

Trip to Japan: Land of Rising Sun

Earlier this year in January, we were privileged enough to have the opportunity to travel to Japan as participants in the Japanese Government's JENESYS2015 programme (SAARC 1st Batch: Energy).

It was 18th January's dawn. Narita International Airport, Chiba Prefecture, Japan. Our flight 0088 (Malaysia Airlines) just touched down the land of Rising Sun. Nothing could be better than that perfect moment. We got a very warm welcome by JICE staffs. After that our Journey began to discover the land of wacky modern, traditional & conservative cultures with advanced technology.



It was drizzling & frozen outside & the wind kissing our cheeks made it chillier as we wondered how people on the sidewalk across the street could walk/bike their way to destination in that weather. Japan's big cities like Tokyo offer a non-stop sensual immersion, with more going on than it's possible to ever see on a single visit. We made our way to the magnificent Tokyo tower. So there we were, standing at one of the most beautiful and significant

landmarks of Japan. Tokyo Tower is a communications and observation tower located in the Shiba-koen district of Minato, Tokyo, Japan. At 332.9 metres (1,092 ft), it is the second-tallest structure in Japan. The structure is an Eiffel Tower-inspired lattice tower that is painted white and international orange to comply with air safety regulations.



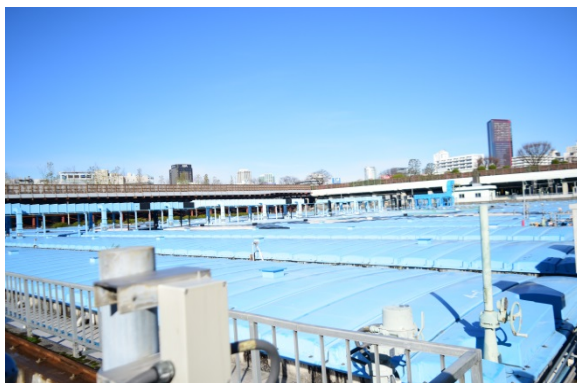
At 11.30 am, we were in an area someplace near Sinjuku (not sure) where we completed our lunch in a Japanese restaurant and the dining area has beautiful scenery. After completing

lunch, we moved to Tokyo Metropolitan Government Buildings. The tallest and most prominent of the three is Tokyo Metropolitan Main building No.1, a tower 48 stories tall that splits into two sections at the 33rd floor. The building also has three levels below ground. The view from both the south & north towers is breath-taking, we were stunned as neither of us had seen anything like it before.



From Tokyo Metropolitan Government Buildings, we checked into Sinjuku New City Hotel. In Japan, one must be careful about time because everything happens here in time. So you must set alarm a clock if think you may be late. Although few of us did have a handful of tardiness incidents during the first day, and it really felt bad for being the last to assemble in hotel lobby. Then we made our way to take dinner in an Indian restaurant. JENESYS participants were free to roam after dinner, but only until 10 p.m. walking around, however, turned out to be worry-free as long as we knew the way back.

Morning of second day started with health condition check-up & by taking breakfast. After that orientation programme was started where around 112 youths from countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan & Pakistan were present. When this programme finished, we returned our rooms & took our lunch. Lecture on Japanese culture & energy was held after lunch. After that all routine are same as previous day.



Shibaura Water Reclamation Centre

As usual like previous day morning after completing health check-up & breakfast, we moved to visit Shibaura Water Reclamation Centre which provides a safe & pleasant living environment for the residents & keeps high quality water in rivers & sea. It also helps prevent flooding & save energy & natural resources.

I'd ridden train in Bangladesh. But there was nothing to compare with riding the Shinkansen, the super-fast, super-quiet bullet trains of Japan. The Shinkansen is a train experience the like of which I'd never encountered before. But I just couldn't get over it. There was nothing like riding a Shinkansen. It was also a special experience. Shinkansen tickets are not cheap. In Tokyo, JICE personnel reserved seats and soon boarded a Kyoto-bound Shinkansen called "Nazomi233". For the next couple of hours, we would sit in comfy seats and speed by towns, cities, huge industrial complexes and hilly countryside. We were amused by seeing view of the homes, industries and hills of the small bit of countryside & Mt.Fuji between Tokyo and Kyoto. [Video link: View of Kyoto prefecture during trip from Kyoto to Tokyo by bullet train, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNDwPOyrCxA>]



Tokyo Shinkansen Station



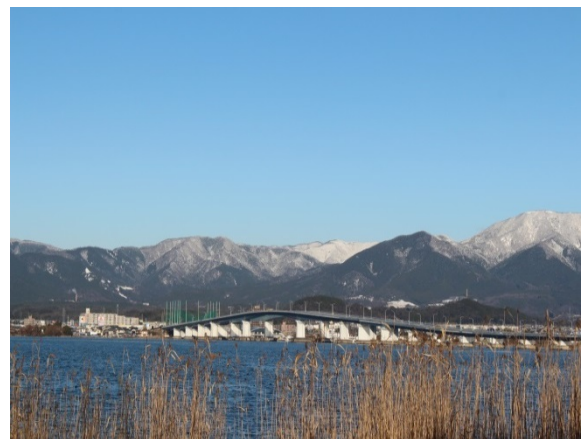
Mt.Fuji

But the Shinkansen is completely silent and smooth. No track noise. I don't know if the speeds are so fast (320 km/h, or 200 mph) that you just don't feel any bumps, or if the network is just this well put together, or what. Riding a Shinkansen is like riding a cloud at the speed of a bullet.

After reaching Kyoto Prefecture, we moved towards Shiga Prefecture by bus. We checked into Hotel Biwako Plaza. I was stunned by seeing view of outside from my hotel room. The beauty of Lake Biwako which is the largest lake of Japan, cannot describe in a word.

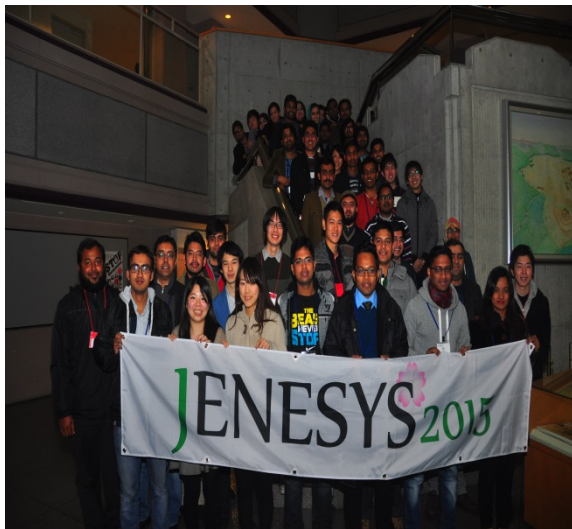


View from Hotel Biwako plaza



Lake Biwako

School Exchange programme was most interesting part of this programme. We visited Ritsumeikan University, Biwako Kusatsu Campus. As a part of programme, there were introductory session, discussion & exchange session with Japanese students, university campus visit session & reporting session. In my group, there were two Japanese students & two Pakistani Students. In the introductory session, we introduced with each others. Yoshihiro Uemura, Akimasa Ishida, Hafsa Qamar, Habib Wajid were my group members. We discussed about education system of each country & tried to find out similarities & differences. We were interested to know about everyone future plans. It was my luck that I made so many friends at once. It helped me to develop relationship & mutual understanding with different cultures & to think beyond borders.



Next destination was Kyoto. In some ways, Kyoto is the cultural archives of Japan. The city was the central to Japanese history for well over a thousand years & the marks of that millennium are in every little corner one could possibly explore. If one come to Japan looking for temples & shrines, he/she will hit a divine motherload in Kyoto. There are more than 1600 Buddhist temples & 400 Shinto Shrines. It doesn't matter how lost one gets, he/she will also find a red tori gate or a smiling Buddha not far away. The religious & historical are inescapable.

First we moved to visit Rokuon-ji Temple "Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion)". Rokuon-ji Temple was originally built as a villa by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu who had taken possession of mountain villa of Saionji Temple in 1397. It was converted into a temple after Yoshimitsu's death. Officially named Rokuonji Temple, is famous for a symbol of Kitayama culture.





Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine

Next destination was Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine which was dedicated to the god of rice & sake by the Hata clan in the 8th century. Shinto shrines are the places of worship & the homes of gods. Shinto rituals & often live on the shrine grounds.

The Kyocera Museum of Fine Ceramics showcases the evolution of Kyocera's fine ceramic technology since the company's founding in 1959. It is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of fine ceramics for all ages. This museum is the symbol of Japanese advanced technology.

We were surprised by seeing Aino Machi Eco Club. Local people are so concern about environment & have been making efforts to be model of resource recycling society. They enhance different activities to promote nature friendly system.



Aino Machi Eco Club



We visited another historical landmark called Umaniokatomuki Shinto Shrine situated in Hino town. This town is also famous for Omi-Hino Merchants Museum which introducing life of Omi-Merchants & local heritages. Omi-Merchants were known as three most successful merchant groups in Japan. Omi-Merchants enjoyed thriving businesses through their famously good relations with customers & the local communities they worked in. they generously put their profits back into philanthropic activities.



Umaniokatamuki Shinto Shrine



Omi-Hino Merchants Museum

Homestay programme was the most memorable part of my life. If you want to know any culture, believe, manners etc, then you must spend few moments with a family of that society. It will help you to go the root level of those cultures, traditions. My host family name was IKARI family. There are three members of this family named Mr. Kamezi Mizoe, Mrs. Toshie Mizoe & their daughter Mrs. Keiko Ikari. Mrs. Ikari invited her friends to join & spend some moments with us. We cooked Chicken curry for them. They arranged lots of Japanese foods such as miso soup, oden, natto, tempura, umebosshi, fried fish etc. My foster family reminded me of my own and they treated like their own. Their hospitality, generosity, sincerity and warmth are the things that I will never ever forget.

[Video link: One night with Japanese family (Ikari family)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87zmrS3liSw>]



Host family: IKARI Family

JENESYS2015 won't happen again. Some of us may not even return to Japan. Those moments were like jumping in the snow, gossiping with people of different cultures might not happen again. But the memories will linger. These are the things that money can't buy, whose value transcends monetary value. In the long run, this trip will pay dividends for the rest of my life, because it's allowed me to see the world from a completely different prospective. I always remember Japan as a nation of “**2T**” which means in spite of modern **T**echnologies, a nation preserving own **T**raditions & cultures.

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Photo Courtesy: Ruhul Amin Foisal