

Japanese Learning at Its Finest in Fukuoka

By Katie O'Hara

Every Friday afternoon at a Japanese language school in the Tenjin district of Fukuoka, a small graduation ceremony takes place. Departing students are presented with a certificate of their achievements, and each one in turn gives a speech in Japanese. Some of the speeches are two words long, others are two minutes; some are written down ahead of time and some are improvised on the spot. But they all have something very important in common: they show that this student has learned something in the time they've spent here.

Genki Japanese and Culture School, or GenkiJACS, welcomes students every Monday and says goodbye to others every Friday. Students take classes for a period from two weeks to as long as they'd like, and are grouped into small classes—no more than seven students, though mine were usually no more than four—based on their current Japanese ability. This combination of weekly courses and instruction at all ability levels provides a lot of flexibility to travelers and language-learners. Whether your visit to Japan is focused entirely on learning or you're interested in integrating some classes into a longer trip, GenkiJACS can meet your needs any time of the year.

The School

I first found out about GenkiJACS through the forums of a *kanji*-learning website, a whole two years before I was finally able to attend. On my first day of classes I was nervous but excited, and after a brief introduction to the need-to-know things at the school—leave your shoes on the shelves by the entrance; restrooms are down the hall; the lounge has water, tea, and coffee and here is your own cup for you to use—I waited with the other new students that day for my level placement interview so I could be put in the right class.

You fall into the school's routine easily at GenkiJACS. Classes are fun and balanced, with a good mix of grammar, reading/writing, and listening, while the small class sizes mean every student gets a chance to practice speaking. The standard course schedule is four 50-minute classes a day, with two in the morning, two in the afternoon, and a break in the middle for lunch (usually a quick trip to a local restaurant, or an even quicker trip to the supermarket downstairs). Classes start late enough that you can wake up at a comfortable time and end early enough to spend the evenings enjoying the rest of Fukuoka.

GenkiJACS, however, offers far more than just the standard course. While every student takes the basic 20 classes each week, you can also take extra, specialized classes suited to your needs and interests. Courses dedicated to

conversation skills or Japanese language exams are available, if you want to focus more on those areas. Students who like their language learning in an active cultural context have options as well: the Pop Culture and Traditional Culture courses.

These two unique courses offer hands-on activities and trips where students can experience different aspects of Japanese culture during their stay. Some things you can expect to participate in on the Traditional Culture course include calligraphy, tea ceremony, and Japanese cooking, as well as trips to culturally significant places such as shrines and *onsen*. Students in the Pop Culture course use media and technology in their classes, write their own manga, and take trips out into the real world to talk with local residents. Both of these courses, as well as the summer-only Japanese Plus Activities course, are a great way to learn the language while getting out and about, taking in the culture and putting what you're learning to good use.

Outside the Classroom

Even if you decide not to take the culture classes, GenkiJACS provides many extra-curricular activities for its students. My first stay at the school (many students end up returning, and I was one of them) was in late spring, and fell over the week of national holidays known as Golden Week. No classes were scheduled that week, but the school organized an overnight trip to a neighboring prefecture, Kumamoto, for one of the weekends. The trip, which included learning how to make noodles at a soba restaurant, an optional visit to a unique *onsen*, and stops at Mt. Aso and Kumamoto Castle, was one of the highlights of my entire six weeks at the school. When I went back to GenkiJACS for my second stay, I was there from late fall through winter and got to tour Fukuoka while it was covered in bright Christmas lights. On Christmas morning the students gathered at a local shrine to make *mochi*, and after New Year's we learned all about that holiday's special traditions in Japan.

All this is to say that while there is always something to do, the particular activities you can participate in will depend somewhat on the time of year, so if there's something you're really interested in contact the school so you can be sure not to miss it. (And if all else fails, go more than once! Returning students get a discount, after all.) Year-round, though, GenkiJACS has special school events on Friday nights. Trips to restaurants, karaoke, and parties at the school are all common activities, and are all great ways to spend time with your classmates.

There is also the whole of Fukuoka City to explore, and if you're not sure where to start you can definitely get some advice from GenkiJACS staff or your fellow students. The city is easy to get around in thanks to trains and buses, and Fukuoka has something for everyone, from attractions like gardens and museums to shopping of all kinds, a healthy night life, and, of course, tons of food to try. Restaurants are everywhere you turn, and while

Fukuoka is known for its ramen and food stalls, or *yatai*, they are far from the only options. If you happen to like sushi, there is at least one conveyor-belt sushi restaurant within walking distance of GenkiJACS, and they offer lunch prices.

Accommodation

At the end of a day filled with classes and hanging out with your friends in town, you'll head back to your dorm, apartment, or host family's house. The different types of accommodation offered by GenkiJACS vary in cost, distance from the school, and other factors. The dormitory I stayed in during my first visit included a small room, attached bathroom, and a balcony with a view of far-off mountains. The dorms had a cafeteria and a kitchen, both of which I used, though not often. My particular dorm was a short train ride away from the school, but some are further away.

Homestays are a popular option with students, because staying with a Japanese family offers more exposure to the culture, provides chances to use and improve your language ability, and is a great way to make friends. With a homestay, the commute to and from school is a little longer than with most of the dorms. The options closest to the school are apartments, either private apartments or those shared with city residents. I was in a shared apartment during my second time as a student, and it was only a few blocks away from the school. Very convenient!

Getting There

Most airlines in other countries do not fly directly into Fukuoka International Airport, so you will likely be flying into Tokyo or another larger city first. Flying from there to Fukuoka is the fastest and simplest way to get to the city, and makes the most sense if you're heading to Fukuoka when you first get to Japan. If you're spending some time anywhere else first, though, you have the option of taking a train into the city. The bullet train, or *shinkansen*, is an amazing, scenic, and very comfortable way to travel, and if you can manage it I highly recommend trying it at least once.

Even if you do take a plane into Fukuoka, you'll be using the train to get to your accommodation. This is a very important note: many of the subway stations in Fukuoka do not have elevators. You will be carrying your luggage up and down stairs. Lots of stairs. Pack accordingly. And of course, don't forget that you'll most likely be going back home with more than you left with, so having some extra room in your suitcase (or a collapsible duffel bag you can pull out for the return trip) is probably a good idea.

#1 Tip for Getting the Most Out of Your Time at GenkiJACS

Make friends.

Yes, you're at a Japanese language school to learn Japanese, and focusing on your studies is important—but the school has more to offer than just teaching you Japanese. The majority of GenkiJACS students are from the United States, Europe, and Australia, with the remainder from a variety of other countries. So, the cultural experiences available through GenkiJACS are twofold: not only are you in Japan, learning the language, meeting Japanese people and getting to know them, but you're also surrounded by fellow language-learners from cultures all over the world. Take advantage of it. The people you meet, both in school and out, and the time you spend with them will end up being some of your best memories from your trip to Fukuoka. Don't just take my word on that, though; contact GenkiJACS to start planning your own trip today, and find out for yourself!