



Figure 1 "I love Japan".

Konnichiwa Japan! (Good afternoon, Japan!)

"I think that the journey does not begin after the moment when we go on the road, and does not end when we reached the final destination. In fact, it starts much earlier and virtually never ends, because the tape in our memory is still turned on, even though we have not moved physically from the given spot for a long time. After all, there is such a thing as being infected with the travelling and the nature of this disease is essentially incurable." (R.Kapuscinski)

Traveling is a way of learning about new cultures, experiencing new cuisine, meeting people different than us. When we encounter something new, all our feelings and emotions pass through our minds and leave a trace. Later I always remember about the lady in New Zealand who invited me to her house and let me stay on her floor when all hostels around were booked out or about German couple in Florida who cooked for me a delicious gumbo.

Therefore, the more I travel, the more I realize that traveling is getting to know people, and their beautiful stories, hearts and minds.

After tsunami in Japan in 2011, I was enormously impressed when I heard that 200 Japanese pensioners volunteered to tackle the nuclear crisis in Fukushima in order to protect younger employees from excessive radiation. I thought: "they are so beautiful people and heroes of entire society; they sacrifice their health to help others". That was the time when my dream about the trip to Japan crystallized. I realized that I need to meet and talk with Japanese. I would love to immerse in their culture and absorb their values. I wanted to understand their community spirit, attitude of service and sacrifice. I started reading about Japan and I have quickly become mesmerized by the beauty of their architecture, traditions and lifestyle.

After digging for more details about this country, I have already started "the tape" in my mind. And now I can say: I am ready. I am ready to go to Japan, meet people, engage in their daily life activities and absorb their values with all my senses. The purpose of my trip will be to understand their motives, priorities and drivers for their behavior. My dream is to understand the stories of their life, imbibe their philosophy and the way they perceive the world. Therefore, the plan of my trip will be mostly designed according to these objectives.

I know that patience and peace are two most important characteristics in the Japanese culture. Therefore, I would like to observe how they are implemented into daily activities in Japan. A chance to live in a highly collective society, in which a common good

is the most important goal, will help me to understand the differences between highly individualistic American attitude and group oriented environment in Japan.

To achieve my main goal I plan to stay with local people associated in the hospitality network called Couchsurfing (CS). Couchsurfing includes now over 5 million members who live in virtually every country in the world (including Antarctica). It is a network of travelers who after initial contact online meet later in reality to share their cultures, customs, adventures and hospitality. I am active in that network for more than 5 years and I hosted many travelers as well as I was hosted by tens of them. Every time it was unforgettable experience. Instead of hanging out with other travelers in the hostels, I had a chance to fish with captain in Tasmania, sail Great Barrier Reef in Australia or live with typical Vietnamese family for some days. Every time I became more convinced that "to prevent wars we should let people get to know each other" and "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow mindedness" as Mark Twain said. Therefore, this time I also plan to design my trip around the places in which I can meet the most interesting individuals.

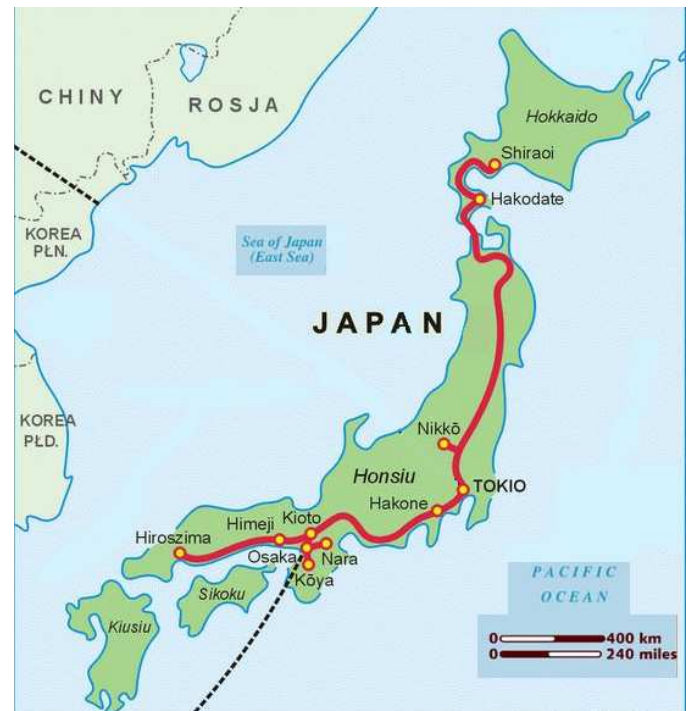


Figure 2 My intended route.

Day 1 - Arrival to Tokyo. Transfer to the city center and meeting with my CS host. Short rest and then a tour to the temple Narita-san established in the tenth century in which I could observe rituals meant to worship the god of fire. Sightseeing the temple and gardens. Overnight stay at my CS host's place.

Day 2 - Flight to Sapporo (Hokkaido Island). Hokkaido is the second largest island of Japan and also the island which has the least population density. Stroll in Sapporo city (sightseeing of the historical brewery). Then transfer to unique seaside village Otaru. Dinner at the

local restaurant in Otaru and conversation with local fishermen.
Overnight stay with CS host living in Otaru.

Day 3 - Train ride to Noboribetsu, one of the most famous spas in Japan. Some chats with people resting in the resort. Visit to Jigokudani where exploding geysers bring to mind hell's atmosphere. Ride to Shiraoi - a town where a museum Poroto Kotan is located - an unique establishment dedicated to Ains - a mysterious ethnic group which is on the verge of extinction. Ains had inhabited Japanese archipelago thousands years before today's Japanese arrived. Conversations with Ains and exploration of their different culture, language and customs. Train trip to Hakodate. Dinner at the local restaurant where guests can learn how to prepare typical Hokkaido dishes on their own. Overnight stay with CS host living in Hakodate.

Day 4 - Visit to a monumental fort Goryokaku - a star shaped citadel which was the last resistance point of Tokugawa samurais fighting against followers of the emperor. Getting to know bushido - the most important lifestyle rules of every samurai, foundations of samurais' ethos, tradition of carrying two swords – katana and wakizashi. Deepening the understanding of seppuku - an honor suicide which is supposed to remove any disgrace from the past. Stroll around Motomachi - historic harbor district which since nineteenth century is a favorite place among foreigners coming to Hakodate. Visit to Orthodox Church and British consulate. Ride through Seikan - the longest underwater train tunnel which connects Hokkaido with Honshu. Arrival to Nikko. Overnight stay with Couchsurfer living in Nikko.

Day 5 - Arrival to the Nikko National Park (one of the oldest national parks in Japan). Tour to the lake Chuzenjiko (the highest located lake in Japan), short trekking in the park. Short bath in the local onsen (a hot springs Japanese pool). Walk around Nikko and sightseeing of Tōshō-gū - a Shinto shrine which serves as a mausoleum of Ieyasu - a founder of the Tokugawa shogunate who unified Japan into one country. Visiting surrounding temples. Overnight stay with CS host in Nikko.



Figure 3 Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park.



Figure 4 Tori Gate located in the Miyajima Island

Day 6 - Trip to Tokyo and visiting the biggest fish market in the world - Tsukiji where the most weird sea creatures can be observed. Short visit in Tokyo Central Business District. Stroll around the market stalls in Asakusa where the feeling of ancient Japan is recreated. Walk to the famous five-floor pagoda and to the most important Buddhist temple in Japan - Senso-ji. Then, a tour around Meiji-Jingū - a temple-garden complex erected as a way of paying tribute to the Emperor Mutsuhito and his wife. Then walk through the Harajuku district - the center of Japanese fashion. In the evening - the walk around Shinjuku - the street famous for multicolor neon signs. Visit to Tokyo Tower - 332 meters tower with panoramic view. Overnight stay with CS host in Tokyo.

Day 7 - A ride to mountain village Hakone in the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park. Contemplation of Fuji mountain (12 319 feet) - the holiest mountain in the Japanese culture, worshiped by all Shinto followers. An overnight stay in ryokan - a typical Japanese inn.

Day 8 - Stay in Hakone. A trip to the Ashino Lake, cruise on the lake and bath in a hot onsen. Train ride to Kyoto. Overnight stay with Couchsurfer in Kyoto.

Day 9 - Sightseeing in Kyoto - a former capital of Japan, full of historic buildings. Visiting Kinkaku-ji - "Golden Pavillion" which is decorated with 200 000 golden sheets. Visiting Ryōan-ji, a beautiful stone garden used for zen meditation. Stroll around Gion - a district of geishas. Learning about the etiquette of geishas and their education process. In the evening - sightseeing of the Kenninji and Yasaka temple complex. Overnight stay with CS host in Kyoto.

Day 10 - The Shinkansen ("bullet-train") ride to Hiroshima. City sightseeing and visit to the Peace Park commemorating victims of the atom bomb tragedy in 1945. Transit to the Setonaikai National Park in the Miyajima Island where beautiful Torii Gate is located. Visit to a Shinto temple complex. Stroll around cameral streets of Miyajima Island and purchase of traditional food and tea. Then, ride to Himeji - the most famous castle in Japan, also called "White Egret

Castle" which is built on the plan of labyrinth. In the evening, return to Kyoto and overnight stay with CS host in Kyoto.

Day 11 - In the morning, the trip to Sagano, one of the most famous and wild bamboo forests in Japan, short trekking in the forest. Return to Kyoto and hanging out with my CS host in Kyoto. Participating in origami classes and Ikebana classes. Later, sightseeing of Nijo castle, multiple temples and museums. In the evening, dinner with my CS host and overnight stay in Kyoto.

Day 12 - Trip to Koya - a town surrounded by mountains, visit to the Kōya-Ryūjin National Park protecting intact landscape and Buddhist temple complex which is headquarters of Shingon religious group. Sightseeing of temples and short trekking in the park. Overnight stay in shukubō - temple style lodging in Koya.

Day 13 - In the morning - stroll around historic temples in Koya. Then, trip to Nara - one of the most beautiful towns of Japan, full of unique buildings which are surrounded by fallow-deer. Visiting Tōdai-ji, Nigatsu-dō and Sangatsu-dō temples and Shinto shrines hidden in the forest. In the evening, ride to Osaka. Overnight stay with CS host in Osaka.

Day 14 - A flight to Naha in the Okinawa Island. Visiting Shuri-jō castle – the UNESCO site. Sightseeing of the garden Shikinaen. Lunch at a typical Okinawa restaurant. Visit to the market at the Heiwa Dōri street and shopping (e.g. sea snakes sunk in the alcohol, sugar from cane growing in Okinawa, local spices, awamori alcohol, miniature bananas from Shima Island, Kariyushi style clothes, traditional musical instruments e.g. three-string sanshin, glass crafts). Overnight stay with CS host in Naha.



Figure 5 Himeji Castle - "White Egret Castle"

Day 15 - Touring Okinawa Island. A short visit to Manza peninsula and the second biggest Oceanarium Okinawa Churaumi. Then, flight to the Miyako-jima Island, the biggest island in the Miyako archipelago. Getting to know inhabitants of the Miyako-jima Island,

learning about their distinct language, culture and customs. Tasting local tropical fruit and typical seafood and fish. Staying with CS host in Miyako Island.

Day 16 – One-day rest at the best beaches of Japan in Miyako Island. Snorkeling trip to the local coral reef. Overnight stay with CS host in Miyako Island. In the evening, departure to the USA.



Figure 6 Japanese woman celebrating "Seijin no hi" – traditional adulthood ceremony.

BUDGET

The costs of my trip will be greatly reduced by not staying in hostels and hotels. So far the budget looks as follows:

Estimated costs:

Flight Houston - Tokyo - Houston	\$1800
Transportation in Japan	\$1000
Insurance	\$ 50
Sightseeing	\$ 200 (16 days x \$12.5/day)
Food	\$ 320 (16 days X \$ 20/day)
Miscellaneous	\$ 100
Accommodation in ryokan (1 night)	\$ 100
Temple lodging in Koya (1 night)	\$ 100
Total costs	\$ 3670

Estimated funds:

Available funds:	\$ 500 - support from the Department of Ag. Economics
	\$1500 - current personal savings
	\$1670 - to be raised

Proposed departure and return dates:

August 7 – August 23, 2013

Important Note: This entire trip will be well documented, photographed and videoed.