

NII International Internship Program Informal Report

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The National Institute of Informatics (NII) is one of the top research facilities in the field of computer science in Japan. NII is located in the heart of the Chiyoda ward in Tokyo near the Imperial Palace. There are two calls of the NII International Internship Program per year. I applied for a five-month internship at prof. Imari Sato's laboratory and I was accepted. In this report, I'd rather describe my life in Tokyo outside the walls of NII.

Accommodation and Public Transportation

Life in Tokyo is not cheap, and the accommodation is very expensive. I lived in a sharehouse near the Kameido station. Kameido is a calm part of the Koto ward without huge apartment buildings in the eastern part of Tokyo. I commuted to NII by taking a train from the Kameido station to the Ochanomizu station and then I walked to NII on foot. It's five stations on the Chuo-Sobu line and about 15 minutes on foot. Everything was nice except the sharehouse itself. The rooms are very small (4-5 m²) and the common area was dirty with a lot of garbage left by previous tenants. The accommodation was one of the very few things that I chose really badly. If I had a second chance, I would definitely do better. You have to take into account the location, the accessibility, and the place itself. It's not easy to balance all these aspects as the NII scholarship is quite modest. The accessibility is also very important as the public transportation is quite expensive. Almost necessary is the so-called IC card which you can use almost for all means of public transportation. I would recommend to buy it already at the airport. You have to charge your IC card with money first. A typical scenario is that you mark the IC card at the entry and exit gate and the price is automatically deduced and charged. If you don't have enough money on your IC card, you can charge it before the exit gate. It's pretty useful as you don't need to buy every single ticket. It might be tricky to buy a ticket with the right price even if you understand Japanese. Using the IC card, you get a slight discount, but you still have to pay for every single trip. That's the reason why you have to take also the accessibility into account. For example, the Tama area, the western part of the Tokyo prefecture, is very nice. It's a calm area without huge buildings; however, it's quite distant from the center. There are a few websites offering accommodation like Sakura House, Oak House, GaijinPot, etc. You usually have to pay a contract fee (~30000 JPY). It might happen that the sharehouse or apartment looks great in pictures; but in reality, it's not so great. In this case, change it even if you have to pay the contract fee again; the sooner, the better. These websites offer accommodation for foreigners, which might make a little bit overpriced. If you understand Japanese, you can try your luck at Japanese websites.

Japanese People and Japanese Language

Japanese people are very polite and Japanese services are one of the best in the world. You feel that you really get the service or product for your money. In the Japanese language, there are different levels of politeness from informal speech to honorific language. As a customer, you

are always spoken in the honorific language. Services also include, for example, the ward office, where you have to register your address in Japan. The only obstacle you might encounter is the language barrier. If you don't understand Japanese, daily routines like ordering lunch at the restaurant might be frustrating for you. Fortunately for me, I had been learning the Japanese language for several years. So I had basics, mostly passive knowledge, but at least something. For the first months of the internship, I was desperately looking for an opportunity where I could practice Japanese. People at my office at NII were almost exclusively foreigners. I finally found a Japanese language study group at the Meetup website, which organizes informal lessons at a cafe located very close to the Akihabara station. I met there many interesting people, and I also improved my Japanese a lot. The Meetup website is a great opportunity for socialization. Even if you are not interested in learning the Japanese language, you can find there many different groups with various interests.

Japanese Food

The Japanese food is not so expensive and is light and so delicious! There is a cafeteria in NII, which is good and cheap, but the meals are repetitive. You can buy so-called lunch passport, which is a booklet with restaurants offering lunch set with a discount usually for 540 JPY. The price of the lunch passport itself is 980 JPY and is valid for three months. You can visit each restaurant in the passport three times. The lunch set usually includes tea or water. Note that you don't pay tips in Japan. My favorite Japanese meals are the Japanese curry, ramen, sashimi, and yakiniku. Besides the restaurants, you can buy prepared food in supermarkets or convenience stores. The convenience stores are small supermarkets offering besides food other convenient things including umbrellas, newspaper, etc. You might be asked there if you want to heat the food in a microwave oven. So you can eat your lunch, for example, at a park instead of a restaurant on sunny days. The prepared food is also very good, even the instant cup noodles are great! When you go to drink to a pub or a restaurant, if you order, for example, a pizza or sashimi, it's served in the middle of the table so that everybody can try many different things, even the bill is divided equally. Note that sake means alcohol in general. If you want to order sake, then try to ask for *nihonshu*.

Traveling

There are many interesting places in Tokyo. However, after the first month, you might want to visit someplace outside Tokyo. Japan is very clean. I traveled to Hiroshima and the northern part of Kyushu during the Golden Week (a series of national holidays in May), and to Kansai (an area around Osaka) at the end of July. Both trips were great! I traveled by airplane to both destinations. For the Kansai trip, I bought airplane tickets from Peach Aviation, which is a low-cost carrier. The price of the tickets was half the price of the bullet train tickets. Traveling in Japan is not cheap (accommodation and transportation); however, it's worth it. You can also make many one-day trips around Tokyo. You can visit Enojima, Mt. Fuji, Okutama and many other beautiful places. I personally prefer nature, which is much more beautiful than the big cities. Very useful, not only for traveling, is to buy cellular data. You can buy a prepaid SIM card right at the airport. However, maybe it's better to buy it, for example, at Yodobashi Akiba (a large department store with electronics in Akihabara) considering validity and data capacity.

Some Good Advice

There are a few things you should definitely avoid as they are not appropriate in Japan. Don't blow your nose in front of other people especially not in restaurants. Don't take a picture of other people without asking as it's rude not only in Japan. If you have a tattoo, you won't be allowed to go to hot springs or public baths. If it is a small one, you may try to cover it with a patch. Don't skip in a queue as it's very rude. There are many other customs which you should be aware of. Generally, don't do anything that may bother other people.

The internship was fantastic but too short. I miss Japanese people and the Japanese cuisine. I would like to return to Tokyo in future to become fluent in Japanese. The application for the internship was one of the best things I've ever done! I can only recommend.