WOFFORD’S JAPAN TRIP: JAN 6-27, 2007

STARRING:

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Bellamy, Ashtin      Janulis, Alexa    Rucker, Nancy
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Dilworth, Lizzie     Kountz, KristIn    Turek, Kelly
Evans, Amber         Meetze, Murray    Williams, Bradley
Ferguson, Mary Kate  Mims, Susan       Moss, Bob
Greene, Jonathan     Oates, Campbell
Harbison, Annie      O’Hanlan, Emily

January 6-7, 2007

My adventure to Japan began early Saturday morning when I met up with Annie and a friend to head to the airport at 6:45 am. Check in went smoothly and somehow, I still couldn’t seem to get my head around the fact that I was departing for Detroit and then directly to arguably the most distant land I had ever been to, Asia, Japan, Tokyo!!! As for the flight to Tokyo, it was very long and restless, but I had my ipod, a good book, and even better company to get me through it. However, it wasn’t until I stepped off of the plane and looked out a Japan’s beautiful late afternoon sky that I started to realize just how far away from home I was, or even where I was. The next major difference that I noticed was on a more subtle level. This massive airport was stocked full of people bustling about to their various destinations, yet incredibly quiet and serene. It wasn’t stillness because people were moving around everywhere, and it wasn’t empty, people were everywhere, but all of the people (mostly Japanese) were incredibly quiet and focused on their tasks, a very different experience than any of the other airports I’ve ever been in, and it was definitely a nice, calming one. Next, we met up with Mariko-san and some of the other IES students who guided us through money exchanging and then to our bus, which finally brought us to the OVTA building in Chiba, a skyscraper that has provided each of us with our very own incredibly comfortable rooms with AMAZING views of the surrounding city, parks, water, and even Mount Fuji. Our hosts later formally greeted us with a much need and excellent feast of Japanese food including sushi, beef with asparagus, seafood dishes, just to name a few. I collapsed in bed later that night realizing just how comforting, relieving, and welcoming this place and in particular, its people are. Japan has welcomed us with open arms, and I can’t wait to dive into this experience and all it has to offer us. This trip is going to be one of a kind, and incredible.

-Katherine
1/8/07: By: Ashtin

Our first full day in Japan has been amazing! We started out this morning going to the IES center for orientation. They told us about how to use public transportation, money, and what to during an earthquake, which we hopefully won't need to know during our trip! We went down the street to a shopping center for lunch. The picture of Lizzie and I shows us enjoying some noodles, which were really good except for the fish flakes on top! After lunch, we went back to IES and had individual meetings about our host families, which made me really excited about starting the homestay in a few days. We took the train to a mall for dinner and to the shopping areas outside Disneyland Tokyo. It was interesting to see what American souvenirs the Japanese wanted. The other picture I posted is of some of the girls in the group with some Japanese girls wearing kimonos. Today was a national holiday in Japan, Coming of Age day, a celebration for 20-year-olds where they dress traditionally. I'm off to bed, tomorrow we get to tour the "electric town" area of Tokyo and attend a sumo wrestling match!

Tuesday, 1/9:

Our day today began with a long ride to Tokyo. The trains/subways are very different from American ones. Everything is so clean and safe. It was strange for me to see even young children (maybe elementary aged children) riding the trains by themselves. Many people sleep on the trains, but somehow amazingly just know when to get off, and the more people pack into the train, the quieter it seems to be.

While in Tokyo, we saw the Thunder Gate and a temple dedicated to the goddess of mercy. Before entering the temple, we walked up to an area where incense was burning and "cleansed" ourselves with it. In the temple was an area to throw our yen and make a wish. After looking around the temple and taking some fun photos with the Buddha, the group took the next few hours to roam around downtown shopping and exploring. We ate at our first traditional style meal, taking off our shoes when entering the room and sitting on pillows on the floor. I tried raw sushi for the first time today. Very different, but good. I have been very open to trying everything, so far so good! :)

Next the group traveled to the "Electric Town" area of Tokyo. This very electronically savvy town was full of any and every gadget that you can imagine. This little town was how many would picture Japan, very bright and neon and had an amazing 240+ stores in one city block!!

After leaving Electric Town we traveled to one of the coolest experiences of my life, a Sumo wrestling match. Sumo wrestling in Japan is a very popular sport and the wrestlers are famous and well liked. I guess it is similar to baseball or football in America. This is very interesting to me because in America, these very popular athletes are thin, muscular, and attractive. In Japan however, the sumo wrestlers seem to be the bigger the better. These men are not athletically built at all and are quite possibly some of the biggest men that I have ever seen, yet are very popular and successful people. Sumo wrestlers apparently begin training at middle school age (if they are the right size to be a wrestler.) A wrestler must be at least six feet tall, which is EXTREMELY tall for this group of people. They begin a very strict eating regime, to put on
weight. The wrestlers eat huge portions of a food that consist of a bown full of vegetables, many different meats, and some kind of broth.

This sport is full of many rituals that must be done before actually wrestling. To win the match, a wrestler must push the other outside of the circle or make the other touch the ground first. It is surprisingly a very entertaining and exciting event to watch!!

Afterwards we ate a meal, roamed around Chiba a little more and are now headed to bed so we will be refreshed and ready for our big day tomorrow! : )

- Ellen Cloyd

SUMO:

When I saw the first bout, as two enormous wrestlers bumped into each other, I thought, 'this is ridiculous', and was worried about having two hours of this to watch. But the students were really getting into it; Katherine and Anna were sitting next to me screaming 'cat calls' in for their players [sometimes attracting quite a bit of attention from the audience in doing so!] With the energy of the students, and a can of Sake as well, I started relaxing and actually getting into it! I'd have to admit, it was fun to watch.

The last was a BIG match, when Japan's top Sumo was wrestling. Tom was so sure this guy would win, he gave two of the ladies 5 to 1 odds; they took the bet, and then... The guy LOST!! As is tradition when the champ loses, everybody starting throwing their cushions into the ring, and Tom started crying over all the Yen he had just lost..... Charley, you may have to put the house back up for sale.

So far, everything in Japan we've seen is spotlessly clean. Every train has been exactly on-time. And no rain. Tomorrow, we travel to Hakone. Long day.

-Bob

1/11/07:

Hello all faithful Wofford Japan Blog readers!! Today, as I am sure everyone here will agree, was a LONG but wonderful day! We got up very early to catch a chartered bus at 8AM that we had for the day of our field trip to Hakone! Mariko-san, our trip/tour guide, announced that we had a 3 hour bus ride ahead of us, so we all settled into our seats. Our itenerary had 3 stops: (1) the Hakone Open Air Museum (2) the Owakudani hot springs and (3) a boat tour on Lake Ashi (to view Mt. Fuji!).

Our bus ride was indeed very long, but we passed the time with a Japanese anime film called Princess Mananoke, which was actually very good! All along the way we could see Mt. Fuji (or Fuji-san, as they call it here) in the distance--and every time it was breathtaking! Within the last hour, we got into mountain roads which led us into Hakone, a much more rural part of Japan. It
kind of reminded me of a cross between the Carolina mountains and Colorado. The roads were windy and steep, and soon we found ourselves on top of one of the mountains where the Hakone Open Air Museum was located.

The museum was absolutely wonderful. Pretty much all of the pieces were outdoors, and we were free to wander around and look at the sculptures as we pleased. Everything was very interesting, and I think we all enjoyed looking around. One of my favorites was a huge tower with stained-glass walls with a spiral staircase inside which we could climb up to the top. The view was amazing: we could see all of the beautiful mountains and valleys of Hakone surrounding us. Back down the tower, we indulged in a hot-spring foot bath (a reward for our already-tired feet), and found it really difficult to leave! There was also a Picasso exhibit inside a building, which displayed some of his drawings and ceramic works. After spending about 2 hours at the museum, it was time to get back on our bus and head to the next stop.

Approaching the hot-springs, we all noticed a really unpleasant smell, kind of like rotten eggs. It turned out to be the smell of sulfur coming from the springs! We got to Owakudani and were immediately blown away by an awesome view of Fuji-san. On a closer mountain, we saw the steam rising from the ground out of the springs. We took the designated path (the sulfur smell increasing as we went) and made our way towards the springs. As Mariko-san told us, the Japanese believe that if you eat a hard boiled egg (actually boiled in these sulfur springs!), you will add 7 years onto your life! So, we got a dozen blackened sulfur eggs from the vendor at the top and ate them on the spot! They were actually really good, well worth the 7 extra years of life. After the egg-fest, we headed back down to the bus for our last stop.

We arrived at Lake Ashi and walked onto the dock. It turned out our boat was actually a full-blown red and gold, ornate pirate ship, and we were pretty excited about it. We climbed aboard and took a 40 minute ride through the lake. The surrounding sights were beautiful. The mountains and water were pristine, and Fuji-san was silhouetted in the distance: our best view yet. After a relaxing ride, we docked again and headed back to the bus for the 3 hour, restful ride back to OVTA.

Thanks to any and everyone who is still reading at this point. It really was a LONG day, as I'm sure you can see from my seemingly never-ending account!!! It is now time for bed, as many of you are just now waking up! The time change still kind of blows my mind. Goodnight/good morning!

-Lizzie Dilworth

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1/12/07:

Hello everyone! Well the alarm went off around 9:30 this morning and we went to our first shinto shrine called Meiji shrine. It was tucked back away from everything, kind of in the woods and was very beautiful. We bought a tablet and wrote our names on it and wished for good luck in the new year. YAY WOFFORD! Then we proceeded to Harajuku (kind of like Tokyo’s 5th avenue) and the fashion mecca for teenagers. Some people found some really great deals. I got really cute shoes for 20 dollars, so that’s always a plus. Later we went to Shibuya which is kind of the equivalent of Times Square. It also holds the world’s largest TV on the side of a
building. We did a little shopping there as well. Afterwards, we went to see Kabuki which is the traditional Japanese theater. Although it was translated over a speaker, the actors and sets transcended the language barrier. It was very beautiful and actually, not hard to understand. When it was over, some of us split up and went to Roppongi district (which is the younger scene\bar scene), but don’t worry, we were safe and had tons of fun! It was also our first time with the trains alone (without Mariko-San who basically has saved our lives 500 times) and we made it back alright (Much thanks to Ashley and Emily)! Anyway, everyone went to bed because we were so tired from all the dancing. It was essentially all you can eat and drink at this restaurant that we went to, and although we were definitely the loudest customers they had ever had, it was the best 30 dollars (3000 yen) I have ever spent. Good day to all!

-Amber Evans

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BOB’S PERSPECTIVE: ADVICE FOR FUTURE TRIPS TO JAPAN:

Anyone considering taking students on a trip to Japan might benefit from a professor's perspective. Here I provide one:

IES has done a wonderful job with planning this trip thus far; I do recommend traveling with them.

Mariko Ishikawa is our trip ‘organizer’, tour guide, and translator. She really looks after the students, and seems to enjoy being with us about 10 hours a day. I would definitely request to work with Mariko-san if you come here through IES.

The greatest difficulty here is the language barrier… In contrast to what the guide books say, even in Tokyo few people speak English. One of the staff at IES suggests 3% of residents speak English. I’ve never experienced this before, and I guess it’s a good educational experience. Trying to buy ice for a student who turned her ankle was nearly impossible [she’s fine by the way]; ordering dinner was a challenge, and just finding out what a certain dish was often proved impossible, without our translator. I’m still thrilled I came to Japan; you should just know how challenging it can be if you don’t have anyone who speaks Japanese in the group. At first I imagined it’s difficult to get a good “cultural experience” if you can’t even communicate about the culture; but the students THRIVED on this challenge!

For our first 5 nights, we stayed at ‘OVTA’, sort of a convention center for training. It’s in a wonderful area, and although small, the rooms are quiet and clean, and have everything you could need. Including CNN in English on the TV!! And free laundry! It’s about a 40’ trip to down-town Tokyo by train [including the walk to the station]. A good choice while you’re staying in the Tokyo area.

Make sure you see a Sumo wrestling match while you’re here. We all loved it. On our third day, we took a day trip to Hakone. The hot springs there were fascinating, and worth the long bus trip [3 hours each way]. We also had a beautiful view of “Fuji-san” [Mt. Fuji] from the hot springs area.

The ‘open air art museum’ in Hakone was excellent, even for someone with no appreciation of art [namely, me!]. Again, it makes the trip to Hakone worthwhile.

We also went on a boat trip there, on a volcanic lake. Nothing new here though; skip the boat trip.
‘Electric Town’ was unimpressive; especially if you’ve been to Times Square. Skip it. Harajuku and Shibuya, ‘Fashion Town’, were great for the shopping, mostly appreciated by the women.

We also saw a Kabuki performance at the National theater. Although we had headsets for translation, they only told us the general gist of the story, not what was being said. I enjoyed the Kabuki performance, as a “cultural experience”… It was very different from anything I’ve seen; and the theater was packed. But if judged solely as an “entertainment experience”, it didn’t rate very highly, and I don’t think the students appreciated it. Two of the students were bored enough that they were actually reviewing their photos on the LCDs on their cameras during the performance! But I think it’s an important experience; I’d recommend it.

At IES on our 5th day, the staff had the students do ‘chigiri-e’, a paper craft. Although I felt like a grade school kid, it was fun. Having the students meet their host families was quite stressful for them, and for me! I felt like a nervous parent, sending my kids off to school all alone! You could see how nervous the students were. I’m sure they’ll get over it though.

-Bob

1/13/07:

Went to the Edo Tokyo museum today, on my own. If you’re interested in Japanese history, you should go. It was only about $5. Mostly large models of Tokyo at various times in history, as well as paintings of and artifacts from various points in history. They have a small display on the American bombing of Tokyo in WWII, including video and photos. It’s quite moving. Although we hear a lot about German bombing of London, we don’t often see the U.S. bombing of Tokyo from the perspective of the ‘bombees’.

In fact, Murray, I did miss the massage chairs in Electric Town; but they have two ‘pay chairs’, 200 yen [about a buck 75] for 15’, in the hotel. These are unlike anything I’ve ever seen…. Seems the chair is licensed to administer massage therapy AND chiropractic! It grabs onto your feet, your legs, your rear, and then give you really "deep tissue" massage! It adjusts your spine, and will even bend, raise and lower your legs. The chair gets a bit aggressive though; I had to mess with the buttons to keep it from getting painful! I’d love to buy one of these and ship it home [although I’m guessing it’s a year’s salary…]

-Bob

1/13/07:

Today we all woke up early, packed up our stuff, and checked out of the OVTA hotel. We then all headed down the street, looking like tourists in a line with our giant suit cases, and went to the IES building. We were met by Mrs. Keiko Tominaga, who taught us the Japanese cultural activity, chigirie. Chigirie is the art of tearing paper and forming a picture. We made Japanese camellias (Tsubaki) and another card to give to our host families. Some of us are more artistic than others. You can take a look at the picture that will be posted later and make the judgement for yourself. (Please note Bob's animal flying near his flower, which "evolved" from a flying donkey to a reindeer to well, maybe, sort-of a bee as he worked on it)
We then all went to a Japanese Italian restaurant to celebrate Ashtin's 20th birthday since we would not be together on the thirteenth. In Japan, the 20th birthday is the coming of age. All of the waiters came out and sang happy birthday in Japanese!

After lunch, we returned to the IES building for home stay orientation. Kudo-san gave us information on appropriate behavior for staying in our Japanese homes. We then all anxiously awaited for our families to arrive. Once all of the host families had arrived, we had an orientation for everyone, and then all headed in our separate directions.

Ellen and I are staying with the Ishida family. We are living with two parents, and their older son. The first night we arrived, Ishida-des cooked tempura for us, which is Japanese fried vegetables, and a Japanese stew. Their son, Yoshi, can speak English very well, which is very helpful, although there are definitely still awkward (hen) moments. We prepared our bed and futon, and then went to bed to prepare for a day of site-seeing, archery, and ceremonies.

Mary Kate

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1/14/07:

Good Monday Morning Everyone!

This past weekend was very eventful in the Igarashi-san household. Friday I met my host mother, Kazuko-san, at IES. We then made the trek to the her home in Kamagaya by train. Kamagaya is a small town with narrow streets filled with many convenience stores, hair salons, and food shops. The Igarashi house sits on the corner of two busy streets--it is small, of course, but it is very comfortable. Kazuko-san gave me a grand tour and then allowed me to "relax" in my bedroom while she cooked dinner. That was a mistake because my exhaustion took over and I fell asleep and missed dinner with the family. But, I woke up around 9pm and came downstairs to visit and to hopefully have some leftovers. Downstairs, I met Hisaetsu-san my hostfather. He was in his robe watching Sumo and drinking some sake. He just laughed at me for falling asleep and to be honest, I don't blame him because I probably had a huge mark on my face from hitting my pillow so hard.

My first impression of the Igarashi-san family is exceptional. They are so kind and welcoming to me, so it makes the transition a lot easier. The only problem is that I lack a lot of experience in Japanese and they only speak a little English...so, you can imagine our conversations are very interesting...electronic translators are their bestfriends.

Saturday morning I rolled out of bed around 9am and came downstairs to greet the family. Hisaetsu-san was getting ready for his morning Tennis gathering with some buddies at the one and only court in Kamagaya. Kazuko-san and I had some yogurt with blueberry jam together as we wished him luck on his way out the door. The two of us spent the morning at home talking about Japan and America. She is extremely fascinated with the States, especially Tennessee!!! (I gave the Igarashi's the Tennessee coffee table book the night before.) Later we drove to the tennis court to tell Hisaetsu that we were going to go to the grocery store in Funabashi...don't worry, it's very close! Their car is a Nissan, and I told them that I think Nissan is very popular in the states...j.k! At the grocery store, Kazuko-san let me choose some foods that I like to
eat...fresh fruit, sushi...she was more than welcome to get me anything that I wanted. After the store, we drove home and had a little sushi lunch...very yummy! Because I had told Kazuko and Hisaetsu that I enjoyed tennis, they asked me if I would like to play that afternoon. I enthusiastically replied with YES! So Saturday afternoon I spent on the tennis court showing off the little tennis skill that I have--Kazuko and Hisaetsu really had me all over that court! For dinner, the three of us made Shabu-Shabu. This Japanese specialty is so easy and surprisingly delicious! All it takes is a pot of boiling water, some meat and/or tofu, and veggies and there you have it...Shabu-Shabu. After dinner, I took a nice bath and watched some Sumo. Sunday morning I woke up feeling a little sore from the day before. I came downstairs expecting a fun day. I had some yogurt and cappuccino, did some laundry for the first time in a Japanese washing machine, read my psychology mag, and talked to Kazuko-san. Later, after Hisaetsu got back from his morning tennis match, the three of us went to a shrine at the end of their street. This shrine was small in comparison with the Meiji Shrine, however, its smallness did not distract me from the serene environment. On our walk to and from the shrine, I saw pear orchards, felines on doorsteps, and smiling natives walking their charming dogs. It's a wonderful feeling just taking it all in...Sunday mornings couldn't be more perfect.

- Annie

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FUN AND EARTHQUAKES: 1/15/07

I spent a jam packed weekend with the Wada family (Yoko, Takeshi, Taiyo (3), and Aozora (7)) that included going to a temple, playing games, making origami, going to an arcade, shopping, eating out, and going to karaoke!! But... Monday morning, and time for class. The day before, we went to the grocery store and Aozora wanted to get some frosted flakes (she had never tried them before) because I said they were very American. The next morning for breakfast she tried the cereal and said it was disgusting. Somehow broccoli and rice seems a more appealing choice! Yoko (my mom) offered to drive me to the station, which was SUPER nice since it is pretty much freezing outside. I got on the train with no problems and met Kelly, who is one station away. We arrived at Kaihin-Makuhari station and walked over to the IES building, ready for the Japanese lesson! After a whole weekend away, it was a little reassuring to see so many native English speakers in one place. We had our Japanese lesson, which consisted of a few basic key phrases. After a non-Japanese lunch (pizza!!) we had a lecture with Dr. Malik on the relations between the UN and Japan. After that, a few of us went shopping in the mall attached to the train station. Then I hopped on the train and went back home, where we had vegetable clear soup, a chicken nugget-ish type thing, and gohan (rice) of course. After dinner I taught the kids American games and songs (the hokey pokey, etc.) and they taught me some Japanese songs. Then while Aozora worked on her Kanji homework, I took a traditional bath (it’s pretty hardcore) and went to bed. WHICH WAS INTERRUPTED AT 3 IN THE MORNING BY AN EARTHQUAKE!!!! It was awesome and everyone is fine. Some people didn’t even wake up, so it wasn’t that big of a deal.

ps- Bob san said to comment on the toilets so here goes: 2 options, either a porcelain hole in the ground or an elaborate heated seat, bidet/shower, flushing sound (when it isn’t flushing) ordeal. We much prefer the second one.

- Anna
Kumbanwa!

OK, I've conquered this city now.... Well.... I mean, armed with a rail/subway map, a JRAIL pass, and a bunch of cash [you have to pay each time you transfer from the rail to a subway line or monorail line], I can get wherever I want to go on my own. Well, not QUITE on my own, as Mariko-san [our organizer/translator/guide] has to tell me what line and what stop I'm going to! But I can wander now on my own and know how to find my way home.

Last night, the IES director [Dr. Malik] and assistant director [Daijin-san] took me to dinner, at a very nice Indian restaurant. The conversation was wonderful, moving between education, politics, and religion. I realized that even though both men had spent time in the U.S., they, and probably most Japanese, know as little about Christianity and Judaism than we know about Buddhism and Shinto.. and that's not a lot! People here have a different "world view", and I don't just mean political, than we do. And that's the most important thing I want the students to experience here. I talked to them about that today; many are kinda shy about talking with their host families about things like religion, their beliefs about death and the 'afterlife', politics, the relationship between humanity and the environment, etc. And the language barrier is greater than we had expected. But hopefully, they'll make more of an effort to engage in more of those "late night dorm discussions" with their new Japanese friends.

Tonight I took a train to a subway to a monorail to an area called Aomi. A neat, 'flashy' area with few interesting things:

- 'Toyota Web': Toyota has a sort of 'show room/arcade' where you can learn about hybrids, go into various rides/simulators [including a race car simulator ride], test drive any of the new models of their cars on a real track they have running through their facility [since they've somehow put the steering wheels on the wrong side of all of these cars, I didn't try it]. They also had a show room of their upcoming cars. The most interesting thing was a line of cars with new handicap access equipment. They have robotic 'lifts' in the back of minivans that will lift an empty wheelchair into and out of the car. Also, an automatic 'ramp' that unfolds from the back of a small minivan at the press of a button, so someone in a wheelchair can be literally wheeled into the back without transferring. And a passenger side car seat that at the press of a button swivels to the door side, slides out of the car, and lowers to the ground. You can get it so just the seat lowers, OR, the seat can have wheels so it doubles as a wheelchair! Even neater, it can be an ELECTRIC wheelchair! Sort of like a real car seat that doubles as an electric wheelchair, and will automatically transfer itself between the ground and the car!! For 'old people' like me, that's neat to see!

- 'Zepp', the biggest arcade I've ever seen. When I was there, there were no kids... just young adults. Slot machines, 'Pachinko', soccer kicking cages, bowling games, PING PONG cages, tennis cages, air hockey, and lots more... And I only saw the first floor!!

- There is a "innovation and future technology museum" that I wanted to go to. I went out to a walkway adjacent to Tokyo Bay, with a sign that showed the museum was half a mile down that walk. I started down it, and then noticed that it was dark, and the lighting wasn't good, and that there was not a single person to be found as far as the eye could see down that walk. This
made me a bit uneasy! I definitely feel safer walking here in Tokyo than I have anywhere in the U.S; but the New Yorker still inside me just wouldn't let me go down that path... bummer!

Tomorrow evening, Tom's 'parents' have invited me back with him for dinner.... UNLIKE Tom's AMERICAN parents!! [just kidding Charley!!] :-)  

[Click on the links to the right to get to photos]

Ja Mata!

-Bob

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January 16, 2007

Konbanwa everyone! (Good evening) What a day! To start with, I got to experience my first 3 earthquakes...even though my memory of the event was a little hazy, they certainly woke me up out of a deep sleep and my day definitely started out on the wrong foot. My host mother Kyoko-san told me this morning that we had an emergency last night. The first thing that popped into my head was TSUNAMI!and FIRE! but those were both wrong. Kyoko-san never could tell me exactly what the emergency was before we reached the train station, so I had to rely on Ellen and Mary Kate for an explanation. Thats when I finally remembered waking up to a shaking bedroom in the middle of the night.

Yesturday was the first day of solo JRail Train navigation so we have not yet been able to perfect our skills. Today was yet another test of our ability to make it from Shisui Station to the Sumitomo building, approximately 2 hours. Before the weekend, Ellen, Mary Kate, Nancy, Lizzy and I decided that we would all get onto the first car of the train so that it would be easy to meet up. Maybe navigating as a group is better than by ourselves...or so we think! This morning, we thought the back of the train was the front of the train. So we had to sprint through the station and dodge a lot of people to make it to the front of the train. Needless to say, the train is a lot longer than we think and we make it to the first class section in the middle of the train before the doors close. We climbed in and immediately realized we were locked in the hallway between 2 first class sections where breakfast is being served. At this point we still arent quite sure if we're going in the right direction or if we are in fact on the right train...But at the next stop we realize that we are going in the right direction and begin sprinting, again, to the front of the train! It was a very stressful morning!

In japanese class tod\today we learned numbers, how to order food in a restaurant, and reviewed common greetings. For lunch a handful of us joined Bob in the Chinese restaurant close to our hotel and where we discussed our homestays and shared interesting stories about our weekend with our families. After lunch we listened to a lecture called "The Tension Between Modernity and Tradition in Japanese Culture." To summarize, we learned that in Japan there is a peaceful coexistence between tradition and modernity. They blend together to form the unique culture that so many westerners don't really understand. Examples of this coexistence can be seen in urban architecture, sumo wrestling, various festivals, and even in religion. One interesting thing that I learned in the talk is that Japanese people are born Shinto, marry Christian and die as Buddhists. People here prefer mixed religions where religion is a matter of participation rather
than belief and spirituality. This is completely different than many western religious views, so I thought I'd mention it in my blog.

After class, Annie and I went to Plena, a huge shopping mall with lots of boutiques. We browsed for a while and then decided we needed to get a massage and have "Relax Time" as my host mom would say. What a treat! Afterwards, I caught the train home with Mary Kate and Ellen who joined my family for dinner. As you might be able to tell Mary Kate, Ellen and I are together a lot! Our families love to have parties for us! In fact, we are actually going to go sword fighting sometime this week and be like "samurais." I'm pretty excited.

After dinner, I finally got to spend some time with my host dad since he is NEVER at home...he's a real hard worker, an engineer with his own company! Anyway, we talked about motorcycles, because, like my REAL dad, he loves those!(The language barrier has made it difficult to talk to my parents about anything substantial, but I've learned a lot about the kindhearted and peaceful nature of the Japanese people in general...everyone's very soft spoken and extremely generous, something harder to come by in America, especially when interacting with complete strangers) And we also talked about my goodbye party on Sunday. I'll end with a pretty funny story about this...My it's my host mom's birthday on Sunday as well as my last night with the family. So we were talking about the goodbye party we're going to have, but she doesn't want to call it the goodbye party. SO instead we are going to call it the only other english equivalent to goodbye (besides bye or see you later) that I could think of ~~THE "PEACE OUT" PARTY! My host family absolutely love the name!!

On that note, Peace Out!

Alexa

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January 17, 2007
A day in the life...
Hello from Japan. The past day has a little less eventful than most, but that is not necessarily a bad thing, as I feel I have found a daily routine that is no longer stressful, and I believe everyone has settled in as well. As always, my day started with a fifteen minute walk to Kasairinkaikoen station to catch the 8:53 to Kaihin Makuhari. On the way I meet Jon Greene and Kristin Kountz giving us a chance to tell eachother about the night before with our hostfamilies. This morning I met Katherine Aul at Excelsior Cafe for some coffee and ordered in Japanese. Most of us have tried to do this, normally to find that the cashier speaks enough English that our attempts are unnecessary.

Last night, as Bob mentioned in the previous spot, he and Mariko Ishikawa came with me to my home. Bob broke the bank by giving my host-parents a bottle of Summit Home White Zinfandel. This is my parents first time hosting, and they have done an amazing job. Summy, my host-mother speaks a little English and is working very hard. Terry, my host-father speaks almost no English, and is content to learn a little at a time. Bob, Mariko, Terry, Summy and I had these amazing local pastries and coffee and discussed my stay there. Bob spoke very slowly and announced every word, only to discover that Mariko then needed to translate to my parents. To speak to them, I need to say a few words, each chosen from a small vocabulary, slowly, and then repeat each part for them to get it. Many of the hostfamilies have electronic
translators, which are invaluable to our communication. I called it a "portable Ishikawa-san," which Terry apparently thought was hilarious.

After Bob and Mariko left for home, we had dinner; spaghetti, just in case I was sick of Japanese food. The other day Terry had a "liver holiday," and decided not to have a drink with dinner, so we made up for it by knockin back some fine zinfandel. I think they were nervous about having company, especially since they were sort of being judged by Mariko Ishikawa from IES, but afterward I think they knew that it could not have been made more clear that I now have a second pair of parents half a world away from home, who will not let me leave the house without enough warm clothing, or leave the table without finishing my vegetables, or mispronouncing a word, etc. See you soon.

Thom

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ANOTHER GREAT DAY IN TOKYO

Every day I appreciate even more how clean, safe, efficient, and wonderful this city is.

After our morning class, I escorted a few students to the Edo-Tokyo museum, and then headed off on my own, back to the Aimo monorail stop, on Tokyo Bay. I went back into Toyota for a minute to take a picture or two, then headed for the National Science Museum. Wow, was it impressive! I only had 90’ til the museum closed, so I saw 2 of the displays… Robotics/electronic technologies, and life sciences. The high point of the electronic technologies for me was a virtual reality room, where I was given 3-D glasses, asked to stand at a rail, and bend over so my head was over the rail, into the display. Then, a 3-D video of the earth from 30,000 miles away zoomed in, and in, and in…. til we entered Tokyo, and the city near the museum. Then the attendant gave me a set of Game-Boy like controls. One side moved the perspective left and right, the other up and down. The display, on 5 walls [3 sides plus top and bottom], that I got dizzy if I moved too quickly. I could fly around Tokyo, move up into space; move down to the ground. It was amazing!! Better than any video game I’ve ever seen!

The life sciences display was amazing too. I entered a mock-up of the Space Shuttle’s experiment and living modules, and learned about a number of experiments done in the shuttle. Including one about chick egg development at zero g’s, that was quite neat. However, somehow, every video from within the shuttle was of Japanese astronauts… I hadn’t realized before that all of the astronauts were Japanese!! But it was neat.

The genetics displays were very sophisticated, conveying concepts that our students wouldn’t get to until an ADVANCED genetics class at Wofford. There was a display of scientists who contributed to the Human Genome Project, and wouldn’t you know it… They were all Japanese!! Again, I was impressed that this massive project was actually done entirely in Japan!! JUST Kidding of course; the museum is excellent. But my favorite moment was when I was LEAVING the museum. There’s a brand new monorail that goes from this area on Tokyo Bay back into the city. It’s an automated monorail, with no driver. I sat in the front car, where I could see out of the front, as well as the sides. Turns out I was riding from the Bay, into the city just at DUSK. And it was the most beautiful view I think I’ve ever seen of ANY city. The architecture in this area is pretty amazing; and all the lights had come on… but it was still light enough to actually see the buildings as well. I guess I can’t adequately describe it, and I didn’t get a picture, so you’ll just have to take my word for it. If you visit Tokyo, take this monorail back into the city at dusk!

-Bob
My alarm clock attempted to wake me up this morning at 6:45. After “snoozing” a couple of times, I rolled out of bed to confront my first challenge of the day—getting from my bed to the ground. Ordinarily, it is pretty difficult to roll out of bed in the morning when the floor is only two feet below. However, the floor here at my host family’s home can only be reached by climbing down a not so sturdy twelve-foot ladder from the little loft where I sleep. Just trust me when I say it is a challenge to climb down from my bed early in the morning!

Once my feet hit the floor, I heard Misan calling “Good morning” (in Japanese of course) from the kitchen below. I scurried downstairs to find a traditional Japanese breakfast set on the kitchen table. If you had asked me three weeks ago if I would enjoy eating fish, soup, rice, and seaweed for breakfast I would have answered with a resounding “absolutely not!” Let’s just say, it is astonishing how much your taste can change when you are in a completely different environment!

Around 8:30 I set out on my urban trek to the IES center to meet the rest of the group for our 10:00 Japanese class. The first leg of my journey is a 10-15 minute bike ride that terminates in a bike garage. Yes, they actually have multi-floor bike garages in Japan! I then hop on a train where I meet up with Tom and Jon (unless I am being a typical woman and running a bit behind schedule in the morning).

Eventually, the three of us made it to class this morning where we learned a bit more Japanese to help eliminate awkward moments with our host families. Honestly, there are times when I find myself just staring at my host mom and dad with absolutely no way to communicate what I would like to say! For this reason, I am quite interested in learning all of the Japanese that I can.

Today happens to be Ashley’s and Brad’s 21st birthdays, so we went out for a bit of a celebration during our lunch break. We all went to this neat traditional Japanese restaurant on the 24th floor of a building that had a gorgeous view of the city. Oh, I should probably mention that we had to take off our shoes in the restaurant and sit on the floor to eat!

After lunch, the President/CEO of Japanime (a successful Japanese comic company run by a native Californian) spoke to us. Despite our initial ignorance of Japanese comics and cartoons, I think it is pretty safe to say that we all enjoyed the captivating speaker!

Marikosan, our guide friend, brought back some sweets to celebrate the two birthdays and so we had a tiny party before we all parted way for the rest of the afternoon/evening.

To fill up the evening hours, I decided to head to Ropongi (a young nightlife district) with several of my friends. Surprisingly, we successfully navigated our way through the Tokyo train system and popped out in the middle of a busy intersection. We grabbed dinner at a sushi bar that made the sushi as you order it. YUMMY . . . raw salmon, tuna, and fish eggs! No really, it is quite delicious if you don’t think too hard about it.

At the end of a crazy whirlwind of an evening, I found myself back at my home station. I then jumped on my bike, switched my bike’s light on (it’s illegal to ride a bike in Tokyo without a light
after dark . . . or so my family continuously warns me), and rode home in the wet, windy, frigid weather.

As I walked in the door, my host mom greeted me with a warm mug of green tea and invited me to watch a bit of A Few Good Men in Japanese with her. Though I did not understand a word (literally), we had great girl time. Eventually, I cleaned up and mustered up the strength climb of the ladder to my bed that seemed longer than ever before.

It is now time to set my alarm clock that will wake me for yet another exciting day.

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January 19, 2007

Konnichiwa everyone. We have now been in Japan for almost two weeks and I have had a great time. Today was the first day we have not had class and we got to spend the day with our host family. Murray and I are staying with the Hayashi family, and they are a young couple in their early 30s. They are the nicest people, and Kimi (the wife) speaks perfect English. Mikio (the husband) speaks some English and is not as bad as he says he is. He is an eye doctor, and unfortunately he was not able to join Kimi-san, Murray, and me on our trip today. The three of us went to this museum (I do not remember the name, how terrible is that?) but it looked like a Japanese ghost town. It was only an hour away, but it was enough time for me to get some decent sleep in the car. When we got there we went to different stations where we could make some traditional Japanese crafts. The first thing we did was decorate these candles with paper. Murray's turned out really well and so did Kimi's. Mine looked like some wrapping paper threw up on the candle, but you know I tried my best. I'm sure my mother will love it. We then went to another station where we painted the faces on this red little statue. It was a lot of fun and I will have pictures to show how well those turned out. While all of this was going on, it actually started snowing and Murray and I both got really excited, since it never really snows in South Carolina. It was a light snow, but it was still enough to probably cancel school in SC. After that we had lunch, and it was a noodle bowl with mushrooms and tofu. There were a few other families in there, and Murray and I couldn't help but notice how differently we ate the noodles from everyone else. As much as I tried, I could not slurp the noodles. When I did soup would go flying everywhere and get on Kimi, so I decided that I might not need to do that anymore. We left lunch and went to a museum which showed some ancient Japanese ruins, which were really cool. There were even fossils from a mammoth, and I was pretty impressed. After that, we went to a printing/stamping station to make a picture of a Japanese woman. It seemed easy enough, but I was mistaken. The woman running the station could not get through to me how to do it properly and I could not make her understand that I was trying, but my fingers were too big. I'm sure when we were done, she had decided that I was a complete idiot, but I think my picture turned out well. Good enough for me at least. After that, we left the cool museum, and I feel asleep once again on the way back. We got back to the house and picked up Mikio, and then the four of us went to Tokyo Disney at the Sea. It was the coolest Disney park I have ever been to. We went to this acrobatic show and all the people did pretty cool stunts. Plus the guys were very muscular, so it something nice to look at too. After that we went on a Indiana Jones ride that about gave Kimi a heart attack. It was kind of scary, but it was fun. We then went on another roller coaster which was my favorite. It was pretty short, but very fast. I'm sure my dad would have liked it. We then went to eat, and then watched the firework show and browsed through some shops. We saw all these cool Mickey Mouse hats, that pretty much everyone was wearing, but we decided not to get any because they were 2000 yen. What really amazed me was that there were girls walking around the park wearing stiletto boots. I could never do that, but the women here definitely put style over comfort, which I admire.
Tomorrow, we are going to a school to help with some kids and tell them about international service. We leave Monday for Kyoto, which I am excited about, bit I will miss Kimi and Mikio. They’ve been pretty great host parents (or siblings? They are pretty young and definitely not old enough to be our parents).
- ‘If I don’t get my stuff together soon, I will end up at McDonalds’ Susan (Mims)

January 20: The One Where Thom Pretended to Read Japanese Porn During Class
Now that I’ve gotten your attention...

Yes, Thom did pretend to read Japanese porn during Japanese class today. There are even pictures to remember the moment. But, on a more important note, today was the last day of Japanese class. We learned Japanese conjugations today, somewhat confusing. And, we learned how to thank our host families, since Sunday is our last day with them. Today being the last day of class, and our last time at IES was bittersweet. We really have learned a lot. Some of us even used our Japanese phrase: "Sumimasen, JR Line wa doka desu ka" (excuse me, where is the JR Line?) when we got a little lost the night before. But, I'm sure a lot of us are glad to no longer be sitting in the classroom, even if Thursday's lecture on Manga was really interesting. Speaking of lectures, we didn't have a lecture today. So, this afternoon, we all had the choice to go wherever we wished. Many of us went to the public bath, but I, along with Susan, Kelly, Ashley Price, and Thom, went to Lalaport, the biggest mall I have ever seen. (Sorry! I know you all want to hear about the public bath!) I got lost at least 5 times, and the rest of the time at the mall, I was still lost...I just wasn't trying to get anywhere. It took me about an hour just to find the book store. I got two Japanese comic books that had been translated into English. I'm excited about reading them backwards like the Japanese! Despite the confusion, the mall was fun, and I would definitely suggest going there. I even found a Coldstone Creamery, which was a big suprise to me. I couldn't believe that an ice cream place we have at home was really at a mall in Japan! So, sometime around 5, I managed to wander my way back to the walkway that leads to the JR. I, also, stopped on the walkway to take a picture of the bridges for my dad, which definitely got me a few strange glances. Somehow, I managed to arrive back at my host family's home, without getting lost...a fairly big accomplishment for me. Then, before dinner, I took the family dog, Riku, out for a walk. Riku is only a baby and very shy. But, I thought maybe a walk would make him like me more...I was right. After I brought him back from the walk, he wouldn't stop jumping on me, and he kept crawling out under the gate and sitting on the steps outside, hoping that I would take him for another walk! Dinner was really yummy! Even the salad dressing here is really good, and I don't even like salads. We also had some pork with ginger sauce and rice, of course. Also, Kimi-san offered me ice cream...she knows how much I love sweets! Friday was great, but little did I know that the next day would bring, Narita (where we would do Japanese crafts), snow, and the Tokyo Disney Sea Park!
-Murray

January 21, 2007
What an Exciting Day...kinda
Today was a very different day. It was full of laughter and joy...on the walk over there. To start it off amber showed up in this beautiful kimono and was getting stared at by all the locals. She looked gorgeous. This morning we traveled to Fuji Kindergarten School. There we were met by people from other parts of the globe. I met a lady from Nepal who spoke both japanese and english. I also talked with some Chinese people who were our age and could speak very good english. They were cool to talk to for a while. What we were attending was the International Youth Gala. At first some people got on stage and talked to the crowd in japanese while we
listened to the translator. Each talked about their previous volunteer work across the world. One lady had worked in Africa for example. It would have been a lot better if we didn't have to go through a translator but oh well. Then all of us stood at the front and introduced ourselves and spoke about any previous mission/volunteer work we had participated in. After those people finished talking, 2 HOURS LATER, we broke for some snacks and drinks. John was being eyed by a local school girl but she was too shy to come and talk and vise versa. Just kidding John. After that we all got together and played the biggest game of musical chairs. I retired in the first round along with Kristen so we were first place in the loser bracket. at the end Amber, Nancy, and whoever else were the winners. then we sat down again and watched the " Nepalian ?" lady do one of her native dances. it was neat seeing how they actually move instead of grinding on someone else. then came two weird looking instruments. one was hanging and the other one was laying down. one lady would shake hers and the other one would beat hers so it made an interesting sound to say the least. it sounded more like a child had gotten ahold of them and gave them hell. That was the end of the program and we walked back to the train station. As soon as i got home it was off to play basketball with my kid and all his friends. I'm not very good at basketball but it was fun being the tallest one on the court. we played for a solid 2 hours. i am so out of shape its not funny. stairs usually kick my ass, just kidding, kinda... oh well off to Kyoto, Nara, and Hiroshima tomorrow bright and early. I'm super excited about that! well thanks for reading my long post. have a good one.

Campbell Oates

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January 23, 2007
Hi from Kyoto!

My annoying alarm clock went off at 7 am and crawled out of my comfy futon. While waiting on Susan to get out of the shower I slid open the traditional Japanese paper window to see a tranquil little courtyard garden with a waterfall in the corner. After we all got showers, Susan, Kelly, Katherine and I went downstairs to the hotel dining room where for the first time since I have been in Japan I had a normal breakfast. We ate our sausage and eggs and drank our orange juice and headed to the bus. Our first destination was the Nanzenji Temple which reminded me a lot of a fort I would have played in when I was younger. It had steep stairs made out of wood which I so lovingly named “the stairs of death”. At the top we were able to see an amazing view of Kyoto which is just surrounded by mountains…GORGEOUS! On the temple grounds there were rock gardens, an aqueduct, and a mountain path which many of us hiked up. It was really nice to be out in nature. After we left the temple we went to a Tea Ceremony at this place that had a little mote like river running in front of it with fish that swam against the current and just stayed in one place. I really enjoyed watching them for some reason. In the tea ceremony we were served a sweet pastry with been paste in it and of course green tea. Luckily for us we did not have to sit on our knees instead we had nice comfortable benches. Our next stop was the Kiyomizu Temple which also had a beautiful view, but the way I think we will remember this temple is the thousands of steps we had to walk up. At this temple there was a waterfall that you could drink from and it would give you wisdom so I decided that I could use some wisdom so I drank from it along with many of peers. Another thing that we found interesting was something called the two love stones in which you had to walk with your eyes closed from one stone to the other and if you made it then the person you were thinking about and you truly love each other. I made it to the other rock but ironically I wasn’t thinking about anyone because all I could think about was making it to that rock. At the bottom of the temple was a street with lots of shops and restaurants, so we did a little lunch and shopping. Later we left to go to try Zenkyo An Meditation
or Zen Meditation if you will. Most of us really enjoyed that although it was really hard to concentrate with a monk stomping up and down, dinging bells and beating us with paddles. I actually asked to be hit, it is suppose to help you concentrate, and I thought it felt pretty good it just made a horrible sound. By the end of our meditation time most of us had sleepy purple feet. When we made it back to the bus which was a few blocks away we noticed that Mary Kate and Ellen were missing so Bob called them and the said that they were lost, so Marikosan went to their rescue. While she found them we went on to the Temple of a Thousand Gates where they met up with us. This temple was the strangest of them all. It was basically an endless line of orange and black gates. From there we went back to the hotel for a traditional Japanese dinner. I really couldn’t stomach to eat that food so I went back upstairs with the girls and we all took a nap. Later that night a group led by Markiosan went to the Gion district. On the way there Alexa, Annie and I ran into two geisha and there “boyfriends” told them to take pictures with us. It was truly like meeting two of Japan’s celebrities! How exciting! We met up with the rest of the group at a bar called Hannah were I stayed for an hour and then Ellen, Murray, and I decided that we were hungry do to lack of dinner so we went to a nearby McDonalds for some chicken nuggets and fries and walked back to the hotel. When I got back to the hotel I went down to the public bath for my shower and hit the sack.

-Ashley P.

1/24/07: Hi from Nancy
To begin with, I love Japan. And a big thanks to those taking your time reading this, thanks for keeping up with our travels to envy every day. Each of you need to embark on a journey to Japan…This country has amazed me daily and I can’t wait to make a return trip!

Wednesday was a fun filled day, as usual. We have stayed busy every second! The day started with our last breakfast in Kyoto at our hotel, then we packed up our bus and headed on to do some sight seeing before jumping back on the bullet train for Hiroshima.

Our first stop was the Horyuji temple. I am sure everyone thinks we are “templed out,” but each one is so different and gorgeous in its own way! We walked around the temple for about an hour, looking at shrines, admiring super old masks and war gear, and soaking in every sight possible knowing our time was coming to an end in Japan. There was a huge bell at this temple that was super old, I forget the exact number but I know it was really old and cool looking.

After the Horyuji Temple, we strolled back to the bus to find our bus driver playing with a black cat. I think that the cat was a “lucky” black cat because our day was awesome and safe, but I am sure those who are superstitious would have immediately turned on the windshield wipers or something to avoid anything unlucky. He was pretty funny trying to shoo away the cat so that he would not hit it when driving away, but the cat just wanted some lovin!

We jumped back on the bus and headed towards the Nara Park area. We were all pretty excited to see all the deer! Once we stepped off the bus, we immediately saw tons of deer. They were so used to people that they would walk right up to us and search our hands for food. We walked up to the Todaiji Temple with deer all around us, poking their head out at random places on the trail up to the Temple. I was blown away to see how they came up to us so easily. The Todaiji Temple was really cool too. There was a HUGE tree in the courtyard area, it was super cool looking. A few people bought some fortunes at a little shop at the temple. Fortunes can range from very good to very bad. Luckily they sold English fortunes so we were able to know what they said.
After looking around the temple we walked down into the heart of Nara Park, which was crawling with deer everywhere. I personally think that the majority of the deer looked nasty, needed a bath, and did not smell too amazing. The baby deer were cute though, the old ones looked like they were ready to attack. There were not any attacks while we were there, and I highly doubt a deer would attack us. I grabbed some octopus balls for lunch. Its not as bad as it sounds. Its just octopus inside some fried dough with some yummy sauce on top. It was not my favorite meal in Japan, but it was not terrible. While some of us stood around eating, we had to shoo away four or five deer from coming up and trying to eat our lunch. That was the most annoying part about the deer. We had a little free time to shop around in the park area. People bought toboggans that looked like deer heads, small Buddha’s, and lots more.

We met at the gates of another temple after lunch. We went into the FIND THE NAME OF THIS TEMPLE NANCY and saw the world’s largest Buddha, it was pretty big. It was inside the largest wooden building in the world. Now, how cool is that?! A lot of us stood there and just stared at the Buddha in amazement in it’s size. We walked around for a while and saw some older Japanese ladies pulling one another through a small hole at the bottom of a large wooden column. Mariko told us that the hole was the size of the Buddhas nose and that if you make it through the hole you will live a long life. Susan was the first Wofford student, followed by a few others, to try getting through. Some of the ladies pulled her through by her arms. They pulled her so hard that you would have though her arms would come out of socket, but she was fine - no worries! A few other girls went through the hole after Susan conquered the hole.

After the temple we were driven by our sweet little bus driver to the Shin Osaka Station to get back on the beloved bullet train, which we all love. The seats are way nicer than any business class seat on an airplane. If we had these seats on the flight back to Detroit, I know we would all sleep great. Too bad North Western has yet to take any advice from the bullet train.

We arrived in Hiroshima around 6:30 pm. We walked for about five minutes from the station to our Hotel. A few of us wondered if it was weird for the Japanese to see 22 Americans get off the train at Hiroshima, but Mariko assured us that it was common and they do not hate us for coming to Hiroshima to experience the city. We had dinner at the hotel in a tatami mat room with lots of traditional foods. One of the main dishes was the famous omelet dish of Hiroshima, and it was pretty tasty!
-Nancy

The last day in Japan
Friday, January 26th

We were all a bit partied out from Karaoke the night before, so everyone looked a little groggy this morning. Nevertheless, we met downstairs with our things completely packed, and left for Himeji city.

The castle was absolutely gorgeous. I suppose it was so unexpectedly pretty, even after all the beautiful shrines, because at the word “castle” I immediately assumed the standard motte-and-bailey castle, not a Japanese one with elaborate flipped roofs and whitewashed walls. It also had several incredibly steep staircases! The castle was transformed into a sort of museum; therefore, each room was filled with artifacts and amusing statements about life back in the Edo
era. There was a book for signatures, too, but the only thing I could think of to write in Kanji was “Hana” (my dog’s name), so I did…

The next part of the day was completely worthless and boring and took up way too much of my life, so I don’t plan to amuse you with time consuming details. We rode the train. For a long time. Way too long. Then we switched trains. And rode that one for a while as well. Then we gathered all of our suitcases and dragged them to the hotel. Then we walked to the right hotel. Then I showered… which was probably my favorite part of the day…

The dinner at the Shinagawa Prince hotel was incredibly amazing though. It was a buffet filled with every type of Japanese food imaginable (except plain white rice, but I probably just missed that). They had sushi, squid patties and ramen noodles with goo and seafood on top… king crab, shabu shabu, and countless cooked random types of fish. For dessert there were several types of pastries with fruit, small cream puffs, and sorbet. It beat out the Big Mac I had earlier that day by far!

After everyone was ready for our last night in Tokyo (I wore all Susan’s clothes… everyone liked them so much better than mine. God my fashion sense sucks), we set out for the pirate bar. When we got there it wasn't fully converted yet (it was a café during the day), so we walked around, admired the marine carousel, and at 9:30 the pirate came out to get us. This place was decked out! Everyone was dressed as a pirate, there was a lagoon, the sky changed from night to day and back every so often… there was even a cannon that went off when the pirate ship started! It was very decorative! We each ordered only our second drink when the bar closed. Confused after realizing it was only 10:00, we paid our tabs and left.

We met Mariko-san’s hot British husband walking around the hotel. After chatting for a bit about the most prevalent topic of the trip, we enjoyed assorted nuts and rice balls in a small café before going back up to the rooms for awkward conversations and final packing. Then it was bedtime. Yay for sleep.

I would also like to extend a special thank you to B-Nasty for posting before me about the day after mine. Sorry I took so long.

There once was a girl from the 'burbs
Who went for some Japanese herbs
She hung with the locals
And worked on her vocals
And now she can kanji-gate verbs.

Chees-u
Kelly
January 27, 2007
Sad Day for us all...
Hello All!
Well, where to begin…I would first like to say that this has been a once in a lifetime trip as far as I am concerned and I do not think that I will ever forget the experiences I had in Japan. Today was a sad day for us for our time here has expired, and with most of us having little or no money left to our names we made ourselves pack up and prepare for one nasty/long plane ride back home. I, and many other students, came to love Japan (as I am sure many of you have read) and having to leave what felt like an ideal society to many of us was very difficult. It was especially difficult to leave behind our fearless leader Mariko and the other wonderful people at IES. I do not think there is any way we can ever fully show our appreciation for their hard work and effort. The day began with some students having breakfast on the 29th floor of the hotel we were staying at, and I must admit I regret not having done my last minute packing the night before…dang it. Well once we departed from the hotel it was about an hours ride to the airport. To our surprise, some of our host families who were able to come actually came to the airport to see us off and give one more “Goodbye”!! That was a wonderful gesture which shows how well this program worked and how wonderfully we had bonded with our host families despite being from two different cultures. Even though communication might have been difficult at times, it was especially difficult to try and express just exactly how much we appreciated all that they did for us, but that is completely OK! That was what made staying with the families fun, having to overcome the challenge of communication difficulties made us open up and really put in some effort to make sure we could understand one another. I do not think that having the families fairly fluent in English would have been fun. Anyway, we were forced to say our “Goodbyes” to Mariko and our host families and we begin the long haul back to the United States. However, thank goodness the flight back to the U.S. would only be about 11 hours instead of 13 hours like it took to get to Japan. Well when we finally arrived back in Detroit, many other students including myself were almost on the verge of tears because we could actually read and understand all the signs in the airport, and could hear people speaking english! I enjoyed the challenge of communicating in Japan, but I was also glad to hear/read some english by this point. Also, there were trash cans as far as the eye could see! Many would agree with me in saying that we love Japan and we love many, many aspects of Japan…but sometimes finding a trash can within your vicinity was a little difficult, but none the less we would find one! Making our way through customs was rather harmless, and no one was denied access back to the States (Thank goodness!) The second flight from Detroit back to Greenville/Spartanburg seemed, at least to me, a very dinky and short flight and it felt more like I was standing in line some where rather than sitting on a plane. I would compare it to having to wait a long time in a huge line to make it through customs, like we were already home but just had to wait around. Either way, it was the final thing that stood in our way of being back with our families and friends who were waiting for us at the gate! Over all Japan was THE best trip I have ever taken to a foreign country and if given the chance…I would go back in a heart beat…I would not have to even think about it, and I know everyone would agree with me when I say
that. The food was GREAT, the people were built around a foundation of Respect and Kindness for one another and the sights were unbelievable. I miss Japan already…
~B-rad (AKA B-Nasty)