

# **PROMOS Experience Report**

**Host University and Country:** University of Tsukuba, Japan

**Academic Year:** WiSe 2019/2020

**Study Subject and Level (BA/MA):** MSc Neurosciences

For the Masters of Neurosciences program at the University of Bremen, we are lucky to have the opportunity to do our lab rotations abroad. For my first lab rotation, I remained in Bremen and worked with Dr. Olivia Masseck at the Synthetic Biology lab. For my second lab rotation, I did some research and reached out to potential supervisors. I was lucky to be accepted by Dr. Sonoko Ogawa at the Laboratory of Behavioural Neuroendocrinology in the University of Tsukuba in Japan. My lab rotation lasted 3 months and during this I worked on a project with a PhD student at the lab. I have always been interested in the field of behavioural neuroendocrinology, so I was really excited to have found the opportunity to both experience a new country as well as continue exploring this field of research.

I was not considered an exchange student, nor was I being paid by the lab or University. Additionally, the plan for the project was to stay for 10 weeks, therefore my tourist visa was sufficient, as I have a Canadian passport. Fortunately, I was also able to qualify for housing with the University. It's important with any experience abroad with an institution to try and see what options the institution can offer in terms of accommodation. In Japan, while it is possible to find others to communicate with in English, it is not a guarantee, so in this case it was best to consult my host university about what the best choices would be. Luckily, the University of Tsukuba has a large number of international students and also has housing specifically for short-stay international students like myself. Of course you are free to find your own accommodation but it's important to know that in Japan, unless you are provided housing with the university or institution, it's likely that any accommodation you find on your own will not include furniture or even basic appliances such as refrigerators, ovens, or washing machines.

In my accommodation I had a studio room, with a small kitchen (with one gas stovetop, one sink and some counter space) and a bathroom (separated toilet and shower area, with a sink and mirror with storage space). In Japan, you have to turn the water heater on in order to get hot water and you can control the temperature. For me, my water heater was located in the bathroom and controlled the hot water for the shower as well as the kitchen sink. My bathroom sink did not have any hot water access, which wasn't too big of a problem for me.

It's common to bike around the campus at the University of Tsukuba. My dorms were located on the other end of campus, so I biked roughly 10 minutes to get to the lab. Bikes can be either on the road or the sidewalk, there are no clear bike lanes like those that exist in Bremen. It's also important to know that in Japan, they drive on the left side of the road, this is important to remember when you're biking, as well as when you're crossing the road as a pedestrian.

Transportation in Tsukuba is similar to the rest of Japan. You can buy a rechargeable IC card (Suica or Pasma) that you can tap when you enter the bus. In Tokyo, or other bigger cities, you usually just need to tap once, however because Tsukuba is a smaller city, they often require that you tap once when you enter from the back of the bus, and all must exit from the front of the bus and tap again. The main train station in Tsukuba Center Square has access to many different areas, there is an express train to Akihabara in Tokyo and highway busses to Tokyo Station, Tokyo Disneyland, both Narita and Haneda airport, as well as busses to other regions. Some busses require a reservation in advance (for example: bus to Narita airport) but most only require that you have enough money on your IC card. One thing I noticed was that people don't like to talk loudly on public transportation and it's considered really rude if you answer your phone and talk on the phone while on public transportation. There are many signs everywhere about this on the busses as well, so please remember to respect this rule!

The neat thing about IC cards is that you can use them to pay at convenience stores as well. Japan has many different convenience stores: 7/11, Family Mart, Lawson, and more. At these convenience stores you can find food, drinks, and some necessities if you can't get to a grocery store. You can charge your IC card at convenience stores and also use IC cards to pay at these stores. Your IC card can be used all over Japan for various transportation (bus, trains, metro, etc.). It's just important to remember to fill it up to have enough money inside the card.

In terms of security, Japan is quite safe. Oftentimes you might leave something in your bike basket, or outside on a bench, and when you remember it, it's likely still there. Of course this does not mean theft does not occur in Japan, but generally I found it to be very safe. But of course, you shouldn't take any unnecessary risks and should still be careful with important things.

One thing I can recommend about Tsukuba is to visit Mt. Tsukuba. This is a mountain with two peaks that has both a cable-car that goes to one peak, and a ropeway car that brings you to the other. If you like nature and hiking, there's also various trails that you can take to get to the top. It's a beautiful hike that isn't too challenging and the view from the top is great since it's quite flat around the area besides Mt. Tsukuba. In certain weather you'll be able to see the Tokyo Tower from the top.

Overall my experience was extremely positive and I would be honoured to have the opportunity to return to Japan again. At first, Japan can be quite overwhelming, but like any abroad experience, it only takes some getting used to and developing a routine and you'll be comfortable before you know it. The people are kind, but many are shy to speak English. I wouldn't take this personally if people don't speak with you, or try to avoid you. It's not because they don't like you, it's usually because they're very shy and are concerned about their ability to communicate with you. Those that I got to know in my lab were shy at first, but they opened up. I learned a lot from them about the lab, culture, and I'm happy to call them friends.



An assistant professor and I at the top of Mt. Tsukuba



A group photo of the students at the lab