

Tokyo, Trains, and Takoyaki: A Railway Trainee's Account of Japan

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From my experiences in Japan, I concluded that the country has an excellent public transportation system by international standards. All major cities such as Tokyo and Osaka have extensive subway, train and bus networks, allowing the traveller to visit any place within a city and its environs. After getting accustomed to using them, I began to appreciate these transit systems for their punctuality, convenience, good service and low cost.

To convince you of the validity of my judgement, let us run through the facts: In a single 24 hour period, East Japan Railway Co. (JR East) operates more than 12,000 train services on a network of 7502 kilometers. The Greater Tokyo Metropolitan area is served by JR East, which must daily complete the task of moving approximately 30 million passengers. Considering the scale of such an operation, I was pleasantly surprised to know that the transit companies are sensitive to the safety and comfort of each passenger. For example, JR East is attempting to alleviate rush hour congestion by concentrating on the required number of trains, increasing the number of cars per train, and boosting passenger capacity per car. Advanced technology is at work in the transportation world as well. A computerized control system known as the Automatic Train Stop-Pattern (ATS-P) prevents trains from exceeding the speed limit or passing a stop signal. By minimizing the possibility of driver error, this system both increases safety and efficiency, enabling trains to run at shorter intervals. Automated technology allows swift management of commuter traffic in the stations—automated ticket machines and turnstiles are simple and easy to use. To buy a ticket these days, it is only a matter of looking at the map to find the destination fare, inserting the proper amount of money, and selecting the correct fare button. The innovations do not stop there. As a railway trainee in Japan, I observed many interesting projects unfold—since 1991,

double-decked rail cars such as those on the Joban and Tokaido lines have been developed. It is as if the charm of the double-decker buses of London have welded with the utility of Japanese trains. Another change being gradually implemented is the use of freight tracks to expand the speed and domain of passenger services. Faster long-distance commuter trains and augmented shinkansen services are also part of the progress. All this is in the interest of keeping the metropolis on the move.

Off the tracks, taxis and buses provide alternative transport. For taxis, the fare differs according to destination and depends also on the taxi-size, for there are small, medium, and large cabs available. With such a myriad of ways to get from point A to point B, the passenger must agree: Japan's transportation system is impressive indeed.

Although Japan's capital, Tokyo, is grand in its own right, it was Osaka, the center of commerce and industry, that left a lasting mark in my memory. Ever since it was one of the nation's first capitals in the seventh century and developed into a city of

prime importance, Osaka has consistently led the advance of Japanese culture. The lively streets brimming with boisterous peddlers reminded me of how the spirited Osaka merchants of the past were free thinkers, contributing to and supporting the creation of a rich tradition of popular culture. For example, the traditional Japanese arts of the tea ceremony and of flower arrangements, as well as the world-famous performing arts of Bunraku, Kabuki, and Noh all originated and were cultivated in Osaka. To get a taste of the roots of Japanese culture, I recommend an excursion to this colorful city. And there is the added bonus of a charmingly distinct regional dialect.

Concerning Japanese patterns of behavior, I found that the Japanese find it hard to leave work at the end of the day unless someone else leaves first, manifested by the fact that many employees do not take the paid time off to which they are entitled because they are worried what their superiors and colleagues will think of them. When a number of Japanese people get together, unconsciously they decide their social ranking based on age or so-



Mr Ishak Bin Hussin in Shinkansen Driver's Cab

cial status, and this has an effect on how they behave. It is interesting that on one hand, the Japanese behave in a homogeneous manner (for example, not wanting to be different, or to stand out), yet on the other hand, they are extremely cognizant of various social hierarchies and rankings. There is a tendency not to say yes or no very clearly. Normally they will prefer to say "tabun" which means perhaps or maybe. Even if they say yes or no, they tend to preface the statement with lengthy explanations in an effort not to hurt the other person's feelings. Subtle emotions can be read on the face or through behaviour. The Japanese engage in subtle powerplays, and any meeting of two or more people can turn into a complicated mental chess board where conciliation is sought. Such powerplays often take place behind the scenes. Powerplays also play a role in group decision making. This is illustrated by the fact that the Japanese have a special word for bottom-to-top consensus building: "nemawashi." As far as social interaction is concerned, face-saving is crucial, and decisions are often made to save someone from embarrassment. Japanese people on the whole do not seem to be very argumentative. They are quiet, respectful, and patient. Modesty and self-restraint are highly valued. Regarding Japanese gestures, formal introductions and rituals are very important. Knowing how to act in these situations is a difficult task for foreigners, so I will describe a few of these social rules which comprise the ethos of the nation. To begin, it is impolite to yawn in public. You should sit erect with both feet on the floor. Beckoning is done with the palm down, and pointing is done with the whole hand. Shaking one hand from side to side with the palm forward means no. When shaking hands, try to avoid being too firm or "pumping."

It is my impression that the Japanese people are very polite and believe in humility, for it is good manners to address

people by their title as well as by name. They often laugh when they are embarrassed. It seems that they tend to display little facial emotion although they smile a lot. Most people dress very conservatively and formally.

Of the many Japanese ceremonial occasions, the one I found particularly intriguing and distinctive was the Kan-Kon-So-Sai in which Kan (Coming of age ceremony, January 15) celebrates the coming of age, or initiation into adulthood of people who have reached the age of twenty. In Japan, upon reaching the age of twenty people have the right to vote, to get married without parental consent, to drink alcohol and to smoke tobacco.

Concerning Kon (Weddings), people often get married in Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian places of worship. After the couple get engaged, there is usually an engagement ceremony, followed by the wedding ceremony which is attended by both sets of parents and friends.

An interesting fact about So (Funerals) is that today almost all bodies are cremated due to environmental damage done by the construction of cemeteries and the difficulty of securing space for graves. It is an example of practicality shaping culture. There are many Sai (Festivals) in Japan. In these vibrant events, whole towns and villages join together to hold memorial services for the departed souls of their ancestors, or to give thanks in autumn to the Shinto gods of the harvest.

However, ceremonies are special occasions and do not occur everyday. One pervasive, everyday aspect of Japanese culture is the cuisine, which consists of

seafood, meat, vegetables, and rice. Unlike in other religion-influenced cultures of Judeo-Christianity, Islam, and Hindu, there are hardly any religion-based customs prohibiting consumption of fish or meat. The only dietary rule that existed was the prohibition of meat-eating by Buddhism until 130 years ago. For this reason most Japanese do not know about such restrictions imposed by other religions. Coming from a Muslim background, I found this rather surprising, and it was consequently difficult to explain religious dietary laws to the Japanese. Glasses are held while beer, juice, sake and other beverages are poured into them, and it is considered good manners to fill one's partner's glass before filling one's own. A surprising dining custom is some degree of slurping when eating miso soup, western soups and noodle dishes. Therefore, what would be bad manners in the West is common practice in Japan.

A warm aspect of Japanese culinary culture that I enjoyed are the street stalls that sell Chinese noodle dishes, stewed items known as "oden," alcoholic drinks and snacks, and "tako-yaki," which are bite-size, ball-shaped fried octopus dumplings. Therefore, a visit to Japan will immerse you in its culture, right down to your stomach. Domo, gochiso-sama deshita. (Thank you very much, Japan, for a wonderful meal!)



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