‘I wouldn’t change the experience for anything’

A Homestay Program spotlight with Makenna Sumner – Part 2

By Casper Wehrhahn
NEEPAWA BANNER & PRESS

Last week, Makenna Sumner introduced readers to the York-Benimaru 4-H Manitoba Homestay Program, and the joy and fulfillment she gained as a host family participant.

This week, the story shifts to the Far East.

As a member of the Neepawa Belles, Beaux, and Builders 4-H Club, Sumner had the unique opportunity to travel to Japan as an exchange student this summer.

“From hosting, I gained a general understanding of the history of the program, but it was not until I experienced this rare travel opportunity that I fully understood how significant and meaningful it is,” said Sumner.

Sumner was one of 10 delegates, accompanied by two chaperones, to stay in Japan for two weeks (July 4 to 20). While there, the group had a “perfectly planned itinerary” which gave them a mixture of modern Japan experiences, traditional culture, education, agriculture, and everyday life with a host family.

The first few days were spent in Tokyo Prefecture. This included seeing major attractions such as the Tokyo Skytree, Sensoji Temple, Edo-Tokyo Museum, Meiji Shrin, and the Shibuya Scramble Crossing.

“Some very special things on our itinerary that created a unique connection to home, while being across the globe, were our dinner at the HyLife Pork Table restaurant and our visit to the Embassy of Canada to Japan,” Sumner divulged. “The dinner was exceptionally special to me, given that the courses we ate all would have gone through the Neepawa HyLife plant.”

According to Sumner, those first few days in Tokyo also quickly showed her “what is most important to people in Japan”.

“It is one of the largest urban areas in the world, yet I never once saw litter on the street,” Sumner explained. “In all public spaces, the priority was to respect others, such as by keeping quiet on trains, maintaining cleanliness and order, and removing shoes when entering traditional buildings to keep indoor spaces clean.”

Off to Fukushima

From Tokyo, Sumner’s group rode the bullet train to Fukushima Prefecture– an administrative district located approximately 240km from Tokyo Prefecture; and the base of operations for the Homestay Program.

“We learned about Fukushima’s rich culture and history by visiting a traditional school that opened in 1803 to educate the sons of high-ranking samurai, a castle established in the 1300’s that now stands as a museum with authentic historical items, and a traditional old village,” said Sumner. “We got to learn about Japanese traditions by practicing them first-hand through a tea ceremony, zazen meditation, and Japanese archery.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAKENNA SUMNER

Makenna Sumner (right) and her host sister (left) at a summer festival in Japan, in July of 2026. They are wearing traditional clothing known as Yukatas. From their hands hang balloons filled with water that are used in a game called yo-yo tsuri.

While at the traditional village, Sumner was treated to “a very traditional meal, served in several distinct, small, individual bowls and plates”.

“At the start of a meal, we would clasp our hands and say “Itadakimasu” (I humbly receive) and end with “Gochisousama deshita” (thank you for the meal),” said Sumner. “This highlighted the organization, gratitude, and value of nutritional balance that Japanese meals have.”

Sumner added, “We also slept in traditional Japanese rooms, with a rice straw floor, walls of sliding panels, and a futon mattress. I later slept in this same kind of room with my host family, so these experiences helped me appreciate how much history and tradition are still valued and incorporated into everyday life in Japan.”

For the second week of the trip, Sumner and the others stayed with their host families. This also included attending school with the host student.

“Staying with a Japanese host family and attending high school gave me the opportunity to experience authentic everyday life rather than simply seeing Japan as a tourist,” Sumner expressed.

She added, “Every delegate went to a different family and school, so it was a way to step entirely out of my comfort zone. Our families generously cooked Japanese meals for us every day, and made bento boxes to bring for school lunches, and I can confidently say that I never once went hungry on this trip.”

One of the challenges Sumner experienced was that it became “very apparent” that the Japanese vocabulary she studied ahead of time was quite limited. However, her host sister was able to assist.

“My host sister could speak English very well, and I am forever grateful to her for helping me interact with my host family and understand high school classes. I learned that even though there can be significant differences in language, culture, and daily routines, meaningful connections don’t require us to have everything in common,” said Sumner. “It was still so easy to bond with them by sharing meals, spending time together, learning about each other’s families and countries, and understanding each other’s humour with ease.”

Later on, she added, “Looking back, I wouldn’t change the experience for anything. It taught me that simply putting yourself in an unfamiliar situation, being willing to learn, and finding other ways to connect with people can teach you more than you expected. I also gained so much respect for all the students trying to learn English.”

In her closing statement, Sumner emphasized that the experience as a whole is one she will never forget.

“I will always be thankful for this amazing experience and will take all the lessons I have learned from it with me through life,” said Sumner.



Above picture: Makenna Sumner and her fellow Manitoba exchange students posing for a photograph at the HyLife Pork Table in Japan. The group had a dinner there, which created a unique connection to home.

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