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2011-12 Postcards

Postcards from Abroad

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## Kyoto, Actual Trip Details

Katelyn Tamashiro  
*Linfield College*

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*One of the gorgeous gates at Nijo Castle.*

We went to many different temples, shrines, and other historical sites while in Kyoto. My friend and I went to Daitokuji Temple, which is the head temple of a Zen Buddhist sect. It was a lot larger than we expected it to be, and we did get lost among the many sub-temples for a while. We visited the sub-temple Koto-in, where a few important historical figures are buried, including Okuni, the woman who is credited with founding kabuki (Japanese theatre). It had a lovely Japanese garden surrounded by a bamboo grove and some maple trees.

On the second day of my stay in Kyoto, we traveled to the neighboring prefecture of Nara (which once held the capital of Japan). Actually, last year, Nara city celebrated its 1300th anniversary as the ancient capital (it was the capital from 710-794). It was a 45-minute ride by the express train on the appropriately named Nara line. We visited Nara Park, which is famous for its deer. A few people did feed them the special crackers that are sold by vendors in the park. There were only minor mishaps like deer slobber on shirts and accidental bites to legs (only a little pain was involved). Within Nara Park, we went to Todaiji Temple, which is the world's largest wooden structure (even though it's 1/3 its original size) that houses the world's largest bronze Buddha statue. There is also a pillar within the temple with a hole in it the size of the Buddha's nostril (the statue's nostril, not the actual Buddha). Many elementary school students were lined up to go through it when we were there. We also went to Kasuga Taisha Shrine, famous for its many lanterns donated by various feudal lords. Later, we went to the "lattice house" of Naramachi (literally Nara town). It used to belong to a merchant, and we were able to see exactly what an Edo Period house looked like on the inside.

On the third day of our trip, we went to the Kyoto Imperial Palace. This was made possible by the fact that the palace was fortunately open to the public only during this one week. Other than that, you have to book a tour through the Imperial Household Agency. The Kyoto Imperial Palace used to be the home of the emperor until the Meiji Era (1868-1912). The palace grounds were very wide and very well protected. We had to submit our bags to a brief search performed by the palace guards. We were not allowed inside of the buildings, but some had their doors open so you could see within. We could not see the throne clearly but it was still impressive. The emperor's garden was lovely, as were the interior of the buildings (those that had their doors open). The decor was somewhat austere and understated, unlike the next location we went to.

We later went to Nijo Castle, the decadent summer palace of Ieyasu Tokugawa, the first shogun of the Edo Period. It was filled with many beautiful, intricate carvings and paintings. Ieyasu must have been a fan of gold, because nearly all of the screen doors in the castle are covered with gold leaf paint, and the outer part of the castle has many gold foil decorations. The castle is also famous for its "nightingale floor." When you walk over the floor, it makes a sound like the chirping of a bird. This was to prevent intruders and assassins from sneaking around. Outside, we climbed some steep stairs to get a great view of the castle and the moat.

After Nijo, we headed to the last sight of our trip, Kiyomizudera Temple. It is a temple famous for 3 waterfalls that visitors can drink from. The falls represent longevity, health, and success. There is also a shrine on the premise dedicated to the god of matchmaking. It was really funny to see so many middle school students praying for love. There were even 2 "love stones" that predicted that, if you could walk from one to the other safely, with your eyes closed, you would easily find love. Of course, the stones were 20 feet apart and the shrine was very crowded. The walk up to Kiyomizudera is mostly uphill, but there are many different shops along the way, so it's very interesting.

For anyone considering traveling to Japan, particularly Kyoto, please consider visiting these locations. They're rich in culture and history and we all had a lot of fun.

-Katelyn Tamashiro