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Summer is the one that rousts you out of bed every morning in Kyoto. The sun shines in good morning from the windows, and the giant cicadas scream for you to wake up in a chorus so loud that it almost sounds like rain is beating against the roof. And you do, because you know that that day, you are going to have an adventure.

I still can't believe that my time there is over. I already miss the Kamogawa River, where kids hang out at night and make friends with strangers. I miss slinking around Gion, trying to catch a glimpse of a white-faced Geisha. I miss the flutter in the pit of my stomach when I tried out my Japanese on a native speaker. I miss the feeling of knowing that no matter how I chose to spend my afternoon, I would have an unforgettable time. Thank goodness my longing for just one more Mos Burger was sated on the plane ride home!

But for many parts of my trip, this is hopefully just the beginning.

My time in Kyoto allowed me to grow up. While I did live with a host family, who helped me in so many ways and to whom I am perpetually grateful, they had their own lives. I was not their child, and they were not charged to take care of me as such. When I left their house in the morning, I was on my own, which led to many situations where I had to learn to trust myself, and how to ask others for help, however grudgingly. I singlehandedly navigated the (surprisingly long) walk from KJLS to Shimogamojinja, everyone arriving unscathed. By the same token, after getting off at the wrong stop on my way to Kinkakuji, I accepted the help of a kind stranger, and was saved from wandering aimlessly for half an hour, even though wandering aimlessly through Kyoto is one of the best ways to see the city.

I learned how to be alone and not be self-conscious that I was alone. I spent days where I wanted to go to a temple, so I did. Touring alone felt a little weird at first. From the outside it seems lonely, but I think that the time I spent sitting in Nagaoka Tenmangu Shrine's garden surrounded by beauty was anything but lonely. Sometimes it can be hard for teenagers to hang out with themselves for a couple of hours, but doing so in such a tranquil setting allowed me to be more comfortable with myself.

And of course I am amazed at how much my Japanese has improved! Even after a couple weeks, I was able to carry out entire conversations in Japanese, seeking refuge in my dictionary only a few times. Because the lessons at KJLS are conducted completely in Japanese, (including grammar explanations) my listening skills, which I used to really struggle with, have

improved dramatically, allowing for better and easier conversation. I used the grammar I learned at school in the morning as I was traipsing around Kyoto shops and temples in the afternoon; exploring the city of Kyoto became my study time.

I got to do all of this alongside some of the most interesting people I have ever met, from the places I've always wanted to visit (giving me someone to call if I do). There were people from Switzerland, Holland, Canada, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, and China. I met a few Americans, too, but we were less represented than I thought we would be. Rather, the school was dominated by Taiwanese students, and, this really surprised me, French people. This rainbow quilt of people opened us all up not only to experiences in Japanese culture, but of world culture as well. Most of our discussions in class centered around our countries and experiences, allowing us to become more worldly just by sitting in a room together. Now I know that if I go to Taiwan, I can get a free plate of gyoza from a friend's gyoza shop. If I go to LA, I already have a network of friends. Several people I met teach in Japan, and I know that if I went to their prefectures, they would totally let me crash on their couch.

Living and studying in Kyoto was one of the best experiences in my life, and it has prepared me to have even more amazing journeys in the years to come.