

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Japan: Tokyo, Takayama & Kyoto;
afterwards farewell from Singapore



Chapter 18

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After enjoying 6 days at Had Yao Beach, we flew to Singapore on April 11th 2007 from where we boarded a plane with Thai Airways to [Tokyo](#) on April 15th 2007.

Japan: unexpected things around every corner

We flew through the night and arrived in [Japan's](#) capital early the next morning. Here we waited for a short while for the tourist information counter to open at 8 a.m. to get those most essential bilingual tourist maps that helped us find our way in this huge city of 12 million inhabitants. Thereafter, we took a train to the city center 66 km away.

We were amazed how many locals fell asleep during this ride. The same applied to the passengers of the subway into which we changed later. Although Tokyo's public transport network consists of 13 subway- plus several commuter railway lines, we were delighted to find out how easy it is, even for tourists, to find our way around. Each line is assigned with a colour and Latin letter, numbering its stations from 1 to ~30 and each station-name was marked in Japanese and Latin characters.



Before 10 a.m. we arrived at our accommodation; the newly opened Aizuya Inn. We were very lucky to have found it on the internet, where they try to attract their first guests with low prices and so we got a room at ¥ 5'600 Yen (€ 35). Although catering for foreign visitors, this was typical Japanese style lodging, called Ryokan, managed by a Japanese couple that had lived in the USA for 5 years. As everywhere in Japan, accommodation is not small: it is tiny!

They have no beds but futon mats that are being rolled up during the daytime, so that the room can function as a living room. There is almost no furniture, only a low table to sit around on the floor and some cloth hooks on the wall. For comfort in temperature in summer or winter, the floor is covered by thick fixed straw mats called Tatami. They are a few centimeters thick and measure 90x180cm for a full, and 90x90cm for half a Tatami. As square meters in the most developed western countries, the number of Tatami is used to measure all room sizes. Our room measured 4.5 Tatami, which corresponds to 2.70x2.70m or 7.29m² and the layout was ½ a Tatami framed by 4 full ones.

Space is probably the biggest luxury in Japan as it's really scarce, but other luxuries are just common. Even our tiny room was equipped with a big flat screen TV set and there was an air-conditioner that could also be used for heating, which we used in our first few nights.

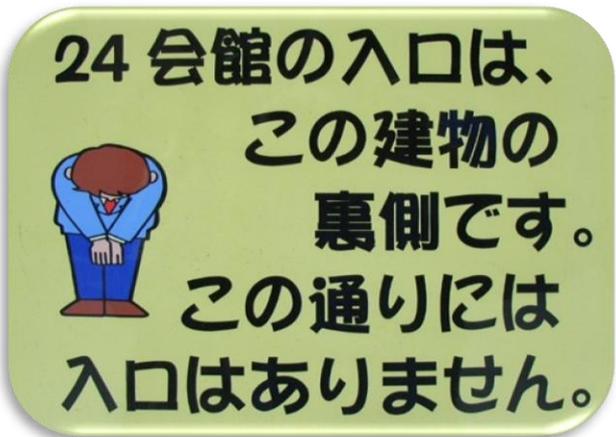
At this point we must rave about their toilets! Even in about 80% of public toilets, which were always of highest cleanliness standards, toilet seats were heated. Often they were equipped with a Closomat and other features that could be activated by remote control. As the very discreet Japanese want to avoid embarrassing their "loo-neighbour" with the sound of pooping, farting or whatever, often a sound could be activated (or was activated automatically) simulating loud flushing noise. To make use of space, some toilets had a small sink covering the water tank. From a tap above, the water that was filling the tank again after flushing could first be used to wash hands. The toilet cabins were often equipped with a small baby-seat in the corner. Heinz reports that on the "Gents" side, there was almost always a urinal with special railings for the disabled and in one case Heinz found even special footmarks for blind people in front of a urinal. Brigitte informs about the "Ladies" side, that mothers with little boys would also always find a small urinal. Washrooms sometimes had a special wing with beautiful high mirrors for pepping up hairstyle or whatever girls do in front of a mirror. Some toilets were squat toilets but most had western sitting style.



Although our first few days in Tokyo were cold (9°C) and rainy, tons of new impressions hailed down on us. First of all: colour and clothing of the masses! Almost anybody wore black suits or costumes, white shirts and tie, no matter how old. Also school children fitted well into this flock as the only difference of their uniforms to the black suited white collar workers was the size of the garments.



When saying farewell, Japanese take a bow and almost bump their heads against each other. Construction site signs apologizing for inconvenience because of construction work or whatever depicted a little man taking a bow with his helmet. The highest respect, i.e. the lowest bow, get bosses and people of higher rank. If you're a customer in a shop or restaurant, the entire staff shouts out "Irasshaimaseee!" to welcome you and every employee will take a bow for you upon leaving, even if you only just purchased something for 50 cents... What a feeling...



After an employee filled the shelf in a store, he will turn around in front of the door and take a bow to the customers before leaving the room. The same applies to railway staff after checking tickets: like an actor at the theatre, they turn around before leaving each carriage and take a bow to the audience, even if nobody is clapping hands or takes any notice...

Even in the city of Tokyo, there are many temples and we visited a few of them. Whatever Japanese do, they do it very correctly and up to perfection, even much more than Swiss. If a temple is being renovated it's obvious, that the elements could harm the historic interior. In Japan, they first build a massive concrete foundation supporting a building that looks like a production plant for the new airbus 380 that covers the entire temple-compound.

Food turned out to be a major highlight and thanks to plastic models displayed in showcases outside almost every restaurant, it was easily accessible for us, even if the restaurant did not have a menu in English. Not only Japanese food, also western dishes were modeled up to perfection.

These models imitated the food so perfectly, that they looked less appealing in a cheap restaurant than in a place where you paid more.



We discovered that the Japanese cuisine offers much more than Sushi, Sashimi, Tempura and Udon and on top of that, culinary specialities from around the globe could easily be found. Especially Italian and French food was hugely popular. All these restaurants were run by Japanese who had lived abroad and as they did what their nation is famous for: they copied everything to perfection – there was no need for expats. The menu of such restaurants was often only in Japanese and in the respective language of the country where their specialities originated, which helped us, even if there was no English translation.

There was an astonishing abundance of bakeries, pastry shops and coffee houses, as we hadn't seen since we left Québec. They were offering everything from crusty bread to superb cakes and other sweets. And again: it was all copied to perfection by Japanese and mostly sold under either French or German names that probably should guarantee quality.

Another unexpected thing about food awaited us in the so called "Food Shows" at the two lowest floors of many shopping centers and department stores. Huge areas sold nothing but comestible items. Delicacies from Japan and around the globe were presented and packed in a luxurious and appealing manner. Apart from the things we knew like speciality meat, cheeses, ready-made salads etc. there were also many unknown Japanese things. From the looks, we guessed there were pickles of any color, conserved fish, rolled leaves and sweet cookies or beans and fruits coated in sugar. There was more than we could imagine and try, but just to walk along these endless rows of delicacy counters was already a feast for the eyes.



Luckily, the prices were not as high as their reputation and some things could even be cheaper than in Singapore. Due to the scarce space, accommodation is the most expensive part of travel in Japan. In average we paid 6'800 Yen (€ 46.40) for a room and if we would have reserved longer in advance, we could have done even better. Those horror stories of not getting any coffee below 10 USD (for half that price we ate a cake with it) and dinner at 200 USD must have been created by business travellers. Of course such expensive restaurants do exist, but there is much more for the lower budget.



In fact, in a country where most people have to eat out, as their apartments neither have space for a proper kitchen nor for a dining area, restaurants can't be that expensive. Even though they don't have the same type of food-courts as in Hong Kong or Singapore, there are many small restaurants providing good and cheap meals. Simple dishes can be found for ¥ 400-600 (€ 2.70-4.00). If we, as most Japanese, decided to get something a bit more decent, we got a variety of about three to four Japanese delicacies for ~¥ 700 as lunch special. Even in Tokyo downtown, ¥ 1'000 (€ 6.80) bought us a dinner with soup, salad, starter, a filling sushi plate and a small dessert. For the same price, you could also get an authentic Italian spaghetti dish. Paying up to ¥ 2'000 gave us the chance of sampling through a collection of dozens of tiny neat plates filled with up to 35 surprises. For ¥ 5'000 (€ 34) you get a superbly prepared French seven course dinner or anything you like.

With a population of 127 million people, living on a total landmass of 377'435 km² with 80% of it mountainous, space is scarce, especially in the big cities where land prices exploded. Therefore Japanese invented lots of smart systems how to save space. One simple method permitted to park 3 cars on one parking lot. They constructed a concrete mould ~4.5m deep and equipped it with an elevator that had three platforms. Those were the simple solutions. The more common sophisticated ones allowed for 30 cars to be parked on a plot that was only 6mx6m big. A high narrow parking silo was equipped with an elevator that rather works like a conveyor belt, taking cars on 30 platforms up and rotates them on the push of a button. Normally 14 cars can be stocked on the right, 14 on the left side plus one each on top and on the bottom in the middle. If the driver wants to fetch his car, he doesn't need to wait much more than 2 minutes until the carpark-attendant managed to call the requested vehicle back to the entrance.



Sometimes a second silo is attached to the back, so in the front silo only 29 parking platforms are being used, that the elevator behind can be accessed. To make leaving quick and easy on this limited space, a round rotatable platform is installed either underneath or in front of the silo.

In Tokyo we were surprised that there was not that much traffic on the road, considering the size of the city. With such excellent public transport systems, the population seems either to rely on trains, metro or buses and to use a bicycle is also a very popular option. Therefore, big bicycle parks were needed and here again, they invented a double-storey elevator for two-wheels.

Next thing we saw, were petrol stations with no pumps. Instead they had petrol hoses hanging down from the ceiling just next to the digital display which was also mounted up there. No wonder there's no space for gardens, but people love plants. So they put up pot plants and flower baskets along the roadside or pavement as their own tiny private garden.

As everything in Japan is so different to what we had seen before, we had unconsciously adopted the Japanese habit of picturing everything but we still didn't copy the habit of being in every picture.

During our three weeks in Japan we were walking endless kilometers every day. If we got thirsty, it was never far to the next drink dispenser. Whether it was in train stations, parks or even between shops, there were often big rows of drink dispensing machines offering almost anything one could desire for a cheap price (~¥ 100-150). For newcomers they can be tricky! One such machine was situated inside our hostel and Heinz opted for a refreshing ice tea in a can. However, what came out was a sizzling hot can and Heinz brought it right up to reception to inform them, that the dispenser machine must have some malfunction. The owner only looked at him and replied a bit puzzled: "this must be a hot tea!" He asked him whether he chose the can from the red or blue section and now we learned that these clever machines are able to dispense hot and cold drinks...

Also cigarettes were available from such machines. At around ¥ 300 (€2.-) they were surprisingly cheap and smoking is one of Japanese's big addictions. Unfortunately it is also allowed in most restaurants. This is probably one of the stress symptoms caused by the unbelievable rat-race we had seen daily here in Japan. Every time when we boarded a subway, it was mainly filled with black suited white collar workers. Most of them closed their eyes and many fell asleep quickly, even when standing and "hanging onto" the handle on the ceiling. To make sure, everybody sleeps well, use of mobile-phones was only allowed in silent-mode.

Rush hour was of course in the early morning and then again in the evening culminating around midnight, as the subway stops running at 00:30 h, when those salarymen who don't sleep in the office, go home. Officially, Japan works 40 h a week but peer pressure forces most Japanese to work mostly unpaid overtime daily – including weekends. It's also common and expected that working mates go out eating and drinking together after they finished working – whenever that is. We heard of some lucky cases who only had to work till midnight about twice a week and the other days, they were allowed to go home already at 9 p.m. We also learned about the more common cases, where the family father regularly gets home at 1 a.m. in the morning and rises again at 04:30 h to get the subway back to work. That's if he is lucky, but sometimes he misses the last train and then he and his colleagues just sleep under the office desk, go home at 5 o'clock with the first train, only to have a shower and change cloths before going back to work immediately. We also heard of people who regularly don't have a single day off for three to four months and thus also work very day of the weekends.



Compared to western cultures, Japanese express much less individualism and the group matters much more. Social bonds usually endure a lifetime but for a newcomer it seems pretty hard to enter a social circle. To please everyone, the individual is not expected to question things and express an opinion. They are expected to think of, not like, the members of their circle. Apparently, if there is a conflict, each side apologizes even if it's unclear who is at fault. Asking Japanese about their opinion of a critical subject must be like torturing them. On the other hand, if a group of workmates or friends is drunk, the members might reveal what's on their mind without fear that anyone will remember their besotted confessions, once they all are sober again.

On the neighbouring dinner tables, we regularly saw business men arriving late for dinner and drinking. Once we probably offended one of these groups, when we refused the Sake (rice wine) they offered us. Never mind, they apologized and we still took pictures with them. The same thing another time with the couple on the next table: after Brigitte accidentally sent a piece of lobster shell flying onto their table. But that was all laughing!



It's not surprising that the stress and pressure of this society has some valves to release it. Everywhere huge gambling establishments can be found and "Pachinko", a noisy Japanese version of the one-armed-bandit, is the most popular way to waste money. Every night, legions of black suited white collar workers are occupying these gambling saloons, where smoking seems compulsory!

Others again venture out to the red-light district, again often in groups of work mates and we have never ever seen so many red-light districts covering such big areas. Of these establishments, most don't want foreigners it seems. Not only men, but also ladies are well catered for. As women are expected to stop working almost as soon as they get married and couples spend so little time together, it's just normal that women get bored and desperate. Entire façades of high rise buildings housing sex-clubs only, are covered with numbered pictures of young men and women in freaky hair styles offering themselves.



In this society with its many taboo's, it doesn't even need hard-core to stimulate. Japanese are big fans of comics and their Manga characters if depicted in an erotic way, seem perfectly able to turn many Japanese men and women on. The sale of erotic Manga comic magazines is big business and entire rows of shops survive on it.

During our initial five days in Tokyo we were visiting various areas of the city. We didn't see as many modern and really high buildings as expected but this is probably due to the fact that Japan's modernization had started already a few decades ago and on the other hand; because of the many earth quakes. In average the earth trembles about 1'000 times every year but fortunately most tremors are so weak, they can only be detected by sensitive instruments. We believe we felt two small ones though.



Because of Japan's reputation of being an expensive country, we didn't expect to see that many tourists. However, especially around some famous temples and shrines, they were big in numbers. Asakusa was certainly the most touristy part we've visited, whereas Shinjuku was the most busy part of town. Shinjuku railway station claims to be the busiest station in the world. It serves 740'000 passengers daily and if the four lines of subway stations are included, this number rises to 2 million people a day.

Japan has a big network of various high-speed railway services and the Shinkansen Superexpress, or bullet-train is a very efficient and comfortable means of transport even though it doesn't run that cheap. The interior of these trains looks like that of an airplane and for instance the 530 km from Tokyo to Kyoto take only 2 h 10 min. with the fastest train, including three stops and cost ¥ 13'500 (€ 83). They have a high frequency and run about every 15 minutes.



Takayama: a small, Japanese, countryside town

As we wanted to experience a bit of the countryside, we took first a Shinkansen train to Nagoya, where we changed to the “limited express” to the mountainous area of [Takayama](#). This small town of 30'000 people had

a definite village feel although it was quite touristy. We soon found out, that there were two reasons for that; the first one was that the village had many old and well preserved houses in the center. The second reason was that due to the higher altitude, cherry blossom opened here a few weeks later and they were in full bloom, just now!



We stayed in the center and were pleased that we now didn't need to squeeze in a full metro anymore each time upon leaving, but could easily reach everything on foot. As we were the only guests in Ryokan Oh-Machi, we were lucky and got upgraded to a two room luxury suite.

Our apartment consisted of an 8 Tatami (13 m²) sleeping and a 6 Tatami (9.7 m²) sitting area. It was wonderful and we

definitely had more space than an average Japanese family. We had seen advertisements of real estate agents in the city where only the most expensive flats had two or exceptionwise even three rooms. The smallest apartments we had seen on offer, had one combined sleeping/living room of only 4.5 Tatami (7.3 m²) plus a small bathroom but no kitchen at all! Although the most common apartment in the city might be a bit bigger; say ~6 Tatami (9.7m²). On top of it, there are usually another 6 m² for toilet, shower, kitchenette and corridor together. More luxurious apartments might have a second bedroom of about 4.9 m² and outside in the suburbs, there are some bigger and more affordable options, but they are still small by any non-Japanese standard; everything is Bonsai in this country, not only trees!

In Japanese society, everything is regulated and people stick to the rules. In the apartment, everybody leaves his shoes at the entrance and in public places like accommodation and those restaurants where you sit on the floor, slippers of different sizes will be provided. With those you walk up to your room where you take them off again, as it's not meant to wear any footwear on the Tatami mats. If you go to toilet, a special pair of slippers is provided just for use in there, as it's not considered clean to wear slippers that were used in the bathroom anywhere else in the house. Normally Kimono's are provided to guests to go to the bathroom where there will be a lilliputian stool on which to sit whilst soaping. Big bottles of shampoo, conditioner and soap were always provided.

After rinsing with a bucket or shower, you slip into the big hot tub, which is not meant to clean, but to relax. The tub rather functions like a spa pool and the water will be used by other people afterwards. It was very relaxing indeed but after a few minutes, our heads got too hot and we escaped out into the cool night to look for a place to have dinner.

Around Takayama, houses and apartments were more generous as it was a rural area but they often stood so close together that people could touch their neighbours wall when opening a window. Not far out of the village center, we found the first rice- and vegetable fields. They were squeezed in between houses and roads on every vacant plot even if it was not bigger than 10 m²!

Outside the village, houses were considerably bigger and some belonged obviously to rich people. Those houses were not necessarily very big, but they had wonderful elaborate roofs with small overlaying roofs edging each other. The other luxury were small gardens around the house, where every tree and bush was manicured.

The traditional architecture of old merchants' homes in the center of Takayama dated from the Edo period and were built around 1615. Their dark wooden façades are well preserved and their front is decorated by a grid of narrow planks that also cover the blinds of sliding doors and windows. In the olden days, thin rice paper was used to cover windows.

Only after seeing them we noted that even modern houses didn't have transparent glass windows. Either there was milk-glass or they had thick curtains which were closed all day.





For us it was most interesting just to walk between the village houses. Also here, space was very limited and we saw many garages where even very small cars didn't fit in entirely and so the garage door could only be closed down to the hood. Other people had to park in between walls in such a tight manner that their cars showed many scratches.

As all over Japan, sliding doors were used to save space. This applied not only to buildings, but also to buses, in order to squeeze more people in. As contact-mats or light barriers are not practical where there is no space, a touch sensor activates the opening mechanism of sliding doors. Also emergency stairs were built the space-saving way. Lowered into the concrete floor of a 70 cm wide balcony, we found a foldable emergency ladder that allowed reaching the balcony below, which in turn had the same system installed.

Many gardeners took advantage of Takayama's cool climate and we enjoyed to walk along its streets with the old houses, temples and the many rivers. Near the most touristy parts, big gold-fish had been introduced to the river to please Japanese tourists. There were many alleys with lots of cherry trees along the water and everybody wanted to get pictured on the orange bridge.

On our last morning we visited the folk village "[Hida No Sato](#)" where a collection of old traditional houses could be seen. Many had steep slanted roofs covered in thick layers of thatch grass. The oldest of the 30 houses dated from 1751 and all were very big. Rooms could be arranged and altered by combining sliding doors that served as walls as well. Only wood and strings were used to withstand the frequent earth quakes. During winter there is lots of snow up here and so roofs must be strong. It didn't look as if there was much insulation against the cold but then they have had a fireplace with no chimney.



Kyoto: one of Japans former capitals

Later on we took a train to [Kyoto](#), one of Japans former capitals which is, together with Tokyo a big "must see" on any tourist itinerary. The first thing we got to see of this city with 1.4 million inhabitants was the new ultra modern railway station that is almost 500 m in length. Apart from its purpose, it houses a huge shopping center with an abundance of department stores and several floors of café's and restaurants plus of course; also a big food-show. This building is very special. Not only what was on sale, but also the architecture was a feast for the eyes.

Again we stayed in a Ryokan with a central location but this one was full to the last Tatami every night. With change of rooms, we stayed for 8 days. Tourists mainly flock to Kyoto for its over 2'000 temples and shrines. Of course, we could only see a fraction of them but it was interesting how different they were. Some temples would charge an entrance fee, others could be visited for free. We soon realized that those that cost money to enter were not necessarily more beautiful, they rather were of more historic significance. Especially the most historic temples and shrines that cost a lot, were usually overran with tourists and large groups of school children. On these school excursions, children wore what they always wear – for 7 days a week: a dark blue or black suit-like uniform with white shirt and tie. Once we sighted a group of 100 students sitting on the floor which reminded us of a stricter version of a youth camp in China during "Mao Tsetung".



Most Japanese school children study like mad from Monday to Saturday with almost no spare time to themselves. On Sunday they often attend cram courses or go for sports to the school ground. Pressure for success starts at a very early age. We've heard of little machines to teach them reading before they can even talk and parents "helping" them to walk earlier than their bones are ready. We have never seen so many people with O or X legs as in Japan and the fact why most elder people have hump backs is our guess; it is either caused by their working so hard or their incessant bowing...

It's impossible to mention and describe every temple we've visited but some of the most striking features were often the entrances. These would distinguish a Buddhist temple from a Shinto shrine. The gate of the latter is called a "torii" that is composed of two upright pillars jointed at the top by two horizontal cross-bars, the upper of which is normally slightly curved. They were mostly made of wood and painted orange, others were cut in stone or formed in concrete and steel. Buddhist temple gates are called "mon" and they look more like a building with multitiered roofs of which some were as big, they had walkways around, decorated by woodwork and guardian figures between those roofs. As temples and shrines could share the same ground, it could be confusing to tell them apart.



Buddhism is much more alive than we thought and there were many believers visiting these holy places. There were usually fountains on which believers purified themselves before entering the temple. Later some would burn incense sticks and once there was a prayer wheel almost too big to be turned by one person only. From young to old, Japanese could regularly be seen praying, donating money for a wish, buying temple charms or writing a wish for Good fortune on a piece of wood or paper to ask the deities for good health and today more often than not; for success in business.



We didn't see many of those famous Japanese gardens though but quite a number of pagodas. Many temples had long rows of big paper lanterns, almost one meter high, hung up and also big painted Sake casks as offerings.

The most outstanding shrine we had seen was Inari Shrine with a 4 km long path lined by the Sembon Toriis through the forested hills behind it. This path was almost uninterruptedly lined with orange toriis standing only a few centimeters apart, it was like walking through a tunnel of toriis. Towards the top of the hill, there were many tea-houses and again those ever present drink dispenser machines to refresh us sweaty hikers.

Located in another corner of the city, was the majestic golden pavilion of the Kinkakuji temple, reflecting in the pond before it.

On Sunday, April 29, 2007 Japan celebrated the start of it's Golden Week holiday. Initially, there were 3 public holidays within a 7 day period. Meanwhile the government declared a 4th (a bridge-day) and then the entire week as a national holiday in order to get people off their jobs. Of course, it couldn't stop everyone to work.

Anyway, it was a beautiful day and we were delighted to find ourselves among a little bit more colourful crowd of families and quite a number of people wore the Kimono.

To rent a boat and go paddling on the Hozu River was very popular now that temperatures had climbed up to 25°C. Many





people also visited nearby temples and shrines. Through a small very picturesque bamboo forest we reached the most unusual temple: Adashino. Here thousands of small stone images, often of Buddha, were crammed into the temple yard. They are believed to be grave stones from as early as 700 AD and nobody knows anymore whom they belonged.

Modern grave yards were also very interesting to visit. As space is scarce, Japan does not only have a system of compressed living but also of compressed r.i.p.! Although there were no shelves as with urns, graves were very small and gravestones literally squeezed in between houses wall to wall.

Back to enjoying life: in Kyoto, the popular cherry blossom viewing "Hanami Sakura", had ended here about two weeks ago. In some parks we saw that cherry trees were illuminated at night and we heard from some other tourists how legions of business men and women had flocked to the parks in their usual stiff attire, rented mats at 10 o'clock at night to pick-nick with fast-food and get drunk underneath the blossom.

Correct attire is a very important part of society and the black suit is probably the most important tool to go to work or to school. Also craftsmen mostly wear uniforms and a tie. Taxi drivers all wear black uniforms with white gloves and a stiff hat like a pilot. Seats of taxis are covered by white embroideries and to speed up boarding, the taxi driver is able to open and close the passenger doors on the push of a button.



Even when we, as outsiders, believe everything looks perfect, Japanese know when it is not! We had seen business men in shiny black shoes queuing up to have those shoes polished with more shoe shine!

To enter certain buildings, it's customary to take off shoes. In some places like museums or guesthouses, someone will take care of these shoes to be turned for the guest to easily slip them on again upon leaving and arrange all shoes in a neat line. In noble restaurants they may attach numbers to them and give the guest a receipt. In front of a temple we had once seen two long rows of white children's sport shoes arranged in a correct line. Yes, students are allowed to wear sport shoes with their black suit-like uniforms.



A very strict uniform, although of an entirely other kind, is attributed to the famous [Geishas](#). Painting their faces white and styling their hair in a particular way, they are wearing elaborate Kimonos with the wooden clogs, called geta. Apparently there are only about 180 Geisha in Kyoto and less than 1'000 all over Japan. In certain areas they can sometimes be seen around dawn, when they enter a tea-house in which they entertain their well heeled clients. A group of wealthy customers might pay up to € 2'500 for the company of two to three Geishas. Without "hunting" for them, as legions of other tourists did, we were lucky to come across almost 20 of these women, mostly in Kyoto but also in Tokyo.

To visit the covered market was a nice change to all the temples. For us there were many unusual things on offer, including some special Sashimi (raw fish) creations. Other things included pickles of any kind and colour. Battered food like Tempura and most other items were in general ready to eat rather than to be cooked. The diet of Japanese must be very healthy, as we had almost never seen fat people. Another factor for this is maybe also because they always take their time to sit down and eat. You never see them munching something down while on the run. After working, eating is probably their second obsession – which is probably rather an addiction.

Tokyo: back in Japans populous capital

On May 1st 2007, we shot back to Tokyo with the Shinkansen bullet train. For our remaining six days the weather was nicer here than in our first week and it was the middle of the Golden Week holiday. However, the Post Office and every other shop was still open 7 days a week. Still, many office-people felt the urge to work until midnight. Those that did go out with their family could now dress “casually” that means: they wore the same as people do in other countries to go to work.

Only a few freaky young people break out and those are known as the “costume play gang” or Cos-Play-Zoku, especially teenage girls. It starts with dying their hair and wearing lots of make-up. They wear whatever helps them to look different and brings them a far cry away from the masses. Many of these kids are being bullied in school and find release and expression in their temporary weekend identities. They usually assemble at Meiji Park on weekends and now there were also many families enjoying themselves in that park. Most had brought a mat along to sit in the grass and everyone loved to play sports games. There was a special fenced off area, where dog owners were allowed to release their darling from the ledge.



Here we watched with astonishment how half of the dogs, especially tiny dogs, wore T-shirts and one even a napkin. Other had their fur groomed and styled in different shapes. To save them exercise, some dog lovers pushed their “bonsai dogs” in special charts like children.



Later we had seen shops selling nothing but “dogs wear” in the fashion of bees, strawberries, Walt Disney characters etc.! In a society which suppresses selfexpression, individuality is probably expressed through pets.

On one of our last days we made an excursion to the Tokyo Bay, where we were mostly surrounded by families. They loved to dip their feet in the water or had a barbeque in the park. We enjoyed a long walk along the bay from where we could observe the working harbour and many modern buildings. Of course there were also many shopping- and entertainment centers and we saw the solution for those Tokyoites who would like to get married in Europe but don't have the time to go there: a “European style” wedding village complete with chapel and French restaurants.

Later, when we were hungry, we entered a restaurant that didn't have a printed menu but a computer with touch-screen on every table. With that system our order went directly to the kitchen and the waiter only had to deliver it and take a bow!

When it comes to pricing, everything is again made in a very correct way and they would never sell for example all sandwiches at ¥ 299. Oh no! Depending on their filling, it was calculated that they must cost: ¥ 298, 301 or 302.

On a rainy day we went to a shopping center and because of the holiday, lots of people did the same. We were not surprised anymore to see lots of black suited “Traffic Regulators” that were “helping” people with mega-phones to find their way to the next escalator from one floor to the next. The same guides could be seen on most busy pedestrian crossings, on any subway or railway platform, on bus stops or even in front of elevators. Wherever a Japanese flock goes, it is being herded around.

Of course there's also times when Japanese need their privacy. Even young couples hardly ever show affection in public and we've seen much more romantic couples in the parks of Muslim dominated Malaysia than here. On the other hand, Japan has so many Love-Hotels. They are



often very luxurious and offer theme rooms to fulfill most fantasies for a few hours. For maximum privacy entrances are almost hidden and kept separate from the exit. Where a garage can be seen from the outside, number plates of the guest's cars are being covered. Room keys and money are exchanged through a small opening without much contact between the receptionist and the guest.

Taboos and almost non-existent family lives create some more businesses; we learned that all Japanese business hotels are equipped with a coin operated sex-channel.



Somehow, we felt Japan was a very westernized society, especially in terms of technology, cleanliness and efficiency and how nothing felt corrupt. Security was no problem at all and people unconditionally trust each other. On the other hand, it's very obvious that Japanese are not trained to think for themselves and to criticize or question things around them. Even the Media that in theory enjoys freedom of press is somehow integrated in that system and executes a kind of self-censorship. In the two English language newspapers we had in the hostel in Tokyo, we were well informed about world news, but they really didn't mention much about Japan! If there is a local hot topic, it seems that these newspapers rather won't mention it at all than to report them in a critical way.

The world and especially America, China and Korea often accuse Japan for not properly apologizing for its war crimes. In fact, there are still wood carvings and painting on display in public places that glorify their wars against the enemies. Because Japanese have never been conditioned to question and criticize, they may seem old fashioned and hold on to old habits and mind sets much longer than a western society would where citizens have been conditioned to question their future and past.

In the west it would be better if the individual would be a bit less egoistic and think more of the society. On the other hand, the Japanese society shows the consequences which appear when peer pressure forces everyone to bleak with the flock. Annually 30'000 Japanese take their own life. One third of them were owners of companies or managers in leading positions who believe they failed on their job. At least 10'000 people more literally work themselves to death – the Japanese word for that is [Karoshi](#).

Another problem is an increasing number of homeless people. We read about the reasons why they become homeless and they are quite astonishing and frustrating! These people are too afraid to go home and choose to become homeless because they won't cope with the pressures of society anymore. In some cases they had "done wrong" things like getting divorced or refused to join their workmates for the daily drinking sessions. They earned so much mobbing for this major faux-pas from their group that they finally dropped out and preferred to live in a card-board box. They must feel so much better having escaped that they refuse the governments offer to give them jobs and apartments. We had seen many of them but not one was begging – it seems that they found some other ways to survive. They are still Japanese though, and we heard that they arrange their shoes properly outside their card-board box each night before they go to sleep.



For us, Japan was a unique experience. The sights were already a very fascinating thing but watching the Japanese way of life was the main highlight. It had been much easier to communicate with people than we had thought. Due to their aim to be perfect, they mostly answered "no" if we asked them whether they spoke English. If we ignored that, they would be able to help us anyway. We also met some that had a good command of German or French and on TV there were Spanish lessons. Once a Japanese understood our question, he really felt responsible for us and if he had by accident given us the wrong answer, he would follow us into the street or into the train to correct what he'd been telling us. Every

Japanese is able to read the Latin alphabet, even if he doesn't master another language and companies often use Latin characters only for their company name.

Japan had been a very easy and comfortable country to travel and one of the most interesting we have ever seen!

On May 7th, 2007 we flew from Tokyo to Bangkok and connected there to Koh Samui, where we boarded a ferry to Koh Phangan. Here we first assembled this travel story about Japan and also enjoyed Haadrin's nice beach, where police ensures that tourists are not being disturbed by beach-hawkers and 'Inter Pool' is ever so busy constructing new swimming pools.

For one last time we headed back to our temporary base [Singapore](#), on June 05.

Singapore: Farewell to a special city

On June 10th 2007, we were in the middle of our last visit to [Singapore](#) - at least during this trip. When we arrived in this multicultural city exactly one year ago, we didn't know, that this place shall become the base for our further travels to Thailand, Africa, China, a naturist holiday in Western-Australia, before continuing to Borneo and finally Japan.

Now, it was already our 7th stay within a year and we will have spent more than two months altogether here, when we leave in a few days time. We loved to stay at Kerbau Hotel in colourful "Little India", we loved to stroll around "Chinatown" or the Malay Quarters "Kampung Glem". Then again we strolled along the modern shopping complexes or the huge and traditional markets like Bugis. We loved to sample the excellent choice of superb food from all over the continent, if not the world, in the town's uncountable food-courts and restaurants. We loved to mingle with, and watch the locals, who are trying to combine modern living with their traditional culture.



It was also an extremely safe place to be. Only after returning from South Africa, we realized and appreciated how extremely safe this city is. Not only can you walk everywhere by day or night; in the food courts, we regularly watched, how locals "reserved" a place by depositing their wallet on the communal tables, while choosing the food at the different stalls. Then, before they went to pay, picked up the wallet and deposited their mobile phone on its place!

Every day, we drank several ice-cooled and freshly prepared fruit juices; we certainly didn't have a lack of vitamins when we left Asia. Since most Singaporeans also eat out three times a day, nobody thought we are just some more rich tourists!

It was refreshing to see how relaxed the Singaporeans behave and dress, in comparison to how we had seen it long ago. Nowadays, stiff business attire is 'out', whereas (copy) Birkenstock, T-Shirts and Shorts are 'in'. To us, this gave the city a more humanely and more sympathetic feel and we grew to like Singapore even more than last time.

In this amazing city state, there is always something going on and although Singaporeans do not really advertise their festivals for tourist purposes, visitors are always warmly welcomed. During the year Singapore was our base, we were so lucky to be 'at the right spot at the right times', that we could experience four mayor festivals: Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali, the mid autumn festival and the most memorable: Thaipusam. All were very inspiring and eye opening.

To us, the city's life and its inhabitants were the real attraction; we didn't even attempt to visit the official tourist sites like Sentosa Island or the Zoo, as we did 20 years ago.



Mingling with the locals in the food courts, markets, shopping centres or just on the street, was so much more rewarding. Even now, after having spent here more than 60 days during the last twelve months, Singapore still revealed some unknown hidden gems every day. We hardly had time to do at least some last minute souvenir shopping, before heading back to Europe, after more than 3 ½ years overseas.

Surely, we were looking forward to see our friends and relatives again, but deep in our hearts, we were a bit sad to leave Singapore, which had become more than our temporary home away from home.

Departure

On June 14th, the night guard from our hotel in Little India gave us the arranged wake-up call at 4 o'clock in the morning. From the window, Brigitte saw that there was already a taxi waiting in front of the entrance, although we had ordered it only for 4:30h. So she decided we have to hurry up. We quickly hopped into our clothing, grabbed our packs and rushed down to the reception 5 minutes later. However, now the Taxi driver felt bothered, as his intention of arriving early, was to first have breakfast with the receptionist!



Anyway, it was an efficient and cheap ride to Changi Airport. It wasn't even 5:00 AM yet when we arrived, just to find our flight with Qatar Airways flashing on the big departure board, announcing in bright letters:

"DELAYED to 5:00 PM". Both of us instantly though, how much nicer it would have been to sleep in, have a last breakfast at Bugis food court and dive into the city again, instead of heading off to the Airport in the middle of the night just for nothing! Never mind, we headed to the check-in counter, to get rid of our luggage. Here, an employee of Qatar informed us that their plane (ours?) is waiting for a spare-part in Jakarta and that they would try to re-book us on a flight with "SQ" this morning (never mention the real name of a competitor). So we should wait on the nearby benches, until they have organised something for us.

About 1 ½ h later, a Qatar employee guided us, together with 7 other passengers with destination Zürich, to one of Singapore Airlines' check-in counters. Here, we got a group-ticket for a nonstop flight with SQ=Singapore Airline to London Heathrow with connection flight on Swiss Airlines to Zürich. One group member was chosen as our "travel guide". That meant, he had the duty to arrange the check-in for the onward flight from London to Zürich for the entire group of 9 Passengers.

The (unexpected) flight with Singapore Airlines to London was just perfect to say good-bye to our last temporary home-country, while flying towards our original home country. Due to the fact, that the arrival of Singapore's new A380 Super-Jumbos was delayed for two years, the Airline used a little bit an older B 747, but the service was very, very good. We were surprised to find them serving Swiss yoghurts and the personal in-flight entertainment system offered even one movie in a dialect of our mother tongue Swiss-German. This is quite unusual, as most movies shown in the German part of Switzerland are spoken in proper German. But, what we never experienced before: Singapore Airlines flight attendants always called us by our names, when they served us. It was nice, but we assume this was a special "treatment", only pampering those passengers who had been re-booked from Qatar to Singapore-Airlines.

After a very strict security check in London-Heathrow, we boarded a plane from Swiss and we knew that Asia's smiling faces had definitely been exchanged, when we heard the familiar "grüezi" (hello) from Switzerland. The flight was more or less a "business shuttle" from London to Zürich, with a few tourists on the spare seats. After having been to Japan only five weeks ago, we found that European Businessmen dress soooo relaxed!

After the experience on the previous flight, it was clear that Swiss could not match that service. It's obvious, that due to the price pressure in this industry, all airlines had to cut costs and therefore (especially on short haul routes), today, the service is a bit limited. Basically; you get what you pay for and only airlines originated in countries with cheap labour or their own sources of fuel, can easily offer a bit more.

Brigitte & Heinz



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