

My name is Frank Pallone. I studied abroad at Waseda University in Tokyo for the entirety of my junior year. Before traveling to Japan I had never been outside of the United States. I was also largely unable to converse in Japanese. After a year in the country, my Japanese skills improved significantly. My experience in Japan was the best time of my life.

I studied the Japanese language, culture, and East Asian history during my time at Waseda. The classes included "Paternalism in Japanese Society", "Japanese Literature after 1945" and "The International History of War and Peace in East Asia". The language instruction included rigorous kanji practice. I lived with a host family for most of the year. They are amazing people and I hope to visit them one day in the future. Waseda is famous for its many student clubs and circles. I joined a circle called Niji no Kai for Japanese students looking to befriend international students.

I was able to do a significant amount of travel. I visited Kawagoe, Hanno, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Yokohama, and Kanazawa among other cities. During Waseda's spring break, I worked in Osaka at an animal shelter for a month. I was able to get to know the staff and many of the local volunteers. In Hiroshima I visited the Genbaku Dome and the nearby peace memorials. The visit was a powerful moment for me. I also went to eat at Hiroshima's famous Okonomiyaki Mura. I tried as many different types of noodles as I could during my travels.

Another meaningful experience was my trip to Kamakura. I grew up living near my grandfather in a small city in New Jersey. He was a tail gunner on a bomber during the Asia-Pacific theater of World War II. He lived in Yokohama during the post-war occupation and always spoke fondly of Japan and Japanese people. He was my biggest advocate for going to the country. He passed away in February when I was in Tokyo. Before he died I was able to send him my picture in front of the Great Buddha at Kamakura. He had earlier shown me a photo of himself at the same spot. That was a particularly memorable moment for me.

My junior year abroad, particularly my time at Waseda University, drastically altered my views of Japan. Americans think that the Japanese are highly disciplined, almost robotic. The stereotype is that Japanese trains always ran on time. That information could not have been more wrong, especially during rush hour. On a serious note, because Tokyo is a big city, I assumed that the people would be cold, and that it would be hard for me to make friends, especially since I was not a native Japanese speaker. Most of the people I talked to and befriended were incredibly warm and were happy that I was using Japanese when speaking to them. The interactions I had in Osaka were especially comforting. On more than one occasion, total strangers came to my table at a pub and started chatting. I think my grandfather was right about Japanese people. I found Japan to be a wonderful place to study and live, much more so than I had anticipated.

My time in Japan also allowed me to reflect on my future. During my senior year at Kenyon College, I will be taking Advanced Japanese to perfect my language skills. My senior history seminar will include a major research paper on modern Japanese history. After graduation in May, I would like to get a job in Washington, DC that relates to my experience in Japan. I now know enough Japanese to have complex conversations and to write reports. I intend to continue studying Japanese with the goal of attaining fluency.