

Exchange report



[*source](#)

Intro – Tokyo, Japan

I think for the reader it's important to note that I have never in my life thought about traveling to Japan, let alone spend an exchange year there. I've never even been to Asia! My girlfriend, on the other hand, used to fantasy all day long about going there. She applied for an exchange year to a few universities and even tried to get a job from the Finnish embassy! No luck... One day I received an email from my university department that said: "Possibility for an internship at the national institute of informatics in Tokyo, Japan, apply here". I showed this email to my girlfriend and said: "Wouldn't it be funny if I'd applied and got in". Well... a month and an interview later I get another email: "You have been accepted...". I couldn't believe it! "What in the world is happening, this is so strange...", I thought. So, in six months I was heading to arguably one of the strangest countries in the world, where they don't speak almost any English (so I heard but this turned out not to be true), and where I can't even read the street signs! I was worried, my girlfriend, mother and sister were all worried, this was going to be quite the experience.

Six months went by fast and suddenly I was in a 7 square meter room that would cost me the same amount of rent than my 35 square meter apartment in Espoo. Oh, and I had two roommates (first time for this as well I guess). They turned out to be very nice, although we didn't spend much time together because we all had quite busy schedules. I even got my very own Japanese ID card at the airport. I still have it attached to my fridge door, it's awesome.

As you could imagine my first day started out by being very confused. Turned out that this feeling would never really go away. I was constantly in a kind of hyper aware state. It might have been the rhythm of the city or something else, but I felt very active and had this sense of everything moving very quickly. Don't get me wrong, I've been to big cities before, but this seemed different. I really wanted to explore and get to know the city, the food, the people as soon as I got that first glance from the airport train. I thought the best way to do this was to explore each city district one by one (In Tokyo there are these large districts inside the city that have their own look and feel). I was also hoping to meet someone local as soon as possible because this is the best way to get to know the culture and find all the best places. I thought this would be easily achieved in my workplace, but it turned out that this would not be the case (more on that later).



The most notable places I visited and where I actually spend most of my time were Koto-Ku, this is where I lived. Roppongi: That's where the nightlife was, movie theatre (I went to see star-wars in 4D, not as cool as you might think) and my favourite burger place, Shake Shack! I also spent a lot of time in Hiroo training Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and of course in Chiyoda-Ku where my office was. When I would go out, I would spend a lot of time in Shinjuku (kind of touristy but cheap food) and Shibuya. Shibuya is the youthful/urban area, very trendy. Also, very nice views there! I also travelled to two other cities, but I'll go deeper into that in a later chapter!

Work and studies

Before I applied for the internship, I made sure that I was able to do my master's thesis there. Luckily, they agreed so this plus two remote courses from Aalto-university ended up being the plan. Like any other master's thesis positions, I expected them to have some topics for me to choose from when I arrived, but this was not the case. When I first met my superior/instructor Mr. Takeda-san he told me to familiarize myself with the semantic web research area and try to find something to work on from there. Quite a task... I spent the first month trying to formulate a connection between the semantic web and an old work project. Trying to manage this while also having people from Finland involved turned out to be too difficult so I decided to pivot. The new plan was to try and create a new ontology for public sector services and make chatbot that could provide service information by using said ontology. I was also helping out the rest of the



team with their tasks that ranged anywhere from parsing tables from PDF to visualizing roads in a picture. The environment was very interesting in that way, the people that worked there came from all over. A lot of people from France, some from Vietnam, Holland and China. There was also one other person from Finland, which was a weird but nice surprise. Surprisingly I wasn't forced to the Japanese working culture. When I started, my colleagues

told me that we were basically our own bosses and could come and go how we pleased as long as we were able to report results every week, this worked out fine for me! It is tradition that when new students come, the team goes out for dinner. This was my first time doing Korean barbeque and it was quite good, also a lot of beer was involved! In my experience it's true what they say about the Japanese when it comes to drinking, they can't really handle it.

Free-time and travels

After work during the weekdays I would go to Hiroo for Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) practice. This had been my hobby for a few years, and I was really looking forward to training in Japan. I visited two different dojos and ended up in the second, which was Carpe Diem Hiroo, to my surprise a dojo with world class instructors! It was absolutely amazing to train with those people. I ended up hitting it off pretty well with one of the instructors and we wound up on a night out a few times. I really wanted to compete in Japan as well but didn't have time to. It was a good idea to start training there because it was something that was familiar to me, like a second language that I was able to speak with these foreign people, it was awesome.



Most of my weekends were spent exploring the city, going to izakaya's (it's like a Japanese tapas restaurant) and meeting up with people I got to know through my BJJ instructor. There was one person who I got especially close with and we ended up traveling together inside



Japan. We visited Kanagawa where we spent the day eating black eggs (a tradition that is supposed to extend your life), taking a cable ride from where we were able to see mount Fuji, and we even went for a cruise. The other city we visited was Kamakura. There we explored a bamboo forest and rode bikes the whole day. I have a fond memory of eating pizza and spaghetti on the beach side, which brings me to another interesting thing point about Japan: You can experience a bit of everything there. So, if you want to spend a city vacation, you can do that. And, if you want to spend a beach holiday or do ski trip, you can also do that. Japan has everything.

I really enjoyed my trip. It was something I never would have foreseen. Completely out of my comfort zone and unexpected. I really hope to go back there one day and visit all the other great places that Japan has to offer. Unfortunately, much of my time was spent working. Next time, it's holiday only! I would like to thank sähköinsinööriiitto for a generous scholarship to support this trip, it really helped me enjoy my time there and not worry about anything else, again, a big thank you!