Internship with ANA Crowne Plaza Kanazawa 2018
Tan Hui Min

I spent this past summer on an internship with ANA Crowne Plaza Kanazawa, and it was a pivotal experience both in terms of realising what kind of job I would want, and in terms of understanding myself. I chose the hotel because of my recent interest in heritage and tourism and hope to engage in some sort of heritage or cultural exchange work in the future. Although I have experience with several hospitality-related jobs, I was really nervous before starting the internship, wondering if I would be able to handle what I imagined would be a strict working environment in a well-established hotel chain.

My assumptions were completely busted from the first day, however. Just on my second day, the General Manager invited me to join the hotel’s team in the InterContinental Hotel Group’s (IHG) nationwide bowling competition! From the start, the hotel staff made me feel welcome and included, and all the managers I met were nothing like the “stern bosses” I imagined. Not just towards me, but to their junior staff in general, they held a relaxed and compassionate demeanour that came closer to that of a parent than a boss. In fact, on a whole I could see how the general hotel environment was a very friendly and intimate one. Part of this could be because of how invested they were in staff welfare. I got to participate in some of Human Resource’s welfare events, including their staff appreciation week. The managers got roped in to work in the staff cafeteria serving special meals that week, and my role was to assemble the roast beef donburis!

One thing I really appreciated was how much autonomy I was given to structure my own internship according to my goals. Having indicated interest in the Guest Relations department from the start (where I would get the most guest interaction), most of my two months was spent there. But throughout the internship I was in constant discussion with my supervisor on what other things I might be interested to try, and she was always open to impromptu changes. Even when I did not request for it, she often proactively added events she thought I would enjoy, such as participating in crafts workshops and even a wedding!

I really enjoyed my time with Guest Relations and bonded well with my colleagues there. The job mainly involved assisting guests with luggage storage, room deliveries and guiding them to their rooms. There were plenty of chances for spontaneous conversations with guests, and there were several times I ended up having long conversations with guests on our travel experiences or making recommendations on what to do in Kanazawa. These conversations often made my day, and I think that made me realise what the IHG “true hospitality” (which I had been taught during orientation) was about and why I enjoy service jobs. The genuine enjoyment of interacting with guests and my colleagues meant there was no need to act out any “service personality”, the desire to serve and positive attitude came naturally. Very often, my interactions with colleagues in one moment made me so happy that I could just carry on the same lifted spirits in smiling and greetings guests the next moment. In other words, I realised how good service is founded not within staff-customer interactions, but with the relations between staff. Cultivating the spirit of service also helped me overcome a personal struggle with keeping my composure when facing failures or problems. Knowing that I could not allow one mistake to impact my ability to serve other guests somehow trained me to keep calm and adapt flexibly!

One other point I was worried about was my keigo ability, since I had never covered it in class. But with the guidance of an onesan at Guest Relations, and the ample practice I was given, I was able to speak confidently within a week. I also got That I had many opportunities for practice was another thing I appreciated. As the “frontline” in attending to guests, the Guest Relations team has a vital contribution to the hotel’s image, and naturally having an intern in that role would have some risk. Nevertheless, my colleagues has confidence in me, giving lots of guidance but allowing me to do things independently after that. Having their confidence also greatly boosted mine, and being
allowed to do things independently even if that meant making mistakes really allowed the maximum learning opportunity I was hoping for.

Apart from Guest Relations, I was also briefly rotated around Marketing, F&B and Banquet Operations. There were also several special events such as the staff appreciation week aforementioned, but two other memorable ones were the chance to participate in a Japanese wedding, and another to join a crafts workshop catering to mothers and their children. How traditions remain highly respected in Japan was always a point of fascination for me, so I was impressed by how hotels may not simply have a role in serving visitors, but also play a part in strengthening local community bonds and promoting appreciation for traditions.

Beyond the internship, I still had many chances to interact with my host family and other Ishikawa locals. Even though I had already went through most of the cultural taiken the last time and tried exploring the Ishikawa region as much as I could, the fact that I still got many completely new experiences this time just shows how culturally rich diverse the region is. For example, I went to Noto with my host mother this time to see the Abare Matsuri, where large floats are paraded around huge stakes which are set on fire. It was a way more rowdy and aggressive festival than I have ever experienced and showed me a very different community spirit in a different part of Ishikawa. I also got to experience a hanabi taikai for the first time, with my guest relations oneesan! Being a part of many community/company events this time definitely gave me a stronger sense of integration with the locals, despite coming as a lone foreigner. It was also amazing to me how much skill and innovation must have went into designing such elaborate floats and fireworks in both events.
Part of the sense of integration also came from the fieldwork I was conducting simultaneously as part of my thesis research on how tourism was affecting local lives in Ishikawa. Trying to get opinions from diverse segments of the population, I managed to reach out to local researchers, international exchange staff, tour guides and even temple priests. The kind of things I learnt were not what I would have realised otherwise as a temporary visitor just there for sightseeing. While the booming tourism did give many a sense of local pride, there were also challenges with coping with the unexpected volume of crowds. I became much more aware of the real significances of tourism in the everyday lives of residents, and conscious of the need to be responsible tourists. Some people I talked to introduced me to lesser-known places like Nonoichi and the three temple areas of Utatsuyama, Teramachi and Kodatsuno, getting to see a different side to Ishikawa’s charms. And I bonded greatly with my host family through many outings to their favourite restaurants that were very different from the usual tourist spots! Especially as the only intern this time, what I am most grateful for is how openly and warmly I was welcomed into the local community, be it at my internship, with my host family, or in my fieldwork.
Top-left: At the hanabi taikai, Top right: With my supervisors from various departments on my last day, Bottom: With my host family at their favourite izakaya