

College of Europe students take part in a special study trip to Japan as part of the MIRAI programme.

For someone who has never been in Japan before, the first impressions are always about immediate and daily things; like having fish and miso soup for breakfast instead of your usual toast and coffee, or like greeting with a bow instead of a handshake. These are things that one can note instantly, small differences that indicate: “you are in Japan”. But after spending a week there and meeting local people, one gradually pays less attention to those first impressions and begins to wonder how different Japan and its people really are.

We were given the chance by the Japanese MOFA to live the first ever MIRAI 2015 experience, a cultural exchange programme where we not only learnt about Japan, but also about each other, as we were 150 students of 54 different nationalities from Europe, Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

During the first two days in Tokyo we visited places that not everyone can easily get the chance to see. The Mori Corporation Building in Roppongi is one of them. Looking at the view from the 53rd floor, we felt enveloped by buildings of all sizes, with the Tokyo Sky Tree Tower being the centre of attention thanks to its 634 metres, making the city the host of the tallest telecommunication tower in the world. The building also housed a 1:1000 scale model of the city, which further emphasised the varied skyline of Tokyo, and served as the presentation material for the former Ambassador of Japan to the UK, Hiroaki Fujii, to explain the corporation’s vision of modern Japan. This included its city planning, with a focus on hosting the 2020 Olympics and on developing more underground projects in order to build a greener city on the surface level.

Another fascinating experience was to attend seminars at Keio University. As we walked through the campus and on to the conference room, it wasn’t hard to imagine ourselves being students there. In the morning, the seminar was opened by the remarks of Prof. Toshiro Tanaka, Professor Emeritus of European Political Integration at Keio University and Jean Monnet Chair *ad personam* since 2003. In his conclusions, Prof. Tanaka described the “Expectations Deficit” in EU-Japan relations, mainly marked by an underestimation from the EU towards Japan and vice versa. He stressed the need to enhance mutual understanding and trust through dialogue, cooperation and exchanges between Europeans and Asians. Finally, he urged for the conclusion of the Japan-EU Economic Partners and Strategic Partners Agreement.

After two days learning about Japan and visiting all the interesting places in our packed schedule, we had already started to build an attempted image of Japanese culture in our heads. We had also been taught some theory, the famous “Do’s and Dont’s”, such as: don’t kiss or hug in public, don’t eat while you’re walking, don’t sit on a table, don’t put make-up on public... and always be on time (i.e. 15 minutes early)! However, everything we learnt was nothing compared to what we were going to experience the next two days. What truly changed our perception about

Japan, and gave us a deeper insight into the values of Japanese culture, was spending two days and two nights as part of a Japanese family away from the capital. Given the number of different locations we went to, each with its own distinct local character and history, it is difficult to summarise the overall experience. However if we had one word to define all our homestays it would definitely be 'hospitality'. Not only were we treated like one more member of the family but most importantly we also *felt* like part of a new household. Sleeping on a *futon*, cooking together, sharing a glass (or two) of sake, playing with the children as if they were your own brother and sister, singing Japanese songs in a karaoke bar, realizing that your host grandmother also wants to make sure you eat more than enough or teaching them games and songs from your own culture and finding out that they also have their Japanese version.

Upon our return to Tokyo we were not the same people and our perceptions had changed a lot. Even though we had learnt not to kiss or hug in public, there we were, hugging our Japanese friends every morning with our very well learnt "Ohayo!" (Good morning).

From Japan we learnt the importance of harmony, of respect, and the contrast between **traditional** –wearing a *kimono* and celebrating the tea ceremony or witnessing a Shinto wedding– and the **modern**–visiting a manga museum or seeing the *kawaii* (cuteness) culture in the way youngsters dress, act or even speak. But most importantly we learnt that we can achieve much more if we are open minded and put aside any fear of the differences. Indeed not only were there far fewer differences than expected, but we also learnt that appreciation of and respect for these differences form a cornerstone of prosperous relations between nations.

The word 'MIRAI' means 'future' in Japanese. This experience only lasted seven days but it was so deep and powerful that the lessons, memories, and relationships will stay with us indefinitely and encourage future visits.

By Elena Moreno with the collaboration of Jordan Hill, Jonas Roleder, Zrna Pavlicevic, Thomas Adam, Eva Sali and David-Jan Bosschaert
Students of thre College of Europe (www.coleurope.eu)