

# MY EXPERIENCE STUDYING ABROAD IN JAPAN

The Gilman Scholarship,  
Travel Abroad Tips, and More



RAJ PATEL

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## Introduction

This book chronicles my experiences on studying abroad. From the realization that I wanted to study abroad, receiving an email for such an opportunity in Japan, and ultimately being fully-funded on my trip to Japan, everything I went through is disclosed here. My goals with this book are to inform, spread awareness on studying abroad, and to ultimately inspire fellow college students. After having a read of this book, hopefully you too will want to take action and study somewhere on the other side of the world! Even if you are past the age of a traditional college student, remember that it's never too late to study abroad, as I had fellow classmates in their late 20's when I studied abroad in Japan.

Studying abroad: It could be one of the best decisions of your life. It's something that all college students, no matter their background or financial circumstances, should have the opportunity to do. There isn't quite any other experience like it, and you would be hard-pressed to reap the benefits of studying abroad without actually doing it. If there is one piece of advice I have as a senior in college, it's to study abroad at some point in your college career. While I wish I had done so my freshman or even sophomore year, the important thing is that I had done it at all.

Going to college in itself changes you a lot. I went from not even considering studying abroad my freshman year to my passion becoming travelling abroad by the summer before my senior year. For this reason, I suggest studying abroad during your first couple years of college. All too often, students have hidden interests left unrealized due to an unwillingness to step outside their comfort zone. As you will discover in this book, you do not necessarily need to have money to afford the privilege of studying abroad. Take it from me, as I received a hefty, generous scholarship from the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, which constituted the majority of my funds to study abroad in Japan for 1 month during the summer.

In fact, were it not for the Gilman Scholarship, I am not so sure I could have afforded the expenditures to study abroad in Japan. This is why I highly recommend applying for the Gilman Scholarship if you currently receive a Pell Grant. Regardless of how much you can earn in scholarships to study abroad, the experience is highly worth whatever you spend on it. With that said, let's review the lifelong benefits of studying abroad in the following chapter: **Why Study Abroad?**



## Why Study Abroad?

Did you know that according to the Institute of International Education, only 1 in 10 U.S. undergraduates actually studies abroad before graduating? This means that if you study abroad, you have a selling point that 90% of college graduates don't have in the workforce. As you can see, studying abroad in itself is inherently conducive to your future, but there are many psychological benefits associated with doing so. One of the first benefits that often come to mind:

### You Become More Open Minded

Immersing yourself within a culture that you are not used to teaches you to be more accepting of things that are dramatically different from what you already know or have experienced. Studying abroad makes you become more tolerant, more patient, and more open minded. You become a more empathetic person and are better able to understand things that people would generally consider strange or weird. In other words, studying abroad will help you develop into becoming a better person overall – one of the greatest benefits associated with doing so.

### You Gain Real World Experience

If you grew up living in one state your entire life like me, then you would benefit all the more from the exposure to another country. Living somewhere else for a while gives you a better idea of how the world works – it provides you with a perspective different from the one you're used to back home. This is why studying abroad is such a strong marketing tool on your resume for potential employers. They want someone who is flexible, can work with a variety of people, and is able to adapt to disparate environments. The successful completion of a study abroad program indicates just that, which will set you apart from other job applicants.

## You Gain Independence

Being by yourself in a different country, you have no friends (at first!) or family to rely on – just you and you alone. It's a time for incredibly profound personal development. You are the one who has to figure out how you'll get from point A to point B. You have to ensure accommodation for yourself once you reach point B. Essentially, you have to fend for yourself while you're out there. There may also be times when you have no choice but to step outside your comfort zone while abroad. This is good, as it teaches you to become a more flexible person and gain character. It's during times of hardship that you learn to appreciate and not take what you have back at home for granted.

## Learn a New Language

While there are always online resources and language courses to enroll in, the real classroom setting lies within the country that speaks the language. Unless you are already around native speakers of the language you're interested in learning, you can only learn so much of the language at home. Furthermore, some software only teaches you how to speak the language in a workforce setting, but what about speaking the language naturally among friends? That's why it is much more effective to go to the country, as you discover nuances in the language and particularly distinct, perhaps peculiar, methods of expressions that you would have never known about otherwise.



## My Experience Studying in Japan

If someone had told me my freshman year of college that travelling abroad would inevitably become my passion, I would not have believed it. However, being exposed to various international students and simply going through college had completely changed that. If I could do college all over again, I would have studied abroad every year. The first time I had a class with international Japanese students was my sophomore year in Spring 2015. This was my first dose of exposure to the Japanese culture. Upon seeing them, I was instantly fascinated by the language and the culture, and thus was born my goal to learn the Japanese language. I started off simple enough, learning simple phrases, such as “how are you?”, “what’s your name?”, and “nice to meet you.” I even began learning some letters of the alphabet, and my interest in Japan snowballed after that.

In fact, it was in late April of 2015 when I told a Japanese student from that class, who was going back to Japan for good in June, “Who knows? Maybe one day I’ll come to Japan.” I had told her this with the intention of going to Japan in maybe 5 or 10 years down the line (imagine her surprise when I suddenly messaged her that I was in Japan a year later!).

February 2016, I received an email from my advisor detailing a summer study abroad program at Saitama University in Saitama, Japan – close to Tokyo. My eyes instantly lit up as I read the email, knowing that this was the program for me. However, my initial remark was, “Too bad none of this would be paid for.” I kept thinking “if only,” since I didn’t have the funds for the trip to Japan. I was looking at what would have been my dream study abroad, thinking that that’s all it would ever remain – a fantasy. How wrong I was. If there’s anything I have learned, it’s to ask as many faculty members as possible if they know of any scholarships or grants for studying abroad. This was how I ultimately ended up being fully funded on my trip to Japan.

Even after the completion of my study abroad program in Japan, it still surprises me to this day that I was able to go to Japan only one year after I wanted to go. Never could I have fathomed my dream of going to Japan would come true so soon.

## What I Did in Japan



I arrived in Japan on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and the Saitama University summer program began on June 13<sup>th</sup> and ended on July 7<sup>th</sup>. I stayed in Japan until July 28<sup>th</sup>, extending my trip before I even left for Japan without knowing how my experience would fare. To this day, I can safely say that choosing to extend my stay was the right decision. The days went by so quickly, and I was sad to leave Japan as the days led up to my departure.

Going to Japan brought along a slew of new experiences for me. There are many things that Japan has worked towards in terms of technological advances. Their toilets are among one of them.



I don't know what these buttons do, but it sure does make the toilet look fancy.

When I arrived at the Narita International Airport, I was greeted by three volunteer Saitama University students who were kind enough to escort me all the way to my building of residence at the university. I will always be thankful of them for their help. Were it not for their guidance, I would have had an incredibly difficult time finding my way in my jet-lagged stupor. To begin with, I had never once used buses or trains in the U.S. nor traveled outside the country by myself. So, you can imagine how confused I was once I tried navigating solo in Japan after the study abroad program ended – especially without a cellular data plan. But what's a trip to a foreign country without getting lost, right? What this

did for me, however, was allow me to return to the U.S. with a renewed sense of confidence in my ability to navigate independently.

It would be remiss of me to not address the food aspect of Japan. Of course, one does not simply go to an Asian country without trying to use chopsticks. While I can't say I became proficient at using them, I had gotten to the point where I could at least get the food in my mouth. This alone was a new and comical experience, and despite being vegetarian, I was still able to eat at many restaurants. Interestingly enough, for the vast majority of Japanese people, I was the first vegetarian they had ever met.



I know what you're thinking: What kind of a budget restaurant can't afford chairs? Actually, this is a pretty common setup in Japanese restaurants. This was at an udon restaurant in Saitama. The sitting style is a Japanese term called seiza.

I also experienced the taste of Japanese tea for the first time in a classroom. When I poured the tea in my cup, I poured it expecting it to taste sweet. However, Japan is nothing like the U.S. in this regard. Many Americans prefer to dump teaspoon after teaspoon of sugar in their coffees, an action that Japanese people would watch in horror. Imagine my surprise when I had my first sip of Japanese

tea, expecting it to taste sweet. It took time for me to get used to the taste, but I gradually came to appreciate the green tea for what it is. It's the reason why I had also decided to embrace black coffee once I had returned to the U.S.

Japanese food and tea aside, going to Japan really put my Japanese speaking ability to the test. There aren't many foreigners in Japan; couple this with the fact that almost no Japanese people speak English, and you have both confused foreigners and Japanese people. Whenever I would get lost, which was quite often, I would ask a passerby for directions in Japanese. The result was almost always an inevitable struggle of communication. Prior to visiting Japan, I thought I would at least be able to hold a basic conversation. Going to Japan made me quickly realize this wasn't the case and that although my Japanese has improved significantly since then, I still have much to learn.



Here is a sample of what Tokyo looks like. It's easy to get lost in a place like this!

During the 1-month long study abroad program, students of the program and I made weekly excursions to different parts of Tokyo. It wasn't until I actually explored Tokyo that I realized just how utterly vast and crowded the city truly is. One of the attractions I went to was the Tokyo Tower. I was able to get a nice view of Tokyo from up there!



As you can see in one of the pictures, the inside of Tokyo Tower offers a vertigo inducing view of what's directly below you. Somehow, seeing a Japanese kid jumping up and down on the glass didn't seem to help.

Another interesting part of Tokyo I visited was the Asakusa (pronounced Ah-sak-sa) district in the Taitō ward. This district is famous for being home to the Buddhist temple, Sensō-ji.

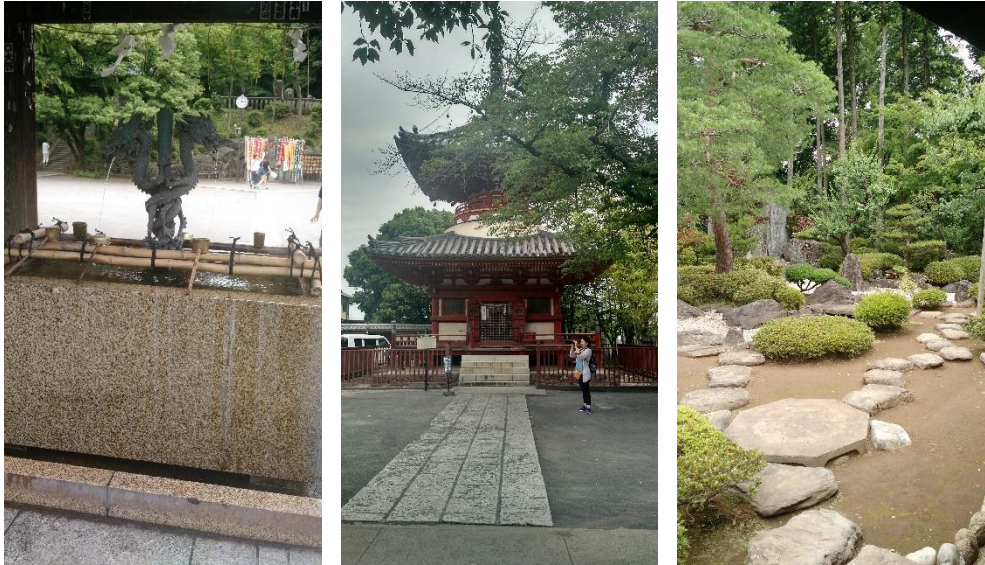




There were plenty of souvenir shops at Asakusa! If you would like to bring something back home, then Asakusa is the place to go!

Of course, going to Tokyo alone would not be a fair or accurate representation of Japan, so the summer program also organized a daytrip to Kawagoe, a “more Japanese” city not too far northwest of

Saitama. It was a great way of mixing things up and seeing something different from the city life in Tokyo. Kawagoe definitely had a more traditional feel to it, and Japanese women donning kimonos were much more prevalent there. We visited a temple and saw some incredibly beautiful scenery and greenery just outside of it. All in all, the excursion provided us with a much more traditional perspective of Japanese culture and lifestyle.



These are a few of the sights we saw in Kawagoe. The picture with the stones and bushes is just outside the temple we went to!

Shortly after the summer program had ended, I began getting tutored in judo at Saitama University by students of the judo club. Every student in the club was already a black belt, since they had all started training from a young age. Seeing the amount of time and dedication they invested into the sport was impressive and inspiring. The language barrier often made it difficult for other students and I to communicate, but I managed to learn a few basic moves. I was a bit disappointed that I only had the opportunity to be tutored for two weeks, however. Ultimately, my experience there has made me want to continue practicing judo one day – once I'm in an area that offers judo lessons.

Less than a week before I left Japan, I also went to Osaka for a weekend to see a friend who studied abroad at my university in the U.S. Since Kyoto is relatively close to Osaka, we went there via train and visited the famous Kiyomizu temple. Having the opportunity to sightsee the different cities of Japan was an interesting experience, and it seemed each city had its own unique vibe.



This was my view of Osaka from where I had stayed for the weekend!



And this is the famous Kiyomizu temple in Kyoto!



Another view of the surroundings near the Kiyomizu temple!

All in all, going to Japan was the best decision of my academic life. I would do it all over again in a heartbeat, and I was even a bit saddened at the prospect of having to leave Japan in the end.





## Funding Through the Gilman Scholarship

The majority of my funds allocated for my trip to Japan came directly from the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship. Without it, I would have had to deal with great financial burden in order to attend the study abroad program. This scholarship program is administered by the nonprofit organization, Institute of International Education (IIE), and you can visit their website at <http://www.iie.org>. It is sponsored by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State. The Gilman scholarship awards funds of up to \$5,000 with an additional \$3,000 if you plan to study a critical-need language. However, the amount varies depending on the length of the study abroad program and your financial need. If you are a U.S. citizen, an undergraduate recipient of the Federal Pell Grant, and would like to study abroad, then I strongly recommend you to apply for the Gilman scholarship.

### Why the Gilman Scholarship?

The Gilman scholarship is a highly competitive, national scholarship. Winning this prestigious scholarship automatically places you in an exclusive alumni group for life. Not only does this give you a leg up over other applicants for future scholarships, but as a Gilman Scholar, you can join the International Exchange Alumni Network. This is a website that offers alumni of U.S. government exchange programs, such as the Gilman, additional opportunities to continue going abroad via scholarships and grants. Furthermore, this is a resource that gives you the access to network with alumni of any other U.S. government exchange programs. You can find their website at <https://alumni.state.gov/> once you've won the Gilman scholarship!

### Winning the Gilman Scholarship

The main, determining factors in winning the Gilman scholarship lie within writing a strong Statement of Purpose essay and a creative Follow-on Service Project Proposal. Keep in mind that these

essays are your only chance to give the committee the opportunity to get to know you. Be creative, get personal, and most importantly, stay unique in your essays. Another critical aspect is to have both your essays repeatedly proofread and revised by a faculty member at your university to make yourself as competitive of an applicant as possible. Spellcheck and grammar check won't catch everything! Furthermore, a different set of eyes can help you more effectively establish your points in ways you would have never thought of otherwise. One last tip is to consider referring to essays that have won in the past as a source of inspiration. The harder you work on your application, the higher your chances of winning the Gilman scholarship!



## Tips for Studying Abroad

There are a few pointers worth mentioning if you plan to study abroad for the first time. In the midst of looking for scholarships and preparing to study abroad, it's easy to forget about important factors that can affect your experience while overseas. However, everyone wants his or her study abroad trip to begin with a good start. The following are a few essential tips to consider prior to departing for your study abroad country.

### Don't Forget the Cash!

If you prefer to swipe your debit/credit card in your daily life, then perhaps the need for cash when travelling abroad might not even cross your mind. Forget about the exorbitant international fees you may incur for using your credit card. Taxis aside, there are some establishments that only accept cash as legal tender. You never know when you'll come across a business that only accepts cash, so it's best to keep some on you at all times when abroad. Otherwise, you'll have to deal with hefty fees to withdraw the cash from an ATM.

### Know What Your Campus Provides

It would be useful to know what will be supplied for you in your dorm before you leave home. That way, you don't have to waste space in your suitcase packing unnecessary baggage. For example, it would save your suitcase a lot of room if you knew ahead of time that your dorm will already have a pillow. Do you need to pack your own sheets? Refer to the university's website to see if you can find out what accommodations they provide. If you are unable to locate such information, then it would be best to contact someone from the university.

## Book Your Flight 3 Months in Advance

The timeframe for the cheapest flight tickets typically falls within the 3-month range. 3 months is the latest you should wait when looking to fly internationally. Wait too long, and the price of your flight ticket will only go up. Surprisingly, there is also the danger of purchasing your flight ticket too early and paying just as much as if you had waited too long. It may seem like a good idea simply for a peace of mind, but booking your flight months in advance will only cost you more money than it should have. Like anything, it's best to browse various websites in your efforts for finding the best deal.

## Consider an International Cell Phone Plan

This is something that would have made my life easier in Japan. Instead of scouring the city for a free wifi hotspot so that I could figure out where I am, I could have used my phone at almost any time with a cellular data plan. This isn't to say that getting a phone with a plan is an absolute must while abroad, but it sure would have made it easier to keep in touch with others while away from wifi networks – not to mention finding my way. On the other hand, not having the luxury of a phone with internet forced me to ask locals for directions in Japanese, so it created for more interaction with the country's natives. Ultimately, it comes down to personal preference on what kind of experience you're looking for and whether you're willing to tough it out without a phone plan to save money.

## Save Up Before the Trip

If you are unable to secure enough scholarships to cover all the costs associated with studying abroad, then perhaps your only option left is to work a job and save money during the months leading up to your departure. This is what many students resort to when they cannot acquire sufficient financial aid. Often, the best way to go about this is to work the whole summer so that you can afford to study abroad the fall semester. It may not sound enticing to spend your entire summer working, but if you keep the upcoming study abroad trip in mind as something to look forward to, it makes working the whole summer that much more manageable.



## Wrap Up

Studying abroad is the opportunity of a lifetime. My first time studying abroad was also my only chance to study abroad during my undergraduate years. This is why I recommend studying abroad as early in your undergraduate years as possible. The sooner you study abroad in college, the more likely you can do it again before you graduate. You will never get these years back, so take full advantage of them while you still can. The experience will always be something that you appreciate and fondly look back upon.