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IWU students Preston Prior (left) and Kari Irwin (right) relax in kimonos with Professor Nancy Sultan (center) at the Midori-No-Mura in Japan.

Wasabi Ice Cream and Other Lessons in Culture

September 17, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The purpose of international travel is to become immersed in different languages and cultures, to expand horizons and discover commonalities. It also provides a way to discover new possibilities, from customs to cuisines.

"I tried a lot. Tofu ice cream? Wasabi ice cream? It was all new to me," said Preston Prior, an Illinois Wesleyan University junior, who traveled to Tokyo this summer as part of the Technos Program. Sponsored by the Tanaka Ikueikai Educational Trust, the program encourages students from across the world to learn about Japanese culture and study at the Technos International College of Tokyo.

"I fell in love with Japan," said Prior, whose grandfather was stationed in Japan after World War II, and grew up hearing stories about the country. "I also learned to be more accepting. We may do different things, but we are all human beings."

Fellow junior Kari Irwin was also chosen for the program, which sends students who have never been to Japan to Tokyo and the surrounding area for two weeks. "The trip was the highlight of my existence – so far," said the 20-year-old Irwin. "It taught me to look at my studies in a whole new way."

The two students traveled with Nancy Sultan, Illinois Wesleyan professor of Greek and Roman Studies, and soaked up culture by visiting everything from ancient temples to modern malls and classrooms. "You can study a foreign language all you want in a textbook, but you are not going to understand the culture until you have lived the culture," said Sultan.

Both students had heard of life in Japan prior to their travels, yet neither was prepared for the dichotomy of modern life and ancient tradition that is Japan. "I didn't have an appreciation for exactly what Japan was," said Irwin, a religions and philosophy major. "I studied the history and philosophy of Japanese religions. It was almost like two separate trips – one to the peaceful and serene mountains, the other to the crunch of the city. I didn't realize how big and modern Tokyo is, so big and so overwhelming."

The teeming streets of Tokyo, and the lightning pace of transportation, stunned Prior. "There are 20 different lines and trains come every five minutes. They literally cram people into these cars like sardines – with no mustard sauce," he added with a grin.



Prior sees the ancient sites at Matsumoto Castle.

That modern feel thrives at the Technos College, where Prior, Irwin and Sultan were welcomed along with 22 other students from English-speaking countries in a grand manor. "It has this amazing, clean, organized feel with tall, glass elevators and giant TV monitors," Irwin said of Technos, where the students attended English classes. "When we arrived, we saw ourselves projected onto this giant screen with what must have been 1,000 Technos students screaming and cheering for us. Now I know what a celebrity feels like."

"It's as though we were rock stars," said Sultan. "I think we were recorded from the moment we got there until the moment we left."

The Technos students, as well as Technos liaison Stephen Fleming, helped the visitors get acclimated and experience the modern and traditional Japan. The

group spent time in an inn in the mountains where they slept on traditional *tatami* mats, and dressed in *kimonos*. They also soaked in the hot springs of a volcano in public bathing areas known as *onsens*. "Everyone is bathing together naked in the *onsens*, so you just have to get over yourself and forget about being shy," said Prior.

Irwin had an added challenge when it came to food. "I'm a vegan, which is unheard of in the city. They said, 'Okay, I understand nothing cooked in fish oil, but no eggs?' I ordered vegetarian spaghetti and it came with ham on it," said Irwin, whose new Technos friends helped her track down the rare vegetarian restaurants in Japan. "It was so nice of them to take me so far out of the way to a restaurant they had never heard of where they had no interest in eating."

New friendships are one thing Irwin and Prior will take away from the trip; new perspectives on their studies is another. Prior, a music education major, plans to teach music and will incorporate the travel into his classroom. "I brought back Japanese folk songs that will enable me to teach a different culture to my future students," he said.

"I was struck by how secular Japan is," said Irwin. "In the United States, students can have such strong beliefs and express them. It wasn't so much that way when I spoke to students in Japan." Irwin said she observed how religious traditions have evolved into the more secular, modern society. "We watched a traditional wedding ceremony, where all these costumes and rituals were based in religious ideas, but it has become a secular ceremony. Now when I approach Japanese religion in my studies, I'm taking that into account."

Sultan, who observed ancient Japanese theatre during the trip, plans to make comparisons between the Noh and Kabuki theatre and their contemporary ancient Greek and Roman tragedies. "This trip gave me the opportunity to study ancient Japan, a non-European, non-Western culture that is comparable on a number of levels with the ancient Mediterranean cultures that are the subject of my teaching. Both my students and I will benefit from comparative study," said Sultan.

All three say they plan to return to Japan as soon as they can. The trip convinced Irwin to pursue the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) before she begins graduate school. "JET will allow me to teach English in Japanese middle schools," said Irwin. "Now I know this is a path I want to take."

Prior now encourages other students to pursue the international opportunities IWU offers. "I'm telling people to apply for Technos or study abroad. People need to go out and experience the world; and travel opens people up to the world, to new ideas, to a better understanding of each other. It was an experience I will never forget."