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Illinois Wesleyan Students Recount Trip to Japan

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.-- They were among thousands of people lining Tokyo's crowded streets last month, watching a parade honoring the marriage of Japan's crown prince.

They saw the emperor's palace and rode the famous "bullet train," as it crossed the Japanese countryside at speeds approaching 170 miles-per-hour.

They went to the Kabuki theatre, a traditional Japanese art form, and they went to Tokyo's Disneyland, a touch of America in the Far East.

They visited the site of the 1998 Winter Olympics, Shinto and Buddhist religious shrines, museums, a ritzy Tokyo department store, and a college campus.

These are some of the experiences of four Illinois Wesleyan University students, who traveled to Japan last month, to represent IWU at an International Week Program at Technos International Academy, a two-year institution of higher education in Tokyo that has academic and exchange agreements with IWU.

For Traci Porter, a senior majoring in art and graphic design from Aurora, Ill., and Matt Fry, a junior from Elgin, Ill., also majoring in art with a focus on graphic design, the trip to Japan was their first trek overseas. Joining them were Elizabeth Dwyer, a junior theatre arts major from Park Forest, Ill., and Ann Hoyt, a senior music major from Menomonie, Wis. Accompanying them on the June 5-16 trip was Miles Bair, professor of art and director of IWU's School of Art.

"There were so many things that were surprising," Porter said. "Tokyo is so crowded and has tall buildings like Chicago. But there are forests around shrines and the emperor's palace. There's a huge amount of vegetation in an industrial city."

Fry was impressed with the "level of organization" in Japan, noting, "Tokyo has so many people crowded together that it has to be very efficient to work. It also has a very low crime level. There is a phenomenal amount of bikes around Tokyo--and they're rarely stolen."

More than 20 faculty and students from five U.S. campuses participated in Technos' International Week, according to Bair. The program included demonstrations of computer and electronics technology and English language classes. The IWU students observed Technos' classes over a range of subjects, including hotel management, travel management, computer programming and graphics, and audio technology.

"The IWU students," Bair said, "liked meeting Japanese students their own age. They got along well and had much in common."

"We developed friendships with our Japanese guides," Fry said. "We were eager to get to know each other and hang out together. In fact, we've already exchanged letters."

The Japanese students Porter met want to study at U.S. colleges and universities, particularly those who are studying English. They also are eager to find jobs after graduation. "They want jobs and independence," Porter said of her new Japanese friends. "They're not looking for marriage right away."

The Japanese and American students, Bair said, "built strong relationships. There was hugging and crying when we left. It was a really good cultural exchange, showing that there is hope for two countries with a history of conflict, hostility, and bad relations."

However, the IWU students did find differences between Americans and Japanese. "The Japanese are not as inquisitive as Americans," Fry said. "For example, if a farmer has a particularly good crop, he doesn't ask why the season was different from others. He just accepts it as a blessing." He also said that consensus is a key Japanese cultural value, while American culture places more emphasis on debate.

Fry was surprised by what's hot among younger Japanese. "We went to Harajuku, a Tokyo district popular with young people--a place where they hang out," he said. "Punk is still big. It's strange. Japanese were everywhere dressed in black leather boots, with colored hair and make up. Punk has been out in Europe and the U.S. for 10 years."

Four aspects of Japanese culture made an impact on Porter: the food; the friendliness of the Japanese toward American tourists; the strong Japanese work ethic (work days, she said, often are more than 13 hours); and the strong influence of Japanese tradition on contemporary society.

Japanese culture, particularly the intricate ritual of a traditional tea ceremony, made an impression on Porter. "I was impressed by all the etiquette and all the rules," she said.

The IWU students also were struck by the affect of World War II on Japanese culture. "We visited shrines, temples, castles, and other landmarks," Fry explained. "And, it struck me that all this history was reproduced after World War II--we were looking at reproductions. In fact, when we were in Tokyo, one of our guides made a special point about a building, saying that it had been built before the war and survived."

"However," Porter said, "while the Japanese like to maintain their traditional culture, many are drawn to Western culture. For example, many Japanese knew about the NBA playoffs and the Chicago Bulls and many Japanese are drawn to American music."

In a display of just how far-reaching American culture is, the IWU contingent was able to keep track of the Chicago Bulls' fortunes by watching playoff games televised in Japan. "In our hotel in Tokyo," Porter said, "there was a button on the television that switched the sound from Japanese to English."

Porter also was impressed with Tokyo's Mitsukoshi department store, which she characterized as "huge, very expensive, and very ritzy." However, the store's most striking feature, according to Porter, is its level of service. "In Germany," she said, "the customer is king. But, in Japan, the customer is God."

Fry and Porter were affected by their trip to Japan.

"I'm not sure how the trip changed me," said Fry, who is spending part of the summer playing guitar in a band, "but traveling out of the country was real exciting--to see a different culture--and stimulating. It gives you a different perspective to be in a place that you had just heard about."

Porter, who is working this summer as a counselor at a Special Olympics-type day camp, said she was changed by the trip to Japan. "I feel more adventurous and I want to try new things," she explained. "I want to travel more. I also feel lucky and grateful to have been selected to go on the trip to Japan."

Last week, a group of 26 students and three faculty from Technos visited IWU as part of a 10-day trip to the United States. The students--12 men and 14 women--were from Technos' engineering, arts, and information sciences (computer) departments. They are studying fields such as electro-acoustic engineering, architecture, data processing, computer engineering, systems engineering, television broadcasting, audio arts, musical arts, interdisciplinary design, drafting and design, computer graphics, and mass communications and public relations.

Stephen Fleming, director of international programs at Technos, said, "The goal of this excursion is simply to show the students something of American life and culture, from the large city to the university campus."

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,800 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. For four consecutive years, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked IWU No. 1 in the Midwest among regional 131 regional colleges and universities in its annual "America's Best Colleges" edition.