Japan
November 30 - December 3
Day 1

Since some of our classes ended already, we had this perfect stretch of time for traveling. We started by taking a red-eye flight on Thursday and arrived in Tokyo at 5AM.

Shibuya

Our first stop was Shibuya, one of Tokyo’s most colorful and busy districts, packed with shops and restaurants.

PC: Karen Shen

The metro was really nice! I loved Japan because everything was so clean and the people were very polite. When we purchased our metro passes, the vendor bowed and gave us water bottles.

...except no one was really up at 7AM XD. Most of the stores didn’t open until 10 or 11AM. We decided to return at night when it was busier.

We literally ate in individual booths!

One of the few places that was open was a ramen chain called Ichiran. We ordered our food from this machine and took our ticket to our booth.

The chef took the ticket, delivered the meal through the window, and rolled down the bamboo curtain. It was a unique experience!
We then took the metro to Shinjuku, a major commercial and administrative center and home to Shinjuku Station, the busiest railway station in the world.

**Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden**

Our first stop was Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden. It just happened to be that late November and early December were the best times to visit the garden.

While waiting for the garden to open, we struck up a conversation with a lady walking her dogs.

The leaves were gorgeous this time of year!
Lunch

Justin discovered a Michelin-rated restaurant called Nakajima that was close to the garden. Their lunch menu consisted of only sardines! Although I’m not a huge sardine fan, we decided to give it a try, especially since each dish was $8 USD! All the dishes we ordered tasted great!

Nakajima didn’t open until 11:30AM, so we stopped for some coffee and lattes at Segafredo.

Thankfully, we lined up 30 min before they opened because the line got long.

Since it was so busy, we shared the table with a nice couple.

Furai (breaded and fried sardines)

Sashimi sardines

Nizakana (simmered sardines)
Harajuku

After lunch, we took the metro to Harajuku and walked to Takeshita Street, which is known for their fashion boutiques, cafes, and restaurants.

Bought a selfie stick!

We went back to Shibuya Crossing to see how the area looked at night.

The intersection was pretty vacant until...

...pedestrians could cross.

Shibuya definitely comes alive at night!
Dinner

Before dinner, we went to a cake café in Shibuya called HARBS. Since we were staying in Ginza for the night, we decided to have dinner at a local revolving sushi bar.

The Miles Cake, a fruit layered crepe cake, was delicious!

We also ordered an amazing chocolate mousse cake.

Sushi Nemuro Hanamaru Ginza
A friendly guy from Canada joined us for dinner :)

We selected the sushi we wanted from a conveyor belt. The color of the plate determined how much the sushi cost.
Ginza
We stayed at the Prime Pod Ginza Tokyo which is a capsule hotel. The place was clean, cozy, and the staff was polite.

Karen was in a bottom capsule.

I was in a top capsule.

All the females lived on the same floor.

Karen was in a bottom capsule.

Our rooms came equipped with a comfortable bed, hangers, safe, outlets, and a TV. Literally, everything was within arm’s reach!

Day 2
Tsukiji Fish Market
The Tsukiji fish market, the largest wholesale fish and seafood market in the world, was only a five minute walk from our hotel! We wanted to catch the famous tuna fish auction that occurred from 3AM - 6AM, so we were up and ready to go by 5AM.

There were a lot of small fish shops open, even at this early hour.

We searched in vain for the tuna auction until an officer informed us that the auction was closed to the public until Jan. 14. :(
Tokyo Skytree

We ate breakfast at a place near our hotel, and then set out for the Tokyo Skytree. At 634 meters, the Tokyo Skytree is the tallest tower in the world! It also serves as a television broadcasting tower.

Even with the rainclouds, the view was still nice.

We went up to the Tembo Deck which was 350 meters high.

Christmas bear :)
Asakusa

We then took the metro to Asakusa and explored the local shrines and temples.

In front of the temples was a market featuring a vast assortment of snack and souvenirs.

Dango is a sweet Japanese snack that resembles mochi. Here, the orange one was sweet and sour while the other was green tea flavor with red bean.

These tasty Taiyaki were filled with red bean paste.

There were so many souvenirs to choose from!

Senso-ji

Senso-ji (Asakusa Kannon Temple) is Tokyo's oldest Buddhist temple and one of its most significant.

Senso-ji
PC: Justin Fong

These stone fountains with ladles are called Chozuya or Temizuya. Here, people would purify themselves with the fountain’s water before entering the temple.
Tokyo Cruise

We took an afternoon water bus ride from Asakusa Pier to Odaiba Seaside Park.

We rode in this futuristic looking Himiko boat.

The boat looked pretty cool on the inside too. PC: Justin Fong

The interior décor included cut-outs of anime characters and a floor that constantly changed colors.

The clouds started to break up and provided the background for a beautiful scene.

Odaiba Seaside Park

The Himijo boat in front of the Rainbow Bridge. At night, the bridge lights up in a gorgeous display of colors. Coming back at night is definitely on the to-do list for a future visit! PC: Justin Fong

We found a model of the Statue of Liberty here!
DiverCity Tokyo Plaza
We took the boat ride here mainly to check out the DiverCity department store.

The guardian of DiverCity!

For dinner, we checked out the food court and came across a place called Gindaco Takoyaki. Takoyaki are typically filled with minced or diced octopus, tempura, and green onion.

Character Street
Next, we visited Character Street located inside Tokyo Station. This place featured a variety of anime stores such as Pokemon and Totoro.

Entrance of Character Street

Karen and I are both Pokemon fans, so we bought Pokemon figurines from these vending machines.
Ginza
We returned to Ginza for the evening. Even though most stores closed around 8PM, there were beautiful decorations everywhere.

We went to an udon noodle place for second dinner!
Day 3

Ginza

The next day we decided to explore Ginza, a district known for their popular upscale shopping area. But first, we went back to the Tsukiji fish market for brunch.

The market was busy in the morning.

PC: Justin Fong

The fish we had was very fresh!

PC: Justin Fong

Assortment of tuna sashimi

The best eel I’ve had so far.

PC: Justin Fong

Salmon sashimi
One thing about this market that really impressed me was how clean it smelled. I could hardly smell the fish! PC: Justin Fong

A merchant sharpening his spear. PC: Justin Fong

I guess no one wanted these.

Shopping

We spent most of the afternoon shopping for souvenirs in Ginza.

On weekends and holidays, Chuo-dori, the main shopping street in Ginza, is off limits to vehicles. This street is also known as Ginza Pedestrian Paradise. PC: Justin Fong

We saw a group of people dressed in character costumes racing Mario cars. Here’s yet another thing on the to-do list for my next visit!
Karen and I spent quite a bit of time in Itoya, a famous 12 floor stationary store!

Japan produces over 300 limited-edition seasonal and regional flavors of Kit Kats. Since Kit Kats are my favorite candy, I simply had to check out the Kit Kat store.

This 12 floor building is the world’s largest Uniqlo store!

While Karen and I were busy shopping for cosmetics, Justin went to the Hakuhinkan Toy Park, Japan’s largest toy store.
For dessert, we went to a café called Salon Ginza Sabou and ordered their famous Sabou parfait.

We dined at a popular restaurant that specialized in katsudon (Japanese pork cutlet over rice).

I ordered katsudon with egg over a bed of lettuce and a side of rice.

A beautifully dusted thin sheet of white chocolate concealed layers of souffle, ice-cream, and rice cracker. Their signature flavor is matcha, but they also had seasonal variations such as this apple Sabou parfait.

The tea went well with the parfait.
Our return flight to Shanghai was at 2AM Sunday morning, so we wandered around Ginza until we had to leave for the airport. We landed in Shanghai at 5AM, took a short nap, and headed out at 9AM to interview prospective high school students who were interested in WashU. It definitely was an eventful weekend!

At this point, we only had a couple of weeks left in Shanghai, so we decided to spend more time exploring this vast city. Stay tuned for the final blog post!