

FF Cornwall Exchange to Japan, October 2004

As relatively recent members of Friendship Force, the visit to Japan was to be the first outbound exchange for Peter and me. What to expect? A different culture, difficult language, unaccustomed food. - How would we cope? Thanks to our E.D. Jennie Dyson, who led a pre-visit workshop, we were thoroughly prepared and enthused, enabling all 16 ambassadors, including members from Cardiff, Somerset and Sussex, to enjoy a totally unique and memorable experience. The meticulous preparation and organisation of our hosts the Mie and Tottori clubs ensured that everything ran like clockwork, with outstanding attention to our creature comforts. The two weeks were so crowded with unforgettable sounds, sights and impressions that this report can give only a flavour of our action packed programme.

The Mie prefecture lies within striking distance of Nara, the ancient capital and vast site of many famous Buddhist shrines and temples. We could but marvel at the immense structures and statues, among them the largest Buddha and wooden structure in the world. On the other end of the historical spectrum the visit to Mikimoto Pearl Island was a fascinating insight into the technology, developed there, to produce cultured pearls.

Tottori club is based in Yonago City, set scenically between the sea and mountains. It is renowned for its hot salt spas in which our hosts initiated us into the rituals of bathing. Our visit to the top of Mount Daisen (pronounced Dyson!) on a spectacularly clear day afforded a magnificent view to the sea. The nearby Adachi museum is home to one of the finest Japanese gardens, at whose perfection we could but marvel.

Japan's cultural traditions lend themselves to participation and both clubs made sure that we experienced Kimono wearing, the tea ceremony as well as instructing us in the crafts of Ikebana (flower arranging) calligraphy and origami.

Welcome and farewell parties were lavish and featured traditional food and entertainment in authentic old houses. Visits to two primary schools, where pupils entertained us with music and dance left a lasting impression of their endearing enthusiasm.

Japan is a land of many contrasts with its high tech industries side by side with a history steeped in customs still practised by its people. For Western visitors it offers a whole new world to explore. Friendship Force provides a unique opportunity to partake in everyday life and as we discovered, to enjoy the warmth of welcome extended by the close knit clubs.

With so many wonderful experiences, the memory which persists, is that of the friendly, generous hospitality of not only our hosts but of all the Japanese people with whom we came into contact.

The exchange to Japan surpassed all our expectations, broadening our horizons to embrace a most engaging people and fascinating culture.

Margaret Lundie - FF Cornwall

