

Japan Diary

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Back in 2000, I spent 6 months in Japan on a JR East Fellowship. Although the moment has passed, the experiences are still fresh in my memory. My stay enriched my knowledge, opened my mind and strengthened my spirit.

It is not wise for me to compare Japan and Malaysia in terms of technology; Japan is Malaysia's *sempai* (respected elder) and has been a technology mecca for many Asian countries. In the early 1980s, the Malaysian government's *Look East Policy* encouraged students to enhance their technical skills and knowledge by studying at universities and colleges in Japan. Additionally, the government also offered Japanese companies attractive tax breaks to expand in Malaysia. Both countries have benefited from the ensuing transfer of technology and Malaysia has developed into an industrial economy. Upon arrival at Narita Airport, I was struck by an aquarium in the Arrivals Lobby with a red fish swimming inside it. A closer

inspection showed that it was actually a lifelike robot! I realized that I was in for a taste of Japan's hi-tech society.

On one of my first free days, I visited Tokyo Tower to get a bird's-eye view of Tokyo's oceans of buildings, which are an odd mixture of old and new. There were small pencil-like buildings built on the tiniest parcels of the world's most expensive real estate, as well as massive 'intelligent' skyscrapers and all was criss-crossed by a maze of roads and railway tracks. Although the Tokyo cityscape is typical of an advanced and progressive country, in my heart I felt pity for Tokyoites because there seems to be almost no greenery where they can relax and escape from the other 18 million people in Tokyo's 23 wards.

The heart of the city is encompassed by the Yamanote Line which is world famous for its overcrowding and fast, punctual services through most of Tokyo's subcentres—Shinjuku, Harajuku,

Shibuya, Akihabara, Ueno and Ikebukuro, each of which has its own character. Shinjuku has its Times Square shopping centre, skyscrapers and business area; Harajuku its faddish fashion parade; Shibuya its popular Hachiko meeting spot, Tokyu (109) department store, capsule and love (short-stay) hotels; Akihabara its electrical and computer shops; Ueno its park and museums; Ikebukuro its Seibu and Tobu department stores and Sunshine 60 high-rise building. I noticed that passengers' behaviour on the Yamanote Line was more interesting than in Malaysia, especially young women applying cosmetics and adults reading comic books. Unlike Malaysians, Japanese are avid readers while travelling, perhaps explaining the huge range of magazines, etc., available in shops and news-stands. Train passengers in Malaysia prefer sleeping or daydreaming—what a waste! However, recently it seems that younger Japanese have stopped reading



Book worms on Yamanote Line

(Author)



Umihotaru Island on Tokyo Bay Aqua Line (Japan Highway Public Corporation)



Author (third from right) taking Japanese language class at Overseas Vocational Training Association (OVTA) (Author)

and are spending their free time on trains sending e-mail from mobile telephones. During my second week, an earthquake hit at about three in the morning. I was shocked and could not get back to sleep because it was my first experience of an earthquake. Afterwards, I was worried about travelling in subways in case an earthquake hit but I later found that all modern structures are fully earthquake-proof.

As a Muslim, I had two worries about spending 6 months in Japan—could I perform my prayers and would my religious dietary restrictions be difficult to observe? There are mosques in Otsuka, Shin Okubo, Shibuya, Asakusa, Chiba, Narimasu and other places outside Tokyo so I had no problems in performing my prayers. When there was no mosque, I performed my prayers in other open spaces, parks, etc.

I came with a 3-month supply of Malaysian foods, curries, etc., because I guessed I could not tolerate Japanese food, especially *sashimi* or raw fish. Amazingly, after 1 month I had adapted; I found many cheap restaurants where I could eat *soba* buckwheat noodles, *udon* noodles, and seafood and vegetable dishes. The ubiquitous AM-PM, Family Mart, and 7 Eleven convenience stores all sold *onigiri* rice balls and bread 24 hours a day.

A very new experience was the token-vending machine outside cheap restaurants; instead of paying inside the restaurant, one first buys a token from the machine and exchanges it for the chosen dish. Soba noodles eaten while standing convinced me that some Japanese people are always in a hurry. I was shocked to find alcohol on sale in the very few Muslim restaurants, even though it is proscribed.

An interesting spot is the Tokyo Bay Aqua Line (TBAL). At first, I thought it was just a bridge connecting Kisarazu in Chiba with Umihotaru Island 5 km offshore, but actually this island is man-made and is the entrance to a 10-km undersea tunnel to Kawasaki on the Tokyo side of Tokyo Bay. The project to link Kisarazu and Kawasaki was one of Japan's largest public works in the late 1990s and construction involved excavating in difficult soft submarine ground. Although the toll to cross Tokyo Bay through the TBAL bridge

and tunnel is very high, it cuts the journey time to just 20 minutes instead of making a long 2-hour drive through Tokyo.

Japan has become the second largest economy in the world and English is spoken widely in the Japanese business and engineering world, but proficiency in Japanese is still a must for making the most of an extended stay in Japan. My fellow trainees came from Vietnam, Thailand and Mongolia so communications between us and our teachers in English was difficult and based mostly on sign language! But as our 6-week course in basic Japanese progressed, we were able to use simple Japanese to express ourselves, get around and ask questions. I found that being almost totally immersed in Japanese culture and environment gave more opportunities to practice phrases that we had learned in class and help speed our understanding of Japan and her people. ■



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