

First, I would like to point out that this exchange semester in Tokyo has been an incredible experience, and I am truly grateful for this opportunity. It has not only enhanced my academic education, but more impactfully has given me a lot of life experience. The scholarship that comes with this exchange between the Freie Universität Berlin and Nihon University was a great aid to my student life in Tokyo. It's really something great.

In the following text, I will expand on my life as a student at Nihon University and outline some of the great aspects as well as some of the difficulties.

Before this exchange was even confirmed, there was a lot of work involved in applying for this exchange opportunity. As my studies in Film Studies were not offered by Nihon University, finding another fitting course proved a bit difficult. This was made even more challenging by the fact that there wasn't a clear overview of which courses I could take at Nihon University with my lack of Japanese language skills. Looking back, this was not a big issue, but it required a lot of back-and-forth emails and could have been a lot simpler. From the actual confirmation of the exchange studies in Tokyo to my departure date, there were less than two months between them. While this wasn't a problem, it felt like relatively short notice. Just something to keep in mind.

In Tokyo, I lived in a dormitory arranged by Nihon University. For me, this was the first time living in a dormitory. It was an all-boys accommodation that also housed some other exchange students, as well as Japanese students and high schoolers. Its location was about an hour away from my university, but by Tokyo standards that is more than reasonable. The rather quiet residential neighbourhood of Itabashi felt very homely, especially in comparison to the more lively, at times overstimulating areas of Tokyo. The subway station wasn't far away, and a supermarket was only one minute away (open all days of the week).

The dormitory offers breakfast and dinner at set hours, and while the food level is canteen-level, it is very comfortable to always have food served. This was also a great space to meet other exchange students and catch up at the end of the day. I really enjoyed that social aspect of it, and it never really made me feel lonely. The price for the whole living arrangement, including the food, was more than reasonable and was deducted from my scholarship funds. Fortunately, eating out in Tokyo is not very expensive, and so when I wasn't there for dinner time at the dormitory, or on Sundays when no food was served, it was not a problem to eat out cheaply and deliciously. As a matter of fact, I don't think I ever ate any bad food, and I could fill these whole two pages just raving about all the great and affordable food that Tokyo has to offer.

Another aspect that I really enjoyed about the dorm was its onsen—a traditional Japanese bath. However, the living situation in the dorm also came with certain challenges, or things to get used to. The walls were very thin, so one would always hear someone speaking in the hallways. In winter, it also got a bit cold because of that. Of course, there was an air conditioner to heat up the room, but it's very different from the heaters I am used to from Berlin. The dorm also wasn't the cleanest place, as some other inhabitants would leave their trash bags in the hallways in front of their doors for weeks on end. Except for the cafeteria space, there wasn't a space to socialise or chill together. I think that would have been a great addition to make it feel more homely and to encourage more interaction with other residents. All in all, the living situation in the dorm was

more than acceptable and a really great deal for the price, but it definitely had areas that could be improved.

Upon arriving, I had the choice to either take the courses that I had selected back in Berlin or to take part in an intensive 10-week Japanese learning program offered by Nihon University (JLP). I opted for the latter. As stated earlier, I arrived with basically no knowledge of Japanese, so I took part in the beginner level of the course. It was very fast-paced, included a lot of little quizzes (2–3 a week), and a good amount of homework. While that made it feel like being back in school, it did help me learn some fundamental Japanese rather quickly. This, in turn, made living in Tokyo a lot more accessible.

The average English skills of people in Tokyo really weren't great, so it was very helpful to know a little bit of Japanese. It's not that it's impossible without it, so don't be afraid of that. It's just that it helps a lot to be able to communicate a little and not just use Google Translate the whole time. I also enjoyed the routine of going to the university language course every day, seeing the same people in my class, and grabbing lunch together. It was really valuable to be integrated into the system like that, surrounded by other people also doing an exchange. Another great aspect was the Japanese volunteers in the class. Twice a week for an hour, Japanese students would join the class and help us learn Japanese. This was a great opportunity to meet people from Tokyo, something that, with the language barrier, proved difficult at other times. The attendance rules were stricter than those that I am used to from Germany. Besides the language course, I had another course at another campus. The professor was extremely kind and accommodating to any questions we had. Looking back at it, the language course was a lot of work and involved a lot of studying, which was very different from my current studies that require more individual reading and text writing, yet I am really glad that I completed it. I think it was fundamental to my stay in Tokyo.

Furthermore, I would like to remark on some other aspects of my exchange experience. Early on into my stay, I purchased a second-hand bike. It made everything feel a lot closer and gave me a feeling of freedom. It took a little while to get used to driving on the other side of the road, but what was surprisingly more challenging was the parking situation in Tokyo. It is very strict where you are allowed to park, and often you even have to pay for bicycle parking (only around 100 yen, but still, that's weird to me.) I would say local transportation is more expensive than what I am used to in Berlin (especially with a semester ticket), so the bike was also great for cutting down costs. Surprising to me was also that some restaurants and other transactions (like the electricity bill), were cash only. Some places also require a Japanese phone number, but I got by without one and just having an eSIM for mobile data.

It is also worth noting that the trains don't run between ca 12:30 a.m. and 5:00 a.m., so when going out, that's something to keep in mind. Certain trains during rush hour are also extremely full. While people are super polite and respectful, it is totally normal to squeeze into a full train like sardines in a tin. This was another reason why I enjoyed having a bike.

From what I have learned and experienced, Japanese culture is very rich in tradition and distinct in many ways. As previously mentioned, people are very polite in the way they speak, and it is

crucial to respect societal rules, such as not calling on the subway or lining up properly. Everything is very orderly, clean, and safe. I don't think I have ever felt so safe in a city. Many times, I did not even lock my bike. At the same time, the city can also make it easy to feel lonely, especially if one is not able to speak Japanese. Hence, I was very happy to be well integrated into the university and dormitory system, always having people around to socialise and share experiences with.