

I could not believe that I was chosen to go on this trip. Landing in Kagoshima, seeing my host parents for the first time outside the sliding doors in the airport, it all felt like a dream. I have had the good fortune of being able to travel to a few different countries over my lifetime, each one's culture quite different from my own. Going to Japan, however, was something very special, and finding the reasons for that has taken a lot of thought. It is not one reason, I have found, but a combination of many. Every time someone at home asks me how my trip was, I always start with, "It was amazing. It was absolutely incredible! It was perfect." Honestly, it is difficult for me to put into words how enjoyable each part of this experience has been.

As for what makes Japan so special, I don't even know where to start. The land is beautiful. Every time I walked outside, I had to stop for a second and take it all in. The towering mountains, the golden sunsets, the rich greenery that grew everywhere, everything about it made me feel as if I was in some sort of movie.

But there was more to it than that.

The culture was so dissimilar from my own, and yet I felt at home immediately. Customs, traditions, the relationships between people. Living in Japan, participating in activities that were normal for a citizen, I felt so wonderfully immersed. It filled me with hope and joy and gratitude for the little things and for each experience.

But there was more to it than that.

I felt welcome the second I met my host parents at the airport, seeing their "WELCOME LILY!" sign. Meeting my host brothers and sisters after we had driven home was a feeling I will never forget. Walking through the halls of Komenotsu Junior High School for the first time, greeting students and making friends with people I would never have met otherwise, that was heartwarming. I have never felt more welcomed by complete strangers. I have so much love for everyone in Izumi-City, for each person I knew was welcoming me with open arms and open hearts.

Looking back, I believe whole-heartedly that it was the combination of all of these things that made my trip so special. The beautiful country, the fascinating, rich culture, and the love and warmth of the people in Japan was something I had never experienced before, and I consider myself so lucky to have had this opportunity. This trip has changed my life, and I hope to return someday soon to see this beautiful country and its amazing people again.