As they walked among the ancient temples of Kyoto, students began, for the first time, to feel the significance of age in a country centuries older than the one from which they came. These fourteen carefully hand-picked students were being exposed, for most of them for the first time, to the Japanese language and culture that they had studied in courses at UTSA. With a generous grant from the Japan Foundation, a big supporter of education in Japanese studies, faculty Mimi Yu and Tomoe Kumashiro designed a trip to lead students through three of Japan’s greatest cities: Tokyo, Kyoto, and Kumamoto.

Just a few steps off the plane, students’ excitement was obvious. As they soaked in their new surroundings, they made many astute observations--and took lots and lots of pictures. As one of them said, “we can probably create a fairly coherent flipbook of the drive from the Narita Airport to our hotel in Tokyo.” As they made their way for the first time through Japan’s governmental, economic, and cultural capital, they took note of the city’s “orderly and hardworking” nature and the politeness of its people. The first stop, the Kokkaigijidou or the National Diet of Japan, gave students a greater awareness of the distinctions between foreign government systems and their own. In keeping with a governmental theme, they also visited the Koukyo, the Imperial Palace Plaza. Japan’s Emperor descends from an unbroken 2,000 year dynasty--that is, he is related directly to the emperor of 2,000 years ago. But as students learned, in contemporary Japan, most political power rests with elected officials.

The trip was educational in another firsthand way--between stops at sites of great historical significance, students ate at various authentic restaurants and visited the Tsukiji Fish Market, where both produce and goods are both sold. Samantha Tello
recalls, “Although we were not able to purchase any fish from the fish market because we would not be able to cook it, we were able to buy fresh fruit and sample fish shavings.”

Students explored Japan’s pop culture at the Ghibli Art Museum in Mitaka as well as during their free time in Shibuya and Akihabara. Students were given full control over their exploration of the Ghibli Art Museum, some shopping, some exploring the interactive exhibits, some watching exclusive Ghibli films, and some eating at the unique cafe located on the patio.

Kyoto, often considered the historical remnant of Japan’s past, is filled with old temples and shrines, but it retains its sense of adventure. Students were able to group up and live with various host families for the duration of their stay in Kyoto. Kaleb Martin remembers his host family as “making an effort to make us comfortable using both Japanese and English wherever they could...I was surprised how easy it was to find a home away from home.”

George C. Wilborn also recalls his experience, “I was greeted by nice and gentle people who were vegetarians and thus I was quite reluctant to try their food, but to my surprise it was quite delicious.”

While each student’s experience differed, all students gained the ability to take public transportation systems from their host family’s house and meet up as a complete group at the main train station in Kyoto.

UTSA has an exchange program with Kyoto University of Foreign Studies (KUFS) whose motto is “PAX MUNDI PER LINGUAS” or “Peace through Languages”. The students toured the campus and also got to eat lunch with many excited KUFS students. Some studied abroad at UTSA or were current UTSA students who were studying abroad at Kyoto University. After lunch, KUFS students were invited to enjoy the afternoon at Arashiyama together with the study tour. “The language and cultural exchange experience is beyond description,” said Neil Kendall, a UTSA senior majoring in History. “I understand Japanese people and Japan better because of this immersion program.”

The group was able to visit Horyuji and Todaiji in Nara to learn about Buddhism in addition to visiting Kinkakuji, Kiyomizu-dera, and Ryoanji to learn about Zen in the context of Japanese daily life and religion. Visiting Gion for a traditional performing arts program which included Bunraku, Kyogen, Nihon buyou, Ikebana, tea...
ceremony, and gagaku was another treat. While in Nara, UTSA students were able to learn about Japanese calligraphy and how to make nigiri sumi from a sumi master.

Kumamoto might not be as well-known as Tokyo or Kyoto on the global scale; however, for those who live in San Antonio, it is its sister city. Students were able to experience the Yumeoso Ryokan near Mt. Aso. There was karaoke and matsuri style games for the students to enjoy after an onsen (hot spring) bath. For lunch one day, students got to create their own soba from scratch and eat it. Aso Farmland is a pay-as-you-go type of resort. Students were given one hour of free time to explore the area. Many students went to an attraction called “Doctor Kiss Fish” where one put their feet into a pool of fish that would eat away dead skin with a tingling/tickling sensation.

While visiting Kumamoto, Eric Trevino, gave a speech in Japanese on behalf of the group at Kumamoto University about his impression on three major points of interest in the three cities that the study tour went, while another student Orlando Cavazos gave a speech when the entire group met the Deputy Mayor Shintaro Maki at the Kumamoto City Office.

Starting out with the 12+ hour journey to Japan, then exploring Tokyo’s bustling districts, followed by studying Kyoto’s historic shrines and temples, appreciating the sister city status with Kumamoto, and growing as individuals, this study tour was a huge success.

Studying a language in a classroom setting, whether it be at any level of education, cannot fully enrich an individual’s appreciation without experiencing it first-hand: “Expanding one’s global perspective through study abroad lets a student think about the world on a larger scale,” said Mimi Yu, Associate Director of the East Asia Institute and co-lead faculty of the study tour.

“While twelve days are not enough to absorb all of Japan’s history, food culture, pop culture, religion, architecture, public transportation, nature, modern home living, or educational system, every student on this study tour went back home with Japan in their hearts.”