

Japan Hui Report

Alice Wang

June 2019

Some of the highlights from the Japan Hui were expected – tasting the delicious cuisine, appreciating the meticulous craftsmanship of the people, and cherishing new friends and the wonderful company of the Leadership Network delegation. There were also many highlights that were delightfully unexpected – including gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation for the Ainu people, seeing the beautiful countryside and livelihoods of rural Japan, and getting a glimpse into Japan’s modern art culture.

In this report, I want to focus on three highlights that really stood out to me from the experience.

Highlight 1: The People

One of my favourite Maori proverbs is the well-known phrase: “He aha te mea nui o te ao, he tangata he tangata he tangata.” My experience with the Leadership Network, ever since I first joined as a young undergraduate student, has always been rooted in the energy, curiosity and character of the members within it.

This trip was no exception. I really loved the co-creation behind this year’s Hui – from the patience and willingness of the ‘Japan experts’ like Corey and Rob to answer everyone’s questions about Japan (and also shepherding everyone to the right destination across Japan’s vast public transportation network) to Sachie’s incredible storytelling and rich explanations of the food that we were eating. The non-experts of the trip also had an important role to play – by fostering a community of authenticity and respect, allowing people to speak and share their stories honestly and vulnerably, and also providing the great sense of humour and playfulness that makes a packed schedule fun and exciting.

Of course, there’s also the amazing effort and work of the Foundation team that made the experience so seamless and enjoyable in the first place – which facilitated the spaces and experiences that helped us create life-long memories and friendships.



Photo: Rob leading a group on a morning walk to the eco-sanctuary owner’s farm



Photo: One of the many laughs and smiles shared during the trip!



Photo: Having fun at Cookie time!

Highlight 2: The Food

It's hard to talk about Japan without talking about food! Every meal on the trip was delicious, but the meal we had at the eco-sanctuary was particularly memorable and continues to stand out for me. The food that was prepared was delicious, of course, but the intimacy of the venue (at the eco-lodge), the love and attention to detail that the husband-wife team put into the food (I remember there were certain ingredients that were specially picked or prepared for us), and the stories that were shared around the table really made this an incredible evening.



Photo: Meal being prepared at the eco-sanctuary

Highlight 3: Old and New Japan

The final highlight of the trip was to see the old and new parts of Japan blending together to create such a vibrant society. During the free morning, I visited the Buddhist temple Sensō-ji and browsed the historic relics of the bustling area, which also included the Nakamise Shopping Street. I really liked how the architecture and features of old Japan provided such an interesting contrast to the very young crowds in the area, walking around with their smartphones and gadgets.

The other experience I had of old vs new Japan was through Yayoi Kusama's art. Yayoi was an artist who struggled for a long time to gain recognition of her art, but which is now a very striking and iconic feature in Tokyo. In addition to visiting her gallery during my extra days in Tokyo, I came across a piano in the observation deck of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building which had been decorated with her iconic dotted prints. Seeing a grand piano so brightly decorated was very striking – and also seeing a piano that anyone could play (and in such a busy tourist attraction!) was also surprising. I couldn't resist the opportunity to play a short piece, even though my jandals didn't quite fit the standard pianist attire!



Photo: Nakamise Shopping Street



Photo: Playing piano at the viewing platform of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building