
IAESTE Internship Report The University of Tokyo, Japan

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1 Decision for an IAESTE Internship

During my bachelor's studies, I developed a strong motivation to gain experiences abroad that went beyond typical tourism. In 2020, I attended a "Go-Out" information event at TU Darmstadt and discovered the opportunity to complete a semester abroad. I applied for and was accepted to Thammasat University in Bangkok, an experience that had a lasting positive impact on me. Living and studying in a different cultural context broadened my perspective and showed me the immense value of international exchange programs for both personal and professional growth.

After returning to Darmstadt, I stayed involved with "Go-Out" and came into contact with IAESTE. The concept immediately appealed to me, as it offered a structured, well-supported way to gain professional experience while living in a foreign country. In 2024, I completed my first IAESTE internship at ENIAC University in São Paulo, Brazil. The program provided not only practical work experience but also guidance, local support, and a community of international interns, making the experience much richer and easier to navigate than an independent placement would have been.

Sharing my experiences with other students and learning about the possibility of a second IAESTE internship encouraged me to apply for the position in Japan. I chose this opportunity not only for the professional experience and the high-quality mentoring it offers, but also to immerse myself in the people, culture, cuisine, and natural beauty of Japan. The research topic of the internship perfectly aligns with my career goals, as I plan to focus on research in my professional future.

Overall, IAESTE internships provide a unique combination of professional development, cultural exchange, and personal growth, making them invaluable to me and for anyone interested in working in an international environment.



Figure 1 - Flight to Japan

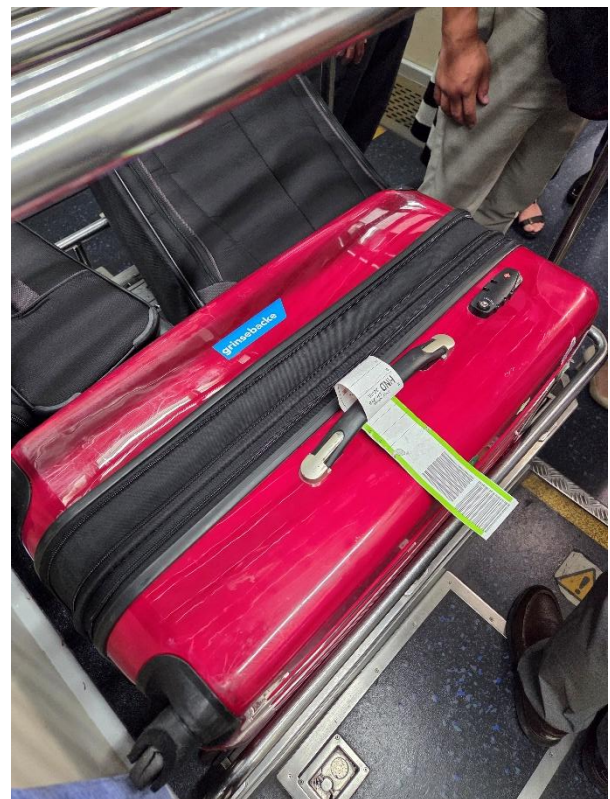


Figure 2 - Arrival in Tokyo

2 Accommodation

Arrangement

During my internship I lived in a shared house together with other internationals. The arrangement and payment of the room was done by my hosting company, the university of Tokyo. For me this was very convenient, as I had not to do a single thing regarding the organization of the accommodation before I arrived in Japan. One week before my flight, an employee from the housing agency reached out to me and we arranged a meeting spot and time on the day of my arrival. We met at the local metro station and went from there to the house. He introduced me to the facilities, and I had to sign the contract afterwards. The whole process worked very good without any issues.

Location

The house I lived in is located between the Nishi-Nippori Station and the Sendagi Station. For me this was very suitable, as I had only short walking distances to the Skytrain (JR-Lines) and the Metro. Furthermore, I could easily walk to the University as it was only 25min by foot. Apart from short commuting times, the area was very pleasant to live in. There were a lot of cheap restaurants, supermarkets and cozy shopping streets around. To reach other vibrant areas in Tokyo it took me around 30-45 minutes by public transport, which is very good for a city this size.

Living in the house

As I mentioned before, I lived together in the house with other Internationals. It is a two-story building with ten separate bedrooms, two bathrooms, two separate showers and a spacious kitchen area. For me it was more of a benefit to live together with nine other people rather than it bothered me. All the Internationals stayed in Japan for longer and gave me tips for the daily life and travelling. The downside was that the room was very minimalistic and small, which is quite normal for student standards in Tokyo. All-In-All, the accommodation was very convenient for my stay of two months but wouldn't be too comfortable for a permanent stay in Tokyo.



Figure 3 - The street I lived in - Sendagi, Tokyo

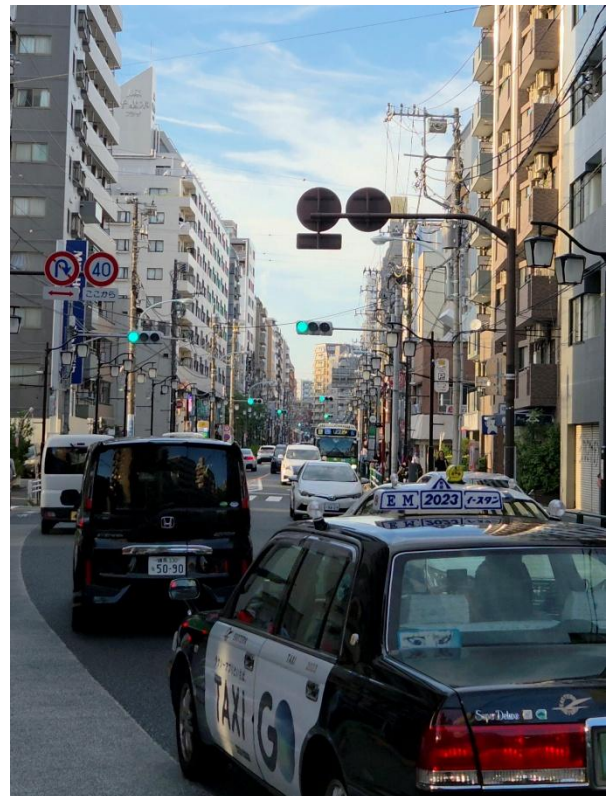


Figure 4 - My way to the University

3 Work at the University of Tokyo

On my first day of my internship, I got accompanied by a member from IAESTE Tokyo. It was very nice to get to know each other in person and take the bus together to the university. Together we figured out where to go and met my supervisors from the university. This was already a good start and great support from IAESTE!

First day

After arriving at the University of Tokyo on my first day, I received a warm-hearted welcome introduction by the exchange coordinator of the university. She explained to me a lot about the internship procedure, the campus facilities and how to commute by public transportation inside of Tokyo. Afterwards, I got to know my supervising professor and researchers of the Institute of Building Material Engineering (BME). The communication between us was constantly very good during the whole internship period. In the beginning we discussed the ongoing research projects and my educational background.

Work environment

During the internship I worked together with two researchers in the field of concrete carbonation and geopolymers, which are highly interesting to me. After our first meeting I've got a detailed tour of the lab facilities and got introduced to the rest of the team working in the institute. I got a permanent desk in the open office room, where I could sit and work. It was very pleasant to sit in a room with other researchers to have some good conversations about the work, culture, hobbies etc.

I connected very good and fast with the team members and we enjoyed several lunch and dinner together. The office team also organized two evening events (one in the beginning and one in the end of my internship), which were very good to get to know all team members and to get socially included. I felt welcomed and very comfortable around my colleagues during the whole internship duration.

I got a student ID card as well, which gave me discounts and access to the university sports facilities. I tried it after paying a small fee and I'd say it's definitely worth a go.

Projects – Calcium Carbonate Polymorphs & Geopolymers

Due to the short duration of the internship, I assisted other researchers in their work without having an own project. In my opinion, this was very good to get detailed insights into practical research work in the lab. I've got to know different methods of extracting polymorphs and different devices and machines to analyze them. To mention some devices, we used TAM Air (Isothermal Calorimeter) & XRD (X-Ray Diffraction).

The analyzation of these polymorphs is important to understand the process and further properties of carbonated concrete. We extracted the polymorphs calcite, vaterite and aragonite in the lab with different techniques. To achieve high quality and a high content of the polymorphs mentioned we had to rerun the extractions several times until we reached our set target. Afterwards, we had to dry and grind the polymorphs to prepare for the XRD tests.

XRD is a widely used technique for determining the atomic structure of crystalline materials. In XRD, X-rays are directed at a sample, where they interact with the regularly spaced planes of atoms in the crystal lattice. At specific angles, the reflected X-rays interfere constructively, producing diffraction peaks according to Bragg's Law. Each crystalline material produces a characteristic diffraction pattern, which serves as a "fingerprint" for identifying its structure. Calcium carbonate exists in multiple polymorphs, including calcite, aragonite, and vaterite, each with a distinct arrangement of atoms. These differences result in unique XRD peak positions and intensities for each polymorph. By comparing the measured diffraction pattern with reference data, the specific polymorph(s) present in the sample can be identified.

The following pictures give some impressions about the campus, my colleagues and some insights to the lab work.



Figure 5 - Me in front of the university building



Figure 6 - Library of the university

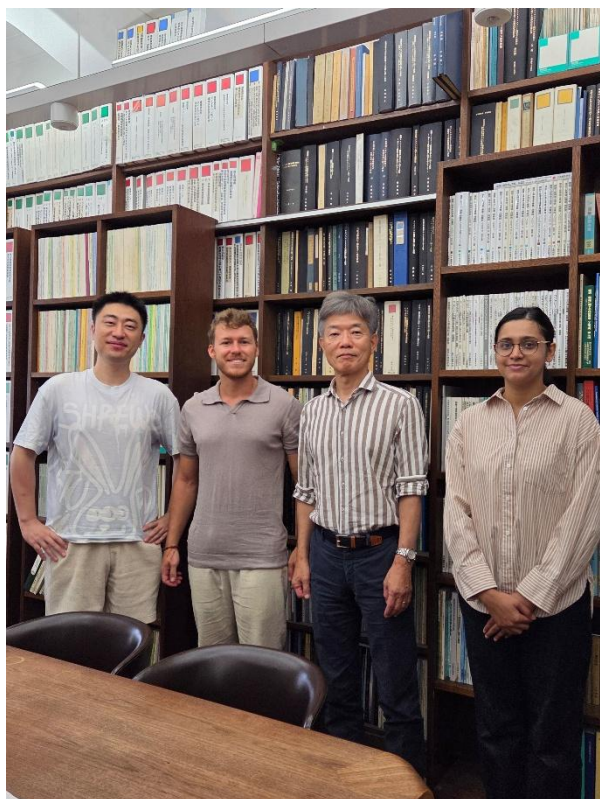


Figure 7 - Me with the professor and researchers



Figure 8 - Lab work on calcium carbonate polymorphs

4 Tokyo

Tokyo, with an estimated population of 37 million people, is considered the most populated metropolitan region in the world. At times I felt this overwhelming size, but in most cases, I did not have the impression of being in the world's biggest city.

The main difference for me, compared to other big cities and countries I have visited, is the considerate and polite manner of the whole community. Regardless of age, appearance, or social status, everyone I met or observed in public behaved neither recklessly nor selfishly, and never egoistic or arrogant. On the streets and in public transportation, there was no noise or trash; everything was orderly and calm. I never saw people arguing or in conflict, and therefore I never felt uncomfortable in public places.

The famous and vibrant areas of Tokyo were, of course, very crowded and full of large commercial screens. The city offers an incredible variety of sights: numerous religious sites with shrines, shopping streets, museums of all kinds, and lively nightlife areas, just to mention a few. One thing to keep in mind is that public transport does not operate between midnight and 5 a.m., even on weekends. So you need to plan your evenings carefully to avoid expensive taxi rides. In the beginning the variety of opportunities appealed to me, but after some weeks I felt the need for more comfort and quietness. That is when I discovered many calm areas, such as:

- **Shinjuku National Garden**
- **Inokashira Park & Kichijōji Area**
- **Odaiba**
- **Lightshow at the Governmental Building (free, every evening)**

Another highlight in Tokyo for me was the Imperial Palace and the jogging path around it. Every day many people gather here to run together along the same paths, which felt very refreshing in such a large city where one can easily feel lonely.

Of course, another important topic in daily life is food and how to get it. In Japan, it is very popular either to eat out in restaurants or to buy takeaway food from supermarkets. Many restaurants are designed for quick dining where you eat your dish and then leave. This also explains why food is generally reasonably priced. A dinner in a restaurant is around €6.50, while buying a meal at the supermarket is about €4. I also cooked for myself but realized that it does not really save money, as supermarket prices are not much cheaper than in Germany. Fruits, in particular, are quite expensive in Japan and are consumed less than in other countries I have visited. Because of this, I really enjoyed trying many new dishes from Japanese cuisine without spending too much money. The variety of international restaurants was also impressive: dishes from China, India, Thailand, or Korea were available at the same price as local food.

Another popular way of eating is going to an *izakaya*. I was very happy that my colleagues introduced me to these places, and we went there several times for dinner. At an *izakaya*, you can order a wide variety of Japanese small dishes and drinks. Usually, you sit together with friends, colleagues, or family and share all the dishes. These evenings were very special to me, as I was introduced to Japanese cuisine by locals and could exchange thoughts and experiences with them in a very cozy environment.

I am very glad that I had the opportunity to live in this megacity for two months. It introduced me to a way of living I had not experienced before. On one hand, I could enjoy the endless variety of things to do and see, but on the other hand, I realized that I feel more comfortable in smaller cities and less densely populated environments. Of course, this always depends on the individual.



Figure 9 - Shrine at Ueno-Park by night



Figure 10 - Shibuya by night



Figure 11 - Typical Street with restaurants



Figure 12 - Tori of the Meiji-Jingu Shrine

5 Weekend trips

In Tokyo there are so many opportunities and areas to explore that you could easily spend two months without ever leaving the city. For me, however, it was very refreshing to explore different parts of Japan on the weekends. I really enjoyed taking the train or renting a car to visit nature or discover other cities. The train system worked very well and is quite straightforward. For almost all trains and buses, you only need one rechargeable card (called *Suica*), which can be topped up at many stations. For the fast trains, however, you need a reservation, and the prices are comparable to long-distance trains in Germany.

Below I would like to mention some of my favorite places that I was able to visit during weekends or public holidays:

- **Nikkō** (beautiful shrines and nature)
- **Hiroshima** (A-Bomb Dome & Peace Memorial Museum)
- **Osaka** (second-largest city in Japan, 10th largest in the world)
- **Kyoto** (former capital of Japan with many calm religious sites)
- **Izu Peninsula** (impressive waterfalls and coastal rock formations)

For the trip to Izu, we rented a car, which is both simple and relatively inexpensive in Japan. The requirements are an international driving license (applied for in your home country) and a Japanese translation of your license (which can be obtained in Japan within 2–3 days). You also need to be aware of driving on the left side of the road, but since driving behavior in Japan is not aggressive, it felt very comfortable.

Accommodation was also quite affordable. On average, hostels with shared bedrooms cost around €20 per night. However, be aware that some rooms are equipped with “Japanese-style beds,” which are basically very thin mattresses laid directly on the floor.



Figure 13 - View on Mount Fuji and Pagoda

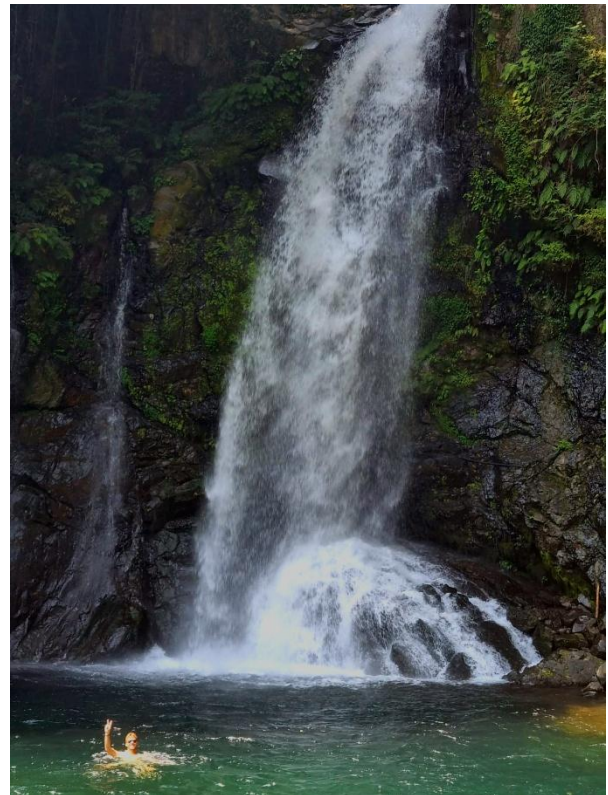


Figure 14 - Waterfall on Izu



Figure 15 - Buddhist temple in Kyoto



Figure 16 - Shinkansen Bullet Train Kyoto



Figure 17 - Hiroshima Castle



Figure 18 - Ramen with Gyoza

6 IAESTE Tokyo

I am very grateful that IAESTE Tokyo put so much effort into making the stay of incoming interns comfortable. On my first day of work, I was accompanied by an IAESTE member, which made me feel confident and secure. They also organized several social events for the interns. Fortunately, I was able to take part in the International Cooking Event, where interns prepared special dishes from their home countries. There I met many kind and welcoming people with whom I could quickly connect. After the event, we spent a lot of time together and traveled through the country or explored Tokyo. Without this event, I would probably never have built such strong connections to other internationals. This was one of the most positive aspects of my stay: building international friendships and discovering new things together.

A big thank you to IAESTE Tokyo for the excellent organization!



Figure 19 - Me and the exchange coordinator



Figure 20 - IAESTE Cooking Event

7 Conclusion

This internship was, once again, proof of how valuable IAESTE internships are. Not only for the participants, but also for the institutions and environments in which they work. It was a pleasure and an honor for me to work at the University of Tokyo alongside colleagues from all over the world. We had a wonderful time together both at and after work. I learned a lot about intercultural behavior, differences, and similarities. I have never regretted my decision to take this internship. Even though there were some overwhelming days, I overcame the challenges by realizing how many opportunities I had to make the best of my time abroad. I am deeply grateful to the University of Tokyo, IAESTE Japan, and IAESTE Germany for their support and excellent organization.

I hope I was able to provide some helpful insights into my IAESTE internship and wish you all the best in your application process and time abroad! If you are still considering applying, I can assure you that you will lose nothing. No matter which country or city you choose, the experience will be invaluable. Just dare to do it!