

Japan, arigatō gozaimasu!

Milena Čechová

(participant of the 30. study tour for European youth 2008)

In October 2008 30 young people aged between 20 and 35 were selected to participate in the study tour organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. I was lucky and honoured at the same time to represent the Czech republic. The reason for organising this tour consists of supporting and promoting the interest of young Europeans in Japan. Furthermore, it offers, during a short period of time, the opportunity to get know better traditional and contemporary Japan.

The study tour lasted 10 days and already before the tour, after reading the programme, it was clear to me that the day in Japan has 25 hours. The programme included both the political and economic aspects of Japan but also areas such as culture, monuments and traditional crafts. On Tuesday, directly after the landing of a direct flight from Frankfurt to Narita, our guides were introduced to us, Michiyo-san and Santaro-san. We got like to them for their kindness and help in all matters we asked for. In Tokyo we have been lodged in Prince hotel with a view of Japanese 'Eiffel' tower. Right after the arrival a small reception was offered by Mr Fukusima from the Department of the European Affairs of the MOFA for the whole group. The reception was accompanied by many sponsors and people from the diplomatic corps.

On Wednesday the morning started by a lecture given by the director of the European department, Mr Okada from the MOFA. I was curious about how the local MOFA looks like, as I myself am an employee of a similar Ministry in Prague. Mr Okada spoke about EU-Japanese relations and generally about the role of Japan in the international field. In the afternoon we went to visit the Imperial palace, the site of the imperial couple. Unfortunately, we were unable to see them. No wonder, you can see them only twice a year, on New Year's day and on the emperor's birthday. The Diet (Parliament) was another official building we paid a visit to. In the evening we enjoyed the performance of classic kabuki theater. Colorful cosumes, changing costumes and symbolic meanings of live pictures on the stage captivated our attention regardless our tiredness and the still present jet lag. The audioguide in English helped us to undestand the theater's message.

The next day started with a lecture, this time given by Mr Tsuneo Watanabe, political scientist, who described the post-war political development in Japan. Moreover, he mentioned in an extensive way the current political situation, the recent change of the prime minister (Mr Fukuda and Mr Aso). He made clear the reasons for the popularity of the former prime minister

Mr Koizumi and the instability of prime ministers of current governments. After this instructive lecture we moved to the Hitotsubashi university. There is an EU center founded at the University which was presented by Ms Shiki. After this lecture we were divided into three groups and together with Japanese students we listened to the lecture on regional integration in Eastern Asia and about the possibility of common currency. It was also us who shared our experience from the European Union and our common currency the Euro.

At night we explored the night life in Shinjuku. After having passed some time studying the network of local metro, we found out how it works and were happy not to get lost in this city of 12 milion people.

On Friday we headed to Nippon Keidanren, the federation of the biggest Japanese organisations, which is involved in the creation of economic policies of the Japanese government. We noted that Japan and the European states deal with very similar problems such as an aging society and a low birth rate. A big issue was the current financial crisis and the way out of it. The afternoon programme was planned till the last minute. We started with Urasenke tea ceremony. A warm welcome and big hospitality were the elements that accompanied us during the whole ceremony. First, we were observers of the tea preparation and then we ourselves could have enjoyed the tea. Unfortunately the time was limited and the following programme waited for us in the Kitajima-Shibori manufacture, a producer company of steel components for airplanes, satellites etc.

Saturday started with a visit to Panasonic center in Odaiba. We knew about the power of Japan with regard to modern tecnologies. However, the House of future surpassed our expectactions. The free afternoon we spent in Akihabara and in Asakusa visiting the Senso-ji temple and admiring tecnical innovations on the market. The evening programme we were invited to the traditional drum concert Taiko. The big drums were in lead of young and old and we ourselves could have tried to keep the rhythm. During The next pleasant event in the company of families who prepared delicious food, we sung in unison karaoke.

Next day we moved by plane to Hiroshima where our host families awaited us. I was with a very kind lady and we decided spontaneously to go to the ikebana exhibition, to see the traditional flower arrangement. In the evening I tried on kimono in a friend's house. It came out that my host mum was a big musician and before going to bed, she played violin and me the piano;we choose the 'Moldau' by the Czech composer Smetana.

On Monday morning we set out for Myiajima iceland near Hiroshima and the Itsukushima shrine which is one of the most photogenic Japanese temples. The weather was beautiful and the walk through the forest where Japanese maples started to get red, was amazing. With this walk our stay with the host family finished, but despite the distance, I stayed in touch

with my Japanese mum. Afterwards we spent the whole afternoon in exhibition rooms of a Peace memorial museum, in an exposition dedicated to atomic bomb and its first use against the humans in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. Then a testimony of a lady who survived the atomic bomb followed.

In the following morning we headed to Kyoto by shikansen, the famous Japanese high speed train. The way passed very quickly and the visit of former Imperial city can have started. First we visited Nijo-jo, a luxury shogun palace which was built in 1603 by shogun Tokugawa who designed it as an official residence. The rooms were decorated according to its function. After the lunch we had the possibility to buy traditional Japanese souvenirs in Nishijin-Ori.

In the afternoon we visited Kinkaku-ji 'Gold pavillon', a former shogun site which was seen in a sunset. The evening we spent in a ryokan, traditional Japanese hostel. We were divided into groups of five people and slept on tatami mats over a futon mat. We all changed our into a yukata before going to dinner. The dinner was full of variety and diversity, endless courses of delicious food. We finished the evening by a rest in warm water sources and gaining energy for the next day.

On Wednesday we moved to a historic part of Kyoto and visited the Ginkaku-ji temple 'Silver pavillon' with a beautiful garden and full of white sand evocating a pleasant zen atmosphere. After the lunch we went to Kiyomizu-dera temple " Temple of cristalline water" which was built in 798 and which offered a beautiful view on Kyoto. Then we strolled down through the historic centre and met not only traditional shops but also maikos- geisha's apprentices. The evening we spent in ryokan situated on the border between Kyoto and Osaka.

On Thursday Nara, a former capital city of Japan, stayed on our programme. A local volunteer guide shown us the Horyu-ji temple with the oldest wooden buildings in the world under UNESCO protection. Our walk was strongly influenced by prince Shotoku who was the founder of this huge complex. In the afternoon we visited the Todai-ji temple with the biggest Budha statue of Japan. This was our last stop.

Friday was really the last day, the early morning meeting at 5:45h heading to Tokyo/Narita, then on to Frankfurt and Prague and home.

That morning we left Japan, the island country which is an eleven hour journey away. You might feel that Japan defines itself as sakoku, secluded nation. Indeed, Japan is an island country with a big concentration of population, only Tokyo has more inhabitants than the Czech Republic as a whole. However, I didn't find Japan secluded at all. It is true that Japan is far away from the geographical point of you from the Czech Republic, nevertheless with its openness hospitality and generosity will stay with me for long.