

My Uchideshi Experience by Karlo Gataric



“Early mornings, late nights, lots of cleaning, lots of training.”

Before I left Tasmania to come to Japan that is what I was told would be the life of the uchideshi at Kobayashi Dojo. Well, I was informed correctly as training 2 to 3 times each day, then traveling between Tokorozawa and Kodaira dojos to clean before each training session left you with a very busy schedule and around 6 hours a day for sleep. Cleaning and training. This is what you do. This is uchideshi life. The dojo becomes your primary concern.

Eating tends to be a bit on the run during the day and noodles at the train station were quick and also a carbohydrate intake which ensured you had the energy to maintain the pace. Evening meals after the last training were usually at a restaurant and always involved a few quiet beers.

During my time as uchideshi there were four others living as uchideshi as well. Communal living with a washing machine that worked overtime was a daily event.

No television, no radio, no newspaper meant that conversations amongst each other led to a real insight into peoples personalities.

The keiko however was the highlight of my time in Japan. Once one adapted to the firm tatami at Kodaira by using smaller, tighter ukemi you could embrace the training regime to the full. Training with high rank and high level students allows you to use the techniques on people who can receive them. That I will really miss about Japan.

The jo and bokken work outside in the street was an aspect I particularly enjoyed as training outdoors in the open air in the Japanese spring was fun and refreshing.

Highlights of the keiko were also the children's classes with their high level of enthusiasm and spirit and most of all fun. It was a real eye-opener for me and made me realize what our own club was missing out on by not having a children's class.

Also attending the Yamanaka camp with Igarashi sensei and Kobayashi sensei were great fun as was training at Meiji University.

The Wednesday morning breakfast provided by Hiroaki sensei and his wife Miyoko were absolutely outstanding. All uchideshi are invited to join them and the gesture and the fantastic food were always greatly appreciated. The *natto* however was always interesting. Always entertaining to watch people try and eat it.

Another interesting aspect of uchideshi life was cooking the Friday morning breakfast for Kobayashi sensei and 5 to 6 other senior senseis as well as the uchideshi in quite possibly the smallest kitchen in the world. A challenge we all undertook with some concern but we always got there in the end. That tradition has been going on for many, many years now and I am sure that sensei has been presented with some interesting meals over that time.



Then there was *onsen* (public bath). What a lifesaver!!! Bjorn, a Swedish uchideshi introduced me to *onsen* in my first week in Japan and from that point on it became a weekly ritual on Mondays. *Onsen* should be part of the weekly uchideshi program. Maybe Hiroaki sensei will one day schedule it into the timetable. I just loved the *onsen*. Fantastic way to relax.

Japan in general was polite, efficient and organized. Looking for bicycles at the station once they had been moved was frustrating at times though. The polite shop staff and efficient trains made life hassle free.

My time as uchideshi was short but was an excellent, valuable experience. I look forward with great anticipation on returning to Japan for further training in Aikido.

I leave behind in Japan new friends and found it to be a wonderful country with the most polite and friendly people. The patience and kindness displayed to me and the other uchideshi will always be remembered fondly.

Many, many thanks to Kobayashi sensei, Hiroaki sensei, Kasahara san, Ukai san and everybody else in Japan who allowed me to come to Japan to experience your aikido and your culture.

