

Mat Harding

Before Mat started high school he originally thought he might study French, however that year his school was offering Japanese for the first time and despite having little knowledge of Japan or Japanese he decided to give it a try. At the time, Japanese was considered an important asset for the future, so it seemed to make sense for him to pick it up and Japanese turned out to be his strongest subject.

Mat's family hosted a Japanese High School student in their house during his last year of high school and through that student he learnt that he could apply for a one month exchange to Japan during the summer holidays. Mat spent a week at a Japanese summer camp with kids from Australia, the U.S and Japan and then had a couple of weeks in different Japanese homes around the Tokyo/Chiba area.

He then decided to go on a high school exchange after finishing high school and was sent to Toyama. The programme he was on, had arranged for him to have 3 families for the period of his time there. Each family was very different, from their social status to the number of people that made up their households. Each provided him support in different ways, and each allowed him to experience life with families across a differing spectrum. During this time he studied at a Japanese High School, with various one-on-one classes ranging from various facets of language study, to Japanese culture, and Japanese history. He also engaged in regular classes with his home room class mates. Although he was 18 at the time, he was placed in a 2nd year level class and as such his classmates were 2-3 years younger than him. This proved to be a learning curve in itself.

Mat then returned to New Zealand, entered university and began a B.A in Japanese but wanted to get back to Japan as soon as possible. His university had a sister school in Kyoto, and a programme in conjunction with that to allow students to study there for one year. After two years studying in New Zealand, Mat applied to take part in this programme and was granted a place. He studied Japanese with other students from around New Zealand and took classes at the university in speaking, writing, Kanji, culture as well as some other classes with Japanese students. While his Japanese naturally improved, being in Kyoto also allowed Mat to experience Japanese culture first-hand. He visited numerous temples, shrines and famous spots in Kyoto and even got to take part in Kyoto's famous Gion festival, where he helped pull one of the floats. Mat also had a keen interest in Karate and joined the University's Karate club.

After a year in Kyoto Mat returned to New Zealand to finish his degree. Following that he went back to Japan to work on the JET Programme as a CIR in the Sakai City Government. He worked there for a year, and instigated the on-line publishing of a newsletter for foreigners living in the area as well as interviewing volunteers to work on a foreigner help line.

Looking for a fresh challenge, Mat was then fortunate to gain employment working with a company involved in the 2002 FIFA World Cup. That job has taken him from Tokyo to Zurich, Switzerland where he now lives. Since leaving Japan in 2002, he has not had the chance to return, which saddens him, but he still keeps in contact with Japanese friends as much as possible. The result though unfortunately is a drastic drop in his language abilities.

Mat thinks the most rewarding outcomes of learning Japanese, were the opening of his mind to a different way of life, and a different way of thinking. Although currently he doesn't have much contact with Japan, Japanese people, or their language, the skills learnt whilst living there have enabled him to live comfortably in Germany and Switzerland. Another reward gained from learning Japanese, was the opportunity to meet his wife! They met in Tokyo and have been together ever since.



Learning Japanese, and living in Japan is a wonderful, safe way to broaden anyone's horizons. There are very few people he has met, who did not enjoy their time living in Japan. It is a friendly, easy place to be in, and everyday there is something new for you to experience.

Mat in the very centre pulling the float during Kyoto's Gion festival.