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# Reflections from the Other Side of the World

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# Reflections from the Other Side of the World

Pilot study abroad program at Kochi University lands junior Jack Dunleavy on a life-changing trip to Japan



April 7, 2014 | Jack Dunleavy '15

**KOCHI, JAPAN** – I had never really been to another country before. I technically went to Canada once—to see Niagara Falls—but I'm not totally convinced that counts. This was all before about two months ago when I was offered the opportunity to travel to Japan during the final week of March with Robert Eisinger, dean of Feinstein College of Arts and Sciences. Kochi University – in the southern city of Kochi, Japan – was running a pilot study abroad program and was looking for students and faculty from several universities to become involved. I was psyched because, as an East Asian studies minor, I had studied and read a lot about the country, but I still had never actually been there. Fourteen hours, two flights and several cups of airplane coffee later that changed and, for the first time, I was on the other side of the world.

**Tuesday // March 25, 2014**

Being halfway across the world and checking your email for the first time is weird. I kept thinking about how far away I was from everywhere I had ever been, but at the same time I was still getting emails from the Metacom CVS about 20 percent off coupons for shampoo that expired Friday.

The first day of the program was a whirlwind. For the first time, we were introduced to the full program staff from Kochi University, the bilingual students who accompanied them, and the 10 other participants who traveled from as far away as the U.K., Australia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Everyone was very friendly and we talked about our flights and the weather in the places we had left.

After more formal introductions, we were to relax and attend a traditional tea ceremony. The tea, matcha, is a finely dried and powdered green tea whisked together with a bamboo utensil. The ceremony is run with meticulous calculation and there is even a method to how you hold your cup before drinking – using your right hand to rotate the cup two 90-degree clockwise turns in the palm of your left hand. Having previously been familiar only with Lipton, the quality of the tea was unreal and it made for a great first day in Kochi.

### **Wednesday // March 26, 2014**

The program today centered around students from Kochi University providing presentations about history and local culture in both Kochi and Japan as a whole. Intermittently, each international group gave a brief overview of their own university and their experiences with cross-cultural interactions.

That evening, the directors of the program took us all to downtown Kochi to explore the city and see Kochi Castle, a historical fortress from the Edo period (1603-1867) located on a hill almost directly in the center of the city. Luckily for us, our trip occurred during the peak two-week period when the cherry blossoms were beginning to bloom for the first time this spring. This provided a killer backdrop to our exploration of the castle, as well as our meanderings through downtown that followed.

That night we ate at *Obiyamachi*, a large indoor food market located across several blocks. The place was crowded but the sheer number of food stalls and stands meant that there was very little wait wherever you went. There were so many options including everything from the regional favorite known as *tataki*, large pieces of mostly raw, slightly seared tuna; *takoyaki*, fried octopus balls served with mayonnaise and another sauce I never got the name of; as well as Indian and Chinese food. The entire place smelled great and the busy, crowded atmosphere was electric.

### **Thursday // March 27, 2014**

I got a message from a friend in the morning telling me that it was snowing in Rhode Island, and the temperature was struggling to keep itself above freezing. I read this message just after opening the window in my room to let in the warm 70 degree air that had been consistent so far throughout my stay in Kochi.

First thing this morning, everyone in the program took a bus to the southwestern tip of Kochi Prefecture, a town called Muroto. With the windows open and a VHS of a Japanese movie I had never seen playing on a portable screen in the front of the bus, we headed out. Although within the same prefecture, it still takes around three hours to reach Muroto by bus. I wasn't complaining, though; I welcomed the road trip as an opportunity to get to see even more of the local area.

As we arrived, I learned that the entire town of Muroto is one large national Geo-Park. Dedicated to preserving and educating about the unique rock formations that have been uplifted naturally by thousands of years of earthquakes and waves, the coastline here was abundant with museums and walking tours. We learned a lot about the unique land formation of Japan, and how the dramatic steppe lands across the country influenced its civilization and agriculture. Again, reading about this is one thing, but actually being there and touching large boulders that had once been at the bottom of the ocean is completely unreal.

### **Friday // March 28th, 2014**

The gang was up early on Friday and we headed to a local deep-seawater facility south of where we were staying in Muroto. The facility collects water through large pipes that reach down almost three kilometers into the ocean. Water at this level, free of much of the bacteria and contamination of surface water, is much purer. We learned that after a desalination process, this water is sold to local businesses and – at a reduced rate – to members of the local community.

I really dug this idea of community and it was interesting to think that many of the local farms and rice fields I had seen on the bus ride over received their water from this one facility. We were also given fresh seaweed that had been harvested at the same facility. This was a really stellar gift, and I thought about how I planned to incorporate it into my cooking when I returned to RWU.

### **Saturday // March 29th, 2014**

My final day in Kochi – before the return flight – began with a final presentation on Japanese soil, which I learned is unique not only to the island nation, but to specific parts of Japan as well. Kochi University, which houses an entire campus for agricultural studies, brought in one of their professors to give a sample lecture for us, and it was very interesting.

After collecting my things, we were driven to the Kochi Airport for our return flight to Tokyo. Traffic downtown delayed us considerably, and we made it to the airport less than 30 minutes before we boarded our plan for departure. In retrospect, it was a good thing because running through an airport is a great distraction from thinking about how much you are going to miss the place you are leaving, and I was definitely going to miss Kochi.

*Jack Dunleavy is a junior English major with minors in East Asian studies and marketing. He is a writing tutor and a member of the RWU Cross Country and Track and Field teams. He hails from Orange, Conn.*