

## Ise and Japan Short-stay Study Program

### The Summary of a Wonderful Learning Experience

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These past three weeks have been an extraordinary cultural, academic and personal experience. While our schedule has been pretty demanding, we have attended classes about Ise, Shinto, religious life, folk traditions, Japanese culture in general, and even the economy of Ise of the Edo period. We have also been on trips to visit various shrines and temples, or on tours through the town of Ise or the area of the Mie prefecture, like Okitama with its representative image of the ‘wedded rocks’, with its old buildings, inns and streets, where hidden, very old treasures (works of art) were still preserved. We had the chance to throw a glance at Ise as seen from the sea, to understand its industry of salt-processing and to pay our respects to a beautiful tree, hundreds of years old. We expanded our horizons even more by visiting Kyoto and Nara, some of us for the first time. On various occasions we were accompanied by Japanese volunteer students, and their warmth and friendliness made our outings even more exciting. In the following paragraphs I will try to detail some of the experiences or lectures that particularly impressed me. For more Ise stories than the present summary allows, please be sure to visit the blog written for this program: <https://thoughtsoutoftime.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/ise-stories/> .

In our lectures I found out more about Japanese mythology and about the history of Ise. The myth states that the Princess Yamato, during the reign of the Emperor Suinin, had a vision of Amaterasu telling her that she wishes to be enshrined (worshiped) in Ise. Another poetic explanation one of our teachers gave us was that the name Ise originally meant ‘land by the sea’, and the sea has always had a mother-like quality for the Japanese, enforced by science that proved in a specific way that the sea is the origin of all life (according to evolution theory), and as such the sea was also the birthplace of Amaterasu. As they could not reach her directly, being such a great *kami*, they found it proper to worship her in a place by the sea, close to her birthplace, where people had wonderful, pure minds and hearts. That was meant to be Ise.

Our visits to the Inner and Outer Shrine were punctuated by meaningful explanations of our guide, and I felt for the first time that Shinto was a religion (?) very much alive, while the

Japanese formed a quiet, but dynamic line in front of the shrine of Amaterasu. The harmonious relationship the Japanese have with nature is felt at its best in such shrines, in the pure mountain air, surrounded by very old trees (who occasionally bear a *shimenawa* Shinto rope on them to mark their special character pertaining almost to the sacred). The intuitive, adaptive relationship the Japanese have with the *kami* is also felt in the modern trend of visiting ‘power spots’, where by a special tree or formation of rocks and so on, the Japanese believe they can receive strength and energy, by placing their hand on a particularly old and beautiful tree. We visited many other shrines as well and what I loved most in them was the apparent simplicity of the prayer, done according to a preordained ritual and with the symbolic use of a coin. I admired how there was no need for ‘competition’ among the believers, no need for a show of deep devotion, how the tiny ritual spoke for itself and the hearts of the person praying for something and of the *kami* could understand and trust each other in an almost transparent way.

Another surprising experience was visiting temples like Kongoshoji on the Asamayama Mountain or the shrine Kasuga in Nara, where we could see the still living syncretism of Buddhism and Shinto. In the museum of Kongoshoji we could see Amaterasu portrayed at the age of 16, and in a statue represented the Dainichi Nyorai, the Supreme Buddha of the Sun, with whom Amaterasu is sometimes identified. Also, in the main building of the temple, behind the representation of Buddha, accompanied by a Sakaki tree (the holy tree in Shinto), there was a shrine decorated in the style of Shinto, pertaining to Amaterasu. As well as in the Kasuga shrine, of Shinto origin, there was a statue of Buddha left, preserved even after the forced separation of Buddhism and Shinto in the Meiji period. The presence of the statue there remains an unexplained mystery. Other than that, I could observe the harmony between the two main religions in the hearts of Japanese, through personal talks and my many questions, for which I am ever thankful.

For anyone wishing an authentic and very insightful experience in Japan and closely tied to the Japanese culture, I strongly recommend the short-stay Ise and Japan study program. Aside from the extreme generosity and kindness of the people of Ise, there is also no better way to begin to understand the complex phenomenon of Shinto, to see history come alive before your eyes, to interact with Japanese about their own culture in a given, welcoming context, and, why

not, to begin to understand yourself better in the midst of all things. If given the chance, be sure not to miss the chance to have such an amazing experience!

## 伊勢と日本スタディプログラム

### 経験のまとめ

今回の伊勢での3週間は、中身の濃い充実した経験になりました。講義を十分に受け、その後の個人学習で理解を含め、実際に神社やそれに関連する地域を見て実証する、さらに個人で伊勢市内を散策する時間もあり、神道を中心に文化が成り立つ伊勢のことを理解し始めたところです。

伊勢との関連性を学ぶために奈良・京都へ研修旅行にも出かけました。伊勢市内のたくさんのお寺を訪ねました。特に二見浦の夫婦岩や斎宮は強く印象に残っています。また、皇學館大学の学生サポーターと毎日のようにフィールドを歩きました。彼らはいつも親切で、私たちを楽しませてくれました。私たちは本当に感動し、驚くほど素晴らしい体験となりました。感謝申し上げます。