

Today I had a hard time deciding what to write about for my journal. I already wrote about Christmas and I'm not ready to write about New Year's yet since I don't know what it is going to be like in Japan. No matter how different or interesting this New Year's is, I can't help but think that it can't beat my New Year's celebration two years ago when I lived in France. A lot of people seem particularly interested in France and French culture, so I thought I would write today about the differences between my year living in France and my life now in Japan.

Because I studied French in college, I went to Lyon, France to study for one year. I had no idea what to expect because I had never been to another country except for Japan. Even though I had studied French for a few years, I had problems speaking French very similar to the ones I have speaking Japanese here. At first I was really shy to say anything for fear of making lots of mistakes, and I thought that my French should have been better since I studied it for so long. Luckily I lived with a host family, and I went to school with French students every day. Little by little, my French improved. Even when I could speak French well, it was frustrating because I could not lose my American accent. French pronunciation is very difficult, but even when I did it well, it was clear to any French speaker that I was American. Usually this didn't cause a problem because the people in Lyon were very kind, but it was frustrating when I went to Paris and people treated me badly because I was American!

My day-to-day life in France was wonderful. My host family was always busy and not home very often, so I spent most of my time out in the city with my friends. I stopped in our neighborhood bakery for breakfast on the way to school each morning, and then I read the newspaper on the 15 minute metro ride to school. One nice thing about learning French was that I could read to improve my language skills. In Japan, I don't think I will be able to read a newspaper for a long time. Even though I like to study kanji, it was so much more convenient to read a language that used the same alphabet, even if I couldn't totally understand. I had a few classes every day, and then I would spend time reading, doing my homework or going out for coffee with friends. Most of my friends were international students, but our common language was usually French so I wasn't speaking English all the time.

By December, I absolutely loved life in France. It seemed like one day, someone just flipped a switch and I went from struggling to speak and understand to having smooth conversations in French. Even though learning Japanese and getting used to my life here has been more difficult, I have had a similar experience. I think it takes a few months of being simultaneously confused, tired, fed up and in love with a new place, before I can really settle into a normal routine and be happy with life there.

Christmas in France was a little bit like Christmas here as far as warm weather goes. It was not too cold and mostly rainy around the holidays, but my family came to visit so it felt more like Christmas. At that time, my brother was living in Japan and I hadn't seen him for almost two years. We were so happy to be all together! We went to Paris for Christmas and I was not impressed. The Eiffel tower was not as tall as I expected, and a lot of things were closed for the holidays. I managed to squeeze in some shopping with my mom and we went to Christmas mass At Notre Dame Cathedral before we grabbed the high-speed train to London. London was rainy and cold too, but it was fun to explore a new place with my family. When everyone went their separate ways, I met my best friend from high school who was studying in England then, and we went to Paris together for New Year's.

To make a long story short, we were harassed by lots of drunken men on the street, we went to the wrong place for fireworks at midnight and we ended up getting fleas in our hotel. Luckily for both of us, we can have fun together no matter what we do, or it might have been a bad trip. Even when you can understand and speak a country's language, there are still a lot of difficulties living in a different place. This is what makes life interesting for me. I have much more vivid and funny memories of our New Year's celebration gone wrong than I do of any other years at home in the United States. Sometimes it is the things that would be rather uninteresting at home that make the most memorable experiences in a new place.

This is why I decided to stay in Japan for the holidays. About a month ago, I really wanted to go home but I fought the temptation. I thought if this year is as all like my year in France, that right around now I would get a newfound enthusiasm for living here. I was right! I plan on spending New Year's with some Japanese friends, so even though I'm not traveling to Thailand, Vietnam, Korea or going home like most of my friends, I will be able to enjoy a more laid back holiday season and see what unique experiences I can have the Japanese way. I hope everyone has a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. See you next year!!