

This weekend, for the first time since I've been in Japan, I traveled to a different country (other than the one I live in). I went to Hong Kong with two friends for three days and we had such a great time!

One of the main reasons that a lot of ALTs come to Japan is to travel. Most people fill their long weekends and school holidays with trips around Asia to visit places that they've never seen before. But my long weekends and school holidays have been so full of visits with friends and family from home, travel around Japan and cultural activities like my school's tea ceremony in each season of the year. So while this was just another fun vacation for my other friends, it was a big deal for me to start venturing out of Japan and visiting someplace new in Asia.

I enjoyed every bit of our trip to Hong Kong. It was good timing because this weekend was the famous mid-autumn festival when lanterns are lit all around the city and there is a parade with a 67-meter long dragon made of flaming incense. We filled our weekend with so much shopping, eating and sightseeing that every night I was sleeping before we even turned the lights off in our room. I forgot what it's like to go to a new place and try to do as much as possible in a small period of time. Maybe that's part of what I like about traveling around Japan—taking my time to enjoy the sights rather than getting totally exhausted from one crazy trip.

One thing that struck me was how strange it felt to be in a country where I couldn't understand anything. Of course, most people speak English there, so it really wasn't a problem, and I could even read a lot of the Chinese characters that are the same in Japanese. But hearing Chinese everywhere, especially as the announcement at the parade, or other situations when people couldn't speak English, made me a little bit uncomfortable. It was the first time I had felt this way in a long time, as I've studied the language of most countries I've visited, even just a little bit, before I went there. It brought me back to the first time I came to Japan, when I couldn't understand anyone and felt nervous the whole time. Of course I wasn't nervous, particularly because I was with a friend who speaks Cantonese. But this experience made me feel more empathy for new ALTs that come to Japan not knowing a single word of Japanese.

All in all, it was a really interesting trip. I visited some unique places like the tallest seated Buddha in the world, and also tried a lot of foods that I had never had before—I liked everything! Although there are still many places that I'd like to visit in Japan, I feel more eager to visit other places in Asia this year as well. If only there were more time!!