

Caldwell Fellows Mayventure - Japan

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Purpose in a Distant Place

This May of 2025, I spent two weeks experiencing the culture and practices of Japan. This excursion was facilitated by the Caldwell Fellows Program, in partnership with the NC Japan Center. Moving between five unique cities, I was able to explore the varied facets of the Japanese mosaic. Ancient Shinto shrines, serene mountaintop temples, and buzzing commercial centers were all easily accessible by way of Japan's impressive public transportation system.

I have always held Japan in high esteem, and for several reasons. The Japanese approach to engineering captured my attention shortly after I took ownership of a certain Mazda vehicle. On the other hand, their devotion to the preservation of their thousand-year history inspires me, especially in a world where technology and tradition seem to become increasingly at odds with each other. I was also highly interested in stepping away from an individualistic society and experiencing collectivist values. When Caldwell Fellows announced this trip, I knew I had to be there. It was my chance to finally experience the environments that shaped the Japanese way of life.



Kiyomizu-dera perches over the city of Kyoto

Impressions, Stories, and Culture

I have many stories to tell from my time in Japan, and most of them will not fit here. However, I have included one of my favorites below.

Basement Ramen

The first full night in Tokyo, I found myself in Shinjuku Golden Gai, a district characterized by narrow alleys and snug dining establishments. Our group of travelers wandered in search of ramen, and we eventually found it in the basement of one of the bars. The restaurant was smaller than a typical living room, but somehow there were 10 stools that wrapped around a single chef and his kitchen. Once everyone's shoulders became acquainted, we dug into the most delicious ramen I'd ever tasted. I was struck by how comfortable complete strangers were with sharing their personal space, in that basement and everywhere else. Such a densely populated nation necessitates a culture where people silently make room for each other. This sort of thing is hard to imagine in the U.S.



A delectable bowl of Basement Ramen

The theme of density carried throughout the entire trip. Seating, buildings, and even graveyards packed as tightly as possible to conserve precious space. Efficiency was king.



Shinkansen, King of Efficiency

Challenge and Growth



Thousands gather to cross Shibuya Scramble

Before I had even stepped off the plane in Tokyo, I knew that there were several aspects of my character that this trip would challenge. My first anxiety centered around big cities. I'm from a rural area, and navigating through metropolitan areas has always been a struggle. If Raleigh was enough to stress me out, then the most populous city on the planet might present some issues. Amazingly, I found myself quite comfortable, slowly starting to enjoy the bustle of commuters. People move through Japan with purpose, and even the busiest crosswalks like Shibuya Scramble have a calm, mechanical nature, not unlike a well-crafted timepiece.

Big city anxiety subdued; I moved on to another uncomfortable pursuit: the onsen. The onsen, meaning "hot spring," is a powerful expression of collectivist culture - a communal bathing practice requiring full nudity. The Western mind recoils at the thought of making the private act of bathing into an activity with others, especially strangers. I wanted to take on this experience to prove to myself that I possess the willpower to step outside of my comfort zone. It was a jarring environment, for about 15 minutes. Once I had committed, I marveled at how the mental block simply faded away, replaced by serenity. Reduced to my physical form, I experienced a moment of unexpected clarity. The halcyon environment of the onsen facilitated excellent self-reflection.



Kamakura Daibutsu (The Great Buddha), representing the Right Mindfulness I found in the onsen

Leaving the Comfort Zone Behind

My time in Japan deeply impacted my self-image and worldview. Given the opportunity to stare down some of my anxieties, I was able to learn to live in spite of them, still capable of achieving the goals they inhibit. From a human perspective, I was reminded of the indomitable spirit we possess as a species in the city of Hiroshima - where determination and courage rose in the face of total and absolute atomic destruction. From a global perspective, I was regularly inspired by the great lengths the Japanese people went to assist us as travelers. The example they set provided fresh motivation to do better, and that is Servant Leadership as Robert Greenleaf described it. Japan connected me to myself and the world at large, and I highly recommend every student embrace similar opportunities to step outside of their comfort zone.



Representing Caldwell Fellows at the Itsukushima Shrine