themselves developing meaningful relationships with those around them by adapting to foreign culture. With the sharing of Kiya, Katie, Annika and Adam's stories, you too can visit a cool and unique culture and as Adam says, "have a life changing experience."



### FOOD

As Adam notes, food was one of the most difficult transitions for the students to make. The cuisine not only looked like it was from a different planet, but it was eaten differently too (chopsticks aren't easy to conquer). However, it's important to keep an open mind when travelling.

"Just get outside of yourself, outside of your comfort zone and explore," advises Kiya. "Even if it's the weirdest thing, like squid, just eat it. Even if you don't like it, it's an experience."

A longing for your own culture is normal when experiencing culture shock, but try



to avoid falling into old habits. "Don't be like, 'I wish I was at McDonald's.' Just be open to everything, learn new things and live in the moment," adds Katie.



### LANGUAGE

Being in a country where you're unfamiliar with the first language can be a major challenge and can cause you to feel upset, confused and uncomfortable.

Fortunately, around the main cities of Japan, the students found that people spoke English very well and didn't come across many problems. However, when they stayed with their host families, language was a barrier. Luckily for Katie, an iPhone app came to the rescue during times of need. It's great to download a translating app or carry around a book to help you with the basics.

Don't let language get in the way of adapting to the culture. "You don't really need to be talking all the time to get to know people," she says. "I feel like I know [my host family] really well. We communicated in other ways and shared experiences that made us understand each other more than talking would've."



### TECHNOLOGY

When you travel to a place like Japan, things are definitely going to be a lot more high-tech. "The students were no different from us," says Adam. But the students were also exposed to things like talking robots while touring different factories and museums. It's important to get involved in some aspect of the new culture; you can start by embracing the different technologies.

"My family had one of these electronic toilets. Instead of having toilet paper in a washroom, you had all these buttons [like

a bidet]. But, unfortunately, they were in Japanese," says Annika. "So as you can imagine as a tourist you're going to the bathroom and thinking, 'What?' But it was so normal for them."

Culture shock is a normal part of the adjustment process when travelling. If you prepare well by researching the country, then opening up your perspective to differences while you're in the new country, you'll have an eye-opening and unforgettable trip.

