

MITSUI & CO.

Mitsui Educational Foundation Study Tour of Japan 2014



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1.0 Introduction

I applied for this program during a busy part of my university studies. I saw the advertisement on my universities website and was very surprised at what an incredible opportunity a Japanese company was giving. I submitted my application, not really expecting anything to come of it, but I was super thankful to receive an email before my second semester started. When I received the call from Kaoru that I was accepted onto the tour, I really did not know what an incredible roller-coaster I was about to embark on.

Before this tour, I had only visited mostly Western countries, and the only Asian country that I had visited was third world. I was very curious to experience a first world Asian country and see the similarities and differences between Australia and Japan. I was also very excited to visit a country with such unusual and exciting pop culture. I really enjoy watching anime and it is very interesting to see the 'kawaii' culture permeate into the rest of the world. As I have only just completed my degree and have one year of masters to finish, my career direction and opportunities are very much at the forefront of my life. I believed that this tour would help me make career decisions involving business and overseas work.

2.0 Personal Impressions

2.1 Mitsui

2.1.1 Before the Trip

As I had never heard of Mitsui & Co. before applying for the MEF program, I did not really have any impressions or expectations about the company. Initially, I was sceptical for the reason a company would fund a program like this, but it came very clear during the program. I later found out that Mitsui do not really have a big presence in Kalgoorlie-Boulder, my hometown, which is probably the reason I was not aware of it.

2.1.2 After the Trip

As I mentioned above, it became very apparent as to why Mitsui funded programs like the MEF Tour. I believe that although Mitsui is big business, they truly care for each community that they are a part of. Whether its social issues across the globe, caring for the environment or being a part of another culture, like Australia, it is done for more beyond big business.

My perception of the company was also highly influenced by the people that I met from Mitsui. The first person that impacts us on the tour is Kaoru Curmi, whom was very organised, professional and efficient. She was also very friendly and a wonderful person to share this experience with. Along the tour we met many employees of Mitsui that provided us with an insight into the operations of Mitsui. I was impressed at the scope and breadth of the company operations and attributed this success to the way Mitsui empower and support its employees.

I was really surprised that with how extensive and powerful Mitsui is over the globe, that they are not better known. Even the MEF tour itself, I am surprised that I have not heard of it, given its long history in Australia.

I was also very impressed at how the employees of Mitsui considered the company a life-long career. Most of the employees we met have been working at the company for a very long time and have had the opportunity to visit many places and undertake further study. Company loyalty is a declining attribute in Australia, my father is very traditional and is very loyal to the organisations he has worked for. Whilst my generation moves around a lot and the bond between the employee and the organisation has been lost. I respect Mitsui for providing a great corporate culture for its employees.

2.2 Japan

2.2.1 Before the Trip

Most of my understanding of Japan came from experiencing Japanese culture through anime and 'Kawaii' culture. Over the countless anime programs that I had watched, I had picked up numerous cultural aspects of Japan. These include activities like the tea ceremony, kimonos, onsen and even recognising a few phrases. Although I was aware of these cultural traditions, I knew that I was still unprepared for what Japan would be like.

I also had a perception of Japanese workers as very hard working and disciplined. I was very interested to see Japanese companies up close, and to experience the differences in work ethic between Australia and Japan.

2.2.2 After the Trip

My experience of Japan has reinforced many of my beliefs about Japan and its people. Japan manages to blend a culture that respects and conserves tradition with an ultra-modern, technology culture. I really enjoyed meeting the Prospective Employees for Mitsui, because they demonstrated how young Japanese people still honoured tradition whilst being very young and contemporary.

I was also very surprised at how my perception of school age Japanese children changed. I thought that Japanese children would approach schooling similar to how Japanese adults approach work, being very serious and highly disciplined. I was amazed to see children talking when the teacher was, running around the classroom and making plenty of noise. It was a very interesting contrast to Australia, where if you talked while the teacher was, you would be in trouble. I believe Australian schooling was what I imagined Japanese to be like and I think it highlights how much more similar the countries are than I once believed. Japanese children are just as free-spirited as Australian people are.

My greatest apprehension for Japan was the food. Although I am quite happy to try different foods, seafood has never been a favourite of mine. Despite this, I made sure that I tried everything that we were given and now have some personal favourites that I can not wait to have again. Shabu Shabu was one of my favourite dishes, as I loved the social aspect of the meal and it was very delicious. I also loved Japanese curry and probably the most amazing dish that I sampled was watching the cook assemble an Okonomoyaki.



Photo 1: Assembling an Okonomoyaki

3.0 Aspects of Direct Special Interest

3.1 Personally

The Mitsui Educational Foundation has allowed me to meet so many interesting and diverse people. Although we participated in many amazing experiences, the people are always the thing that I love the most and remember.

3.1.1 Mitsui Prospective Employees

Finishing the Mitsui Educational Foundation tour with the MPEs was such an amazing experience. We had visited and experienced so much, but it was really great to see Tokyo with people that were similar in age and in the same part of their lives. At the start of the trip we split up into buddy pairs and I was fortunate to be paired with Yukiko Nagano (kiki). I feel that I have made a friend for life with Kiki and really enjoyed the weekend spent with her and the other MPEs. I was very surprised at how Kiki's behaviours were very similar to mine. I had expectations that graduate students for Mitsui would be reserved and thoughtful, Kiki broke that expectation and I consider Japanese students to be very similar to the average Australian student. Although, in the MPEs there were some participants that were quiet but I don't associate that with Japanese people anymore, I believe that Japanese are just as emotive and extroverted as Australian people. I enjoyed have my expectations reevaluated because I know that I am becoming a more rounded, global citizen.



Photo 2: Making wind chimes with the Mitsui Prospective Employees

3.1.2 Saito Family

My home stay will very much be one of the best things that I will remember about the tour. I had the privilege of staying with a very large family, a mother, father, grandmother, and four children. When we were waiting for our host families to pick us from the high school I was very nervous and apprehensive about spending time in a family's house. Japanese customs and beliefs are very far from Australian ones, and I was also worried that I would do something really wrong and offend someone. However, the Saito family were very welcoming and generous, and I learn a lot about how a normal Japanese family lives. It was very interesting to see how Japanese houses in Chigasaki are on such small amounts of land and rooms serve multi-purpose reasons. It was a very big contrast to Australia where we have very big houses and giant back and front gardens.



Photo 3: Visiting Matsumoto Castle with the Saito Family

3.1.3 Earthquake Museum - Kobe

Before the MEF Tour, I did not know about the earthquake that hit Kobe in 1995 and I am very thankful that we got to go to the Museum and learn about the area's history. Our guide for the museum was a volunteer that had survived the earthquake. We didn't get to speak to her as much time as I would have liked to, but her story touched my heart and I admire her bravery in showing other people about the earthquake when it would have been a very frightening experience. The effects of the earthquake also demonstrates the resilience that Japanese people show. It is very admirable that Japanese people do not shy away from their history, even if it is good or bad.

3.1.4 Tea Ceremony and Kimono

Donning the traditional Japanese Kimono and participating in the tea ceremony was probably my favourite traditional activity that we got to enjoy. The kimonos were simply stunning and the tea ceremony, I believe, demonstrates a lot about Japanese people. The tea ceremony has to be performed with precision and beauty, which Japanese people value highly, and the respect for the ancient arts are really evident in ceremonies like this.

3.1.5 International Association of Chigasaki

The homestay, the tea ceremony and the high school visit were among my favourite things that we got to do in Japan, and I am very thankful towards the International Association of Chigasaki for their time and effort. They were very giving and kind and it is wonderful to see an organisation like that, take such pride in their country. The International Association of Chigasaki definitely provided me with experiences that tourists could not get and memories to carry with me forever.



Photo 4: Celebration dinner put on by the International Association of Chigasaki

3.1.6 Technology

Japan has a pretty big reputation for technology, and I was not disappointed at all. The Shinkansen was very impressive in particular, because I have to travel approximately 600km between Kalgoorlie and Perth, taking around 6 hours, to see this distance be covered in half that time was remarkable. I was also surprised at how comfortable and spacious the Shinakansen was.

Every time I travel, the small embarrassing things are the memories that stick with me. The toilet and bathroom was definitely that for me. At my homestay house, it took me a rather embarrassing amount of time to realise that the bathroom floor was the shower. And even longer time to figure out how to make the water run on hot. The toilet's in Japan are another impressive technology that more often than not, eludes the typical westerner. At the beginning of the trip, toilet seat warming and buttons for music were really fascinating to me. Each toilet that I visited became another challenge to figure out how to flush.

3.2 Impact on Study area

As I major in Communications, learning cross-cultural communications skills is very important to me. Communication becomes more than simple exchanging of words, rather extensive body language and actions, morphing a combination of Japanese phrases with English, and laughing at the mistakes

of both cultures. As I am a rural person, that lives in community with a large range of colloquial words and phrases, trying to reign in my slang is always something I always have to consider. It is always challenging to think of simplified terms to ensure that it's easier to communicate with English as a second language people. I feel that I attained a good cultural literacy of Japan and I am motivated to learn more about Japan.

The MEF Tour also has had a profound effect on my Management studies. I believe that Japanese businesses provide a very comprehensive example of good management practices and I endeavour to adopt these skills and practices to my own business knowledge.

4.0 Discovery about Australia and Oneself

Shamefully, I did not know much about Australia's trading before this trip, and the MEF tour has definitely sparked an interest in learning more about Australia's economy and relationships with other countries. The presentations by the Mitsui employees helped me to further understand mining in Australia, and I was really interested in this because my hometown being dependent on mining.

It was very interesting learning about all the industries that Mitsui fund and how important the resource industry is for Australia. We are a very fortunate country to have such a large amount of natural resources.

5.0 Further Study and Career Paths

My career path has always been a struggle between leaning towards a creative industry job, and going towards a business driven career. Both paths are very appealing to me and hope to find a career that allows me to fulfil both objectives. The MEF Tour has definitely encouraged me to apply for employment at Mitsui when the opportunity arises. Mitsui's vast networks and projects would be very challenging and rewarding for me. I thrive in a work environment that is constantly changing and flexible and I believe Mitsui's operation would cater that in bounds. The presentations with the Mitsui employees in Tokyo reminds me why I chose management as my second major at university.

This tour also reinforced my personal aspirations to learn another language. Meeting so many bi-lingual people abroad I feel it is a shame that Australian rural schooling does not provide the option to learn a second language. I enjoy having a large list of personal aspirations to achieve, and being bi-lingual is becoming increasingly important to me.

The visit to both the Australian Embassy in Tokyo and the Consul-General's house in Kobe were both very interesting and important places. Having a career for the Australian government overseas has not really occurred to me before, however talking to employees at the Australian Embassy has really made me think about it. I would love to work overseas and represent Australia. Although, I'm not quite sure how my degree would work in this situation but I am determined to find out.

6.0 Other Comments

Something that fascinated me before the trip, and much more after the Trip is how Japanese language uses a broad array of honorific suffixes for addressing or referring to people. I believe it is a

fatal flaw in English language that we cannot express our respect for another person by using their name.

7.0 Constructive Feedback on the Program

7.1 University Selection Procedure

I felt the university selection procedure was done really well. I found out about the tour from an email sent from the university and on the short-term exchanges page on the university website. Although, when I received the email to say that I was through to the Mitsui interview stage, I didn't really understand the full meaning of the achievement.

7.2 Tour Arrangements

The tour has had years of fine-tuning and is hard to fault. Each year the tour suggestions would be dependent on the people on the tour. I would have liked to spend a night more in Hakone on the Tatami mats. I felt it was a really cool experience sleeping on the floor and being in a traditional inn and would have liked to have more time exploring the beautiful nature of Hakone.

7.3 Suggestions for the Tour

The tour was very comprehensive with covering traditional and cultural significant places. However, whilst in Tokyo we wanted to see some stereotypical Japanese modern culture. We went to the Robot Restaurant in Shinjuku in our free time. I would definitely recommend this on the itinerary if possible, it was very exciting, showcased everything weird and wonderful about Japan.

Personally, I really enjoyed the night in Sydney and in Hakone where I shared a room with other participants of the tour. Even though I was exhausted most nights when we returned to our rooms, I would have liked to share hotel rooms for majority of the trip. Sharing a room helps with the culture shock and making better bonds with the other members of the tour.

8.0 Conclusion

As a student that has been on a cultural tour of America and as an exchange student to the United Kingdom, I can attest to how great a tour like this is. Being a tourist and travelling through a country you do not get to experience the full depth of a country's culture. I feel so blessed to have spent time with a Japanese family, the Saito family allowing me into their homes and their private lives, shows a side of Japan that is really rare and special. Also meeting the Mitsui Prospective Employees, two groups of university students and the high school students, were incredible experiences, after all the best way to experience a country is to meet its people. I feel like I have made life-long friends with the other participants on the trip, the wonderful Mitsui staff and the countless other people that have made a great impact on us through this journey.

I am now very proud to be alumni of the Mitsui Educational Foundation because it is such an incredible, inclusive program that allowed a poor, rural student from Kalgoorlie have the experience of a life time. I will definitely be encouraging my peers to apply for the program in future years.