

JENESYS 2.0

Japan East-Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths

My name is Caitlin Jones. I'm 20 years old. I attend the University of Newcastle. I do a Bachelor of Arts, with a double major of Japanese and Linguistics. I also study French.

My group went to Ibaraki prefecture. We stayed at two Japanese inns, which was a new experience for me as I'd never slept on a futon or used a public bath before. We met the mayor, made mocha and soup, visited a sake brewery and watched paper being made. We also visited several museums and art galleries. However, the most striking experience of the trip was seeing the damage done by the earthquake and tsunami, and the progress of the rebuilding. I was amazed by the strength of the people of the area in the wake of such a disaster.*

I originally applied for this trip because, in high school, I was part of a two-week exchange program. Although we had an interpreter, it was still difficult to communicate with all the people I met. After I returned home, I decided to study Japanese in order to be able to communicate more easily the next time I visited Japan. Since then, I'd applied for Japanese trips whenever they came up, but was usually turned down or had the program fall through. Another reason why I applied for this program in particular is because it was partially focused on renewing interest in Japan after the disaster. The city I visited in high school, Kesenuma, was one of those badly damaged by the disaster. I was therefore very interested in seeing how Japan was recovering a few years after.

Overall, my time in Japan was fantastic and I definitely intend to seek opportunities to return to Japan. I would strongly recommend this program to others interested in experiencing Japan's unique culture and people.

Caitlin Jones

* Mochi—a traditional sweet made by pounding rice.

From 2 to 10 December 2013, 80 high school and university students from Australia were among 362 young people from South East Asian and Oceanian countries visiting Japan at the invitation of the Government of Japan.

Ms Caitlin Jones and Mr John Corleto were two of the 24 participants from New South Wales and they agreed to share their thoughts about the trip with us.

My name is John Corleto, a student at the University of Sydney studying Commerce and Japanese. In applying for the JENESYS program, I expected to be exposed to Japan's urban 'cool' as well as the natural scenery that have enraptured so many minds in Australia. However, I left the program with much more. I gained precious insights as to the bonds that connect Japan with South East Asia and Oceania and the role of youth in strengthening these relationships through recognition of diversity, mutual respect and most importantly, sharing in fun times. Current events and the media have always stressed cultural difference, however in making new friends from all over Asia and Oceania, never have I felt more strongly the similarities between young people in these regions and the potential to build life-long friendships.

In addition to this, despite having visited Japan before, it was only in this trip where I felt that I was beginning to experience first-hand the strong values and beliefs that underpin Japanese culture, easily overlooked by popular interpretations of Japan.

Within the eight days spent on the JENESYS 2.0 program, I was exposed to many different facets of Japan, from the much envied street culture of Harajuku, Shibuya and Shinjuku to the natural beauty of mountainous Yamaguchi prefecture. In addition to this, the program allowed deeper involvement in Japanese society; observing natural disaster prevention mechanisms in Shimonoseki, hearing the unique ethos of a sake brewery president regarding protecting tradition through business, witnessing the way that urban dwellers move effortlessly between spaces on their daily commutes in Tokyo and living with a Japanese family for two days.

Experiencing these things first hand triggered important realisations regarding Japan. Japan's 'cool' does not only lie within its cultural exports of anime, manga and music. These are symbolic of underlying cultural characteristics: a

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complete devotion for one's occupation, continuous improvement of one's own craft and a willingness to adapt concepts such as modern business from other nations while maintaining strong links to tradition.

Through encounters with both strangers and newly made Japanese friends such as my host family, the Yamaguchi-ben* teaching bus driver and

the macho-man photograph-posing firemen and paramedics, I have realised importantly that Japan's cool lies within its people: their passion, their curiosity about other cultures, their consideration for others both in daily



John Corleto [right] with fellow participants

life through their etiquette but also through their warmth and humour.

I had not expected that a program such as JENESYS could completely change one's way of thinking regarding the world within a little more than a week. I had learned that all countries in the region have unique knowledge, philosophies and cultural assets to share and that by letting them interact we can recognise their intrinsic value and foster an atmosphere of awareness. In addition to this, I have made lifelong friends. I, without a doubt, recommend this program to other young people in the hope that it brings about greater unity within our generation. My host father in Yamaguchi constantly repeated *keiken*, referring to everything as an experience. JENESYS 2.0 was truly a life-changing one.

John Bono Corleto

* -ben means 'dialect'.