

Japan: A Country of Wonderful Contrasts

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

For as many years as I can remember, I've dreamed of visiting Japan and recently I was finally able to make that dream come true.

In our two-week tour of the country, we went to the capital Tokyo, the former capital Kyoto, and Hiroshima, infamous for the events of August 1945, as well as visiting the Tokyo Disney resort. Add to that day trips to Nara, Nikko, Mount Fuji, and Lake Hakone (all easily accessible from Tokyo) and our trip certainly gave us a good chance to experience Japan.

To me, Japan is a country that is full of contradictions, and I love the idea of that. If you head to the right parts of any major city, you'll find young Japanese experimenting with the most way-out fashions they can find, many of them Western in origin, yet elsewhere in the same city, you'll also see women in traditional kimonos, taking pride in the history of their country. I can't think of any other country where you would see people in everyday life wearing such traditional costumes. They're hardly made for today's society, but the women we saw in them, without exception, looked elegant and seemed to relish the challenge of getting around in a kimono.

Think of any new kind of technology and the chances are that it probably originated in Japan, with cameras, TVs, and computers often debuting there first, before finding it into the rest of the world. Visitors to the country can see, and in some cases, try out that new technology, with many major companies having areas open to the public to market their newest inventions. The Sony Center in Tokyo's Ginza is one example, with floors full of things you've never seen before, with some clearly marked as not yet available on the market. All I'll say is keep an eye out over the next few months for Rolly, who plays music and dances to it. He's an adorable invention, the likes of which you've never seen before.

Yet, ironically, in a world where we're all getting used to the idea of being in a recession, it's something the Japanese are already very familiar with. Their economy has been in recession for the last decade, according to all the official figures, but it's not something that you'd ever know from visiting the country.

It's literally packed with designer names everywhere you go. Having visited some of the richest playgrounds in the world, such as Monte

Carlo and Beverley Hills, we were amazed to find that Japan's major cities seemed to have more of these brand names than we had seen anywhere else. The recession certainly doesn't seem to be hurting the Japanese ability to shop.

If you know anything about the history of Japan, you'll know that it was a country that was closed to the outside world for 200 years, until Commander Matthew Perry led a fleet of US vessels into Edo Bay, the old name for Tokyo, in 1835. Bearing in mind that the Japanese have only had a couple of hundred years of contact with the outside world, you perhaps wouldn't expect them to speak other languages, but they do and exceptionally well.

Although I had spent a couple of years learning Japanese, I didn't get much of a chance to speak it while we were there. We had a couple of interesting experiences with taxi drivers in Kyoto, where my lessons did come in very handy! I had read that the Japanese don't like to speak English, as they're worried about getting things wrong, but there was no sign of that at all. Generally, when I did attempt Japanese, I would get stunned looks, as if they couldn't understand how a Westerner could speak their language.

And here's another contradiction. Although English is widely spoken, most restaurant menus are in Japanese, which even I couldn't fathom, with my knowledge of the language. Fortunately most menus do have pictures with them, so you could get an idea of what you were ordering. Being vegetarian I did become very adept at asking if the items had meat in them or not!

Perhaps one of the things that Japan is best known for is its public transport system, and rightly so. We were fortunate enough to take four journeys on the Shinkansen, known more commonly as the bullet train, and it is just as amazing as people say. It runs perfectly to schedule, is spotlessly cleaned at the end of each journey, with the seats giving you more room than you would find on most planes. Yet, step on to a subway train and there's every chance you'll be sandwiched into a carriage in a way you've never experienced before, with people even employed during rush hours to push you into the train to make sure you all fit!

Something else you can't escape talking about when you talk about the character of Japan is the bathroom facilities. Our hotel rooms all featured toilets with the most amazing array of functions on them, including warm seats, music-- I kid you not! These have to be seen to be believed and it is something that the Japanese take seriously, as they like to exercise discretion in these delicate situations.

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Contrast that then with the Japanese-style toilets that you'll find in some public places. These are literally just troughs in the ground and take some getting used to. Fortunately, in most places, they do also have the more traditional Western versions available, which came as a great relief!

One thing that isn't a contradiction is the behavior of the Japanese. At all times, they were exceptionally courteous and we would often find ourselves bowing in response to them, as it suddenly seemed the most natural thing to do. The service you receive is second to none and there is no tipping in their culture. Leave any extra money and there's every chance they'll run after you and give it back to you. It's a very refreshing change, although sadly I don't think service anywhere else in the world will now ever seem that good to us, having experienced the best in Japan.

Japan is certainly a land of contrasts and we noticed huge differences between the sprawling cities and the open countryside we saw. It was fascinating, and we loved experiencing the Japanese culture first hand, so much so that one day we hope to go back to experience some more of it.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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