

My experiences at St John's College

Memories are like music. They are intangible and cannot be replayed identically, though they certainly remain inside our hearts and fulfil us. Each one of them holds its own meaning, whether it is a climactic moment, a period of turmoil or a pivotal event within a whole story. Some are so significant that they are way too meaningful to be kept hidden – and that is exactly how I feel about my journey at St John's College. It is a great pleasure to share my story rather than keep it all to myself. I really appreciate this opportunity!

Hello! My name is Tetsu Akasaka. I spent four weeks at St John's as an exchange student from Japan. Through an exchange programme at my school back home, I got to step into this warm and welcoming community at St John's. Having spent a month in a completely new country, community, and culture, I felt my initial anxiety turn into a desperate longing to return to New Zealand, even though it was only a short stay. I miss everything from the St John's community: friendly and affable classmates, empathetic international students, supportive teachers.... I long to go back.

Looking back, I feel like students can be their true selves at St John's, thanks to the wide variety of opportunities available. There are various extracurricular activities, where students can pursue their own enthusiasm. For me, music was one of them. With the kind support of my music teacher, I had the chance of performing a piece I had spent weeks preparing before the entire school assembly. Far from being a mere display of skill, this became a pivotal moment – when music connected me with students beyond the classroom. Individual effort and talent are never met with envy or indifference in St John's, but with genuine admiration and respect. I was deeply moved by how naturally encouragement flowed amongst students and teachers alike, creating an environment where everyone's gifts are celebrated and appreciated.

It does not mean that I did not face any challenges, though. It was, indeed, a daunting challenge for me to dive into an unfamiliar community, and I truly had the anxiety of not being able to use my first language as a tool of communication. But that concern immediately disappeared once I walked into a classroom. The teachers and friends were so nice and supportive that they made me feel at ease. No one laughed at me for any grammatical errors, and no one avoided me because of my language skills. That warmth and positivity definitely contributed to a very comfortable stay at St John's. I also found the presence of the international students' community really helpful. I was able to make friends who are in similar circumstances to myself (e.g. struggling to communicate in a second language), allowing us to encourage each other and establish a concrete bond of friendship. Thanks to the abundance of international students' backgrounds, I also got to experience a real-life cultural "salad bowl", where I found students' respectful attitude towards other cultural backgrounds.

Speaking of culture, there were some little yet significant findings about how small habits may differ across different cultures. I had a surprising moment in maths class when my classmates noticed the way I did calculations — the Japanese method of *hissan*. My friends were fascinated by how different, albeit efficient, it was compared to their own way of calculation (using a calculator). That conversation ultimately turned out to be a subject of discussion on how different Japan's and New Zealand's school curriculum may be. Although I genuinely think that using a calculator is way faster and more efficient, the point here is that what started as a simple calculation eventually turned into a lively exchange of curiosity, where they genuinely wanted to learn more about how students do maths in Japan. This small interaction opened the door to broader conversations about

Japanese culture, traditions, and daily life. I felt authentic excitement realising that something as ordinary to me as maths could spark such genuine interest in others. It transformed what could have been a simple cultural difference into a deep, mutual appreciation of who we are and where we come from.

In a retrospective, this cross-cultural curiosity was only possible because of the remarkably respectful and welcoming atmosphere at St John's. Because everyone naturally embraced individual differences without judgment, I felt safe and proud to share my own background without unnecessarily hiding it. I appreciate everyone involved in St John's community for maintaining such a welcoming atmosphere and positive attitude towards international students.

Ultimately, my brief yet profound time at St John's remains one of the most resonant memories of my life. Just as a piece of music leaves a persisting impression long after the final note fades, the warmth, friendships, and lessons I acquired in St John's continue to fulfil me every day. These intangible memories are far too meaningful to be kept silent; sharing my story is my way of replaying a symphony that fundamentally changed how I view the world.

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