



Introduction

I have been enrolled on a double degree programme between Tohoku University and INSA Lyon from April 2021 to March 2023.

Living in Sendai: Experience Advice, and Leisure

Housing



University residents are available for all exchange students.

[\(https://sup.bureau.tohoku.ac.jp/en/arrival-e/pre-e/find-a-place-e/uh-e/\)](https://sup.bureau.tohoku.ac.jp/en/arrival-e/pre-e/find-a-place-e/uh-e/)

The registration to the dormitories was part of the registration process to the University. It consisted in ordering the top 3 choices of residences. Residences are located in different places in the city. I was living at the UH

Aobayama, which is located less than 5 min from the cafeteria, 5 min from the laboratory. The city centre is easily accessed by the metro, the station located at a ~5 min walk from the dorms. If walking, the city centre can be reached in 30 min, 10-15 min if by bicycle.

At UH Aobayama, dormitories are non-mixed and a flat is shared with max. 8 people. Each person has its own room which is already furnished: bed, sheets, storages, hangers, desk, lamp, cutlery, shelf, balcony with a bar to hang its clothes. The shared spaces are spacious and include the entrance (shoebox ~8 paires), the kitchen (induction hobs, basic kitchenwares, common and individual storages, microwave, rice cooker) and the bathroom (washing machine, showers, toilets, common storage, sinks). The shared spaces are cleaned once a week by the cleaning ladies/men of the UH. They notably refill the dishwashing product, the sponges and the trash bags. There is access to the internet in the dorms but it is necessary to have an ethernet cable and a relay to access it.



The rent without the charges is 29500 yen/month, and approximately 44000 yen/month (± 10000 yen) when included. The deposit is 30000 yen, and can be paid by card or by transfer. It is the most expensive residence. "The biggest disadvantages of UH Aobayama are that there is no close supermarket, and that the city centre is a little far."

There is a "welcoming session" by the management office when coming for the first time at the residence. It lasts for ~1h and includes a visit of the room. An inventory has to be done when arriving in our individual room. Be careful: they are very meticulous when finally leaving the dorms, so it is necessary to be very cautious during the inventory.

Payment

In Japan, people mainly use cash or apps (Paypay, Rakuten, etc...) rather than credit cards. ATMs are accessible in many places such as convenience stores, so it is quite easy to withdraw money. Be careful: a fee might be applied when withdrawing outside a given time window (~9:00-18:00, Sunday, holidays), though, not that expensive. Japan is a very safe country so there is no problem with withdrawing large amounts of money.

Large expenses (rent, health insurance) are often done by direct debit. In such cases, having a Japanese bank account might be helpful. A bank that is often used by foreigners is the Yucho Ginko, the postal bank. Be careful: a phone number is necessary for creating an account (you can discuss it with the [Help Desk](#) or your lab if you don't have a Japanese phone number).



Health Insurance

The price depends on the prefecture and the duration of the stay.

Tohoku University provides all necessary information about [Student Insurance](#).

In the case of a double degree there are three mandatory insurances: the Gakkensai Insurance and the Inbound Futai Gakuso which are both part of the Student Insurances, and the National Health

It is also mandatory to have a personal insurance that covers the time period before the enrollment to the university. However, the National Health Insurance must be paid for the whole duration of the stay in Japan (e.g., if I arrive in March but start in April, I need a personal insurance for covering March + I pay the National Health Insurance for the month). Be careful to be always uptodate for the National Health Insurance because hospitalisation fees would not be covered, even with one day of difference.

The registration to the National Health Insurance must be done at the Aoba ward when arriving in Sendai. At the same time, it will be necessary to declare our arrival in Sendai. Therefore, it is recommended to consider ~half a day at the ward.

Phone - internet

I don't have much advice to give as I did not subscribe to any telephone company during my stay in Japan. Having a phone number is useful when not living in residences or to book restaurants/hotels/cars (or you can simply choose your friends wisely). There is access to the internet in the residences, on the campus, in all train stations, in convenience stores and on some streets.

On official documents it is often possible to provide the lab's or residence's phone number. In such cases, it is necessary to precise it, and to verify with the lab/residence if they agree on having their phone number written. If there is a need to give a call, you can still ask the management office of your residence or your lab. There are also telephone boxes in some train stations but it is becoming more and more rare. Count 10 yen for a minute of telephone.

Mobile phone plans are more expensive than in France and some might not be applicable for foreign phones as telephone companies are those selling the mobile phones. Also, a few plans are available only if staying for more than two years.

Transportation



Transportation fees are way more expensive in Sendai than in France. It is also more expensive than in Tokyo.

There is no student reduction for usual transportation, but there are for regular train rides to university (only between the closest train station to your home and that of your campus). Still, Sendai is not really well covered by bus or trains: having a bicycle is recommended if you live in UH Sanjo for example. If you study and/or live at Aobayama campus, many

students have electric bicycles or mopeds because it is located on the top of a hill.

Finding a bicycle might be tricky. There are a few bicycle shops in Sendai, and they sell both new and second-hand bicycles. However, there is no possibility to buy cheap, still good bicycles as we can on LeBonCoin in France, neither "bourse aux vélos".

Large cities such as Tokyo, Osaka or Kyoto are reachable by bus or train. Night buses are the best options, except if you have transportation sickness. Shinkansen are really expensive, even with the student discounts. There are also plans for foreigners so it is highly recommended to ask other foreign students that have been in Japan for a while as they might know various tricks to travel at low costs.

Groceries

Stores are often open 7/7 days, even though they open later than in France, still, close later. All kinds of food can be found almost everywhere, but if you look for foreign food, then the Gyomu Super (業務スーパー cheap and large) or Kaldi (expensive and small) are highly recommended. However, if you are used to eating a lot of fruits, you will need to give up this habit as fruits and some vegetables are expensive in Japan.

The price of groceries is not that different from France, sometimes even less expensive. If you are vegetarian or vegan, Japan is absolutely not adapted to you if you want to eat outside (cafeteria included), but has a lot of potential when it comes to cooking for yourself. There are several sources of proteins (various types of tofu, natto, soy beans, edamame, okara, ganmo, etc...), iron (sea weeds, leafy vegetables, etc...), The rice tastes so nice, notably the genmai which I am really fond of, and you can make your own stock from kombu seaweed and mushrooms. Have a look at <https://www.shinagawa-japanese-cooking.com/blog> for vegan and

traditional Japanese recipes in English. There are really large varieties of tastes and textures, please enjoy!"



kombu seaweed



natto



edamame



genmai

Life in Sendai: personal experience

Student Life

When a foreign master's degree student (M1, M2), the lab can allocate you a student tutor who will help you with all the administrative tasks. She/He will be there to help you get through the beginning of your master's degree. Also, you might have some help from the secretary of your lab, they are always very nice.

Classes have a duration of 1.30h: 8h50~10h20, 10h30~12h00, 13h00~14h30, 14h40~16h10, 16h20~17h50. We choose our courses ourselves, but some laboratories might ask you to choose some specific courses. Be careful with the credits: 1 Japanese credit is equivalent to 2 ECTS. Here is the [Link](#) for courses in the engineering department.

The language of the courses are defined as follows: J for Japanese, E for English, JE for hybrid formats. The hybrid format varies from a teacher to another: speaking in Japanese but slides in English, speaking in English but slides in Japanese, speaking in Japanese then in English, everything in English. Generally, the teacher speaks in Japanese and the slides are in English.

Don't hesitate to contact the teacher to know what they are planning. In anyways, they often allow you to write the reports in English even though the course is completely in Japanese. Be also careful that one course can be managed by several teachers at the same time. There are various types of evaluations: reports at all courses, reports on specific courses, a final report only, a report and an oral presentation, written exam, etc... This can also be asked to the teacher.

There are no "TD" or "CM" as we used to in France. All courses are the same format: 1.30h with the class, no exercises during the course. Exercises are often given as reports that are evaluated. There is rarely feedback from teachers on our work. Also, Japanese students rarely ask questions during courses. They also sleep a lot, which is apparently better considered than not coming at all.

Master's degree students necessarily belong to a lab. The atmosphere within a lab will definitely vary from a lab to another. Some might have obligations (presence, courses, meetings, etc...), some others not. Often, it is difficult to really understand what teachers really expect from us: compared to the other Japanese students it is rather difficult to understand all the untolds. It is really important to take time to choose your lab wisely.

Daily life

I arrived in Japan in the middle of the corona crisis. Therefore, all courses were online, no sport activity, bars and restaurants with curfews. After a while, life started again, but there were still a lot of restrictions, notably when comparing with Europe. What was most difficult I guess was that nothing was never clearly forbidden but rather "not recommended". Again, Japan is a country of "untolds": a lot of pressure can be felt from unwritten rules that everyone seems to follow. Another difficulty is that as a master degree's student, some laboratories may discourage students from taking part in Associations.



For those who like sports, there are a lot of mountains in the surroundings of Sendai for hiking, cycling (though the routes are not very good...), and running. You can also run along the river or in parks. There are a few swimming pools, unfortunately not close to any of the campuses except if you are in the swimming team, you can find weight rooms dedicated to students in the campus and there is a climbing gym (Bnuts') not too far from the city centre.

Career Paths

Future projects and criticisms

There are still little women in the Engineering domain, notably in the Civil Engineering department which I belonged to. There were also little foreigners: you can easily feel left alone in your lab and feel more pressure than there actually is. Moreover, Japanese students are often more distant than in France: they are less chatty in addition to their difficulties of speaking English. In addition, there are “ranks” depending on your age: senpais are older than you, kohai younger, which can make the socialisation even more difficult. Of course, as for any rules, there are always exceptions!

Doing this master's degree was a great way to discover what research consists in. I did not have this chance in France before. It made me realise that I rather wanted to continue on with a PhD than working in companies because of the richness of universities: various domains, nationalities, paths... However, I also decided I would not stay in Japan as the difficulties I faced such as socialising or the constant pressure of untolds, were too hard to handle to have a “safe environment”.

Overall, I really enjoyed this experience in Japan. Even though they were some hard times, it was a rich experience that was definitely worth it. Staying two years in Japan allowed me to immerse in the culture and to start to grab all the complexity and beauty of the country.

