

Tokyo House Hunting

Claire Hénault

Japan is well known as a country with a highly complex business culture; European businesses who want to be successful in this market must not only understand Japanese culture but also adapt to it. Otherwise, cultural conventions and the language will prove insurmountable obstacles. To prepare Europeans for the Japanese market, the European Community introduced the Executive Training Program (ETP) in Japan. It is an 18-month intensive training course, which provides high-level personnel with the necessary knowledge to be successful in the Japanese market. For me, Japan is a fascinating country of economic miracles, harmony between modernity and tradition, ancient history.... I wanted to focus my career on Japan to become better acquainted with the country and its people, so I applied for the ETP in Japan and was accepted.

I am a French woman, but have worked for some years as a project manager in Germany for one of the world's largest insurance companies with a branch office in Tokyo. Thus, I was able to combine my strong personal interest in Japan with my career. The ETP made it possible for me to acquire the necessary language skills and cultural competence.

I arrived in Tokyo from Europe in May 2002 for a minimum stay of 18 months. Due to the financial support of the ETP and my position in an international

insurance company, I was able to achieve a stable situation, making my life easier and allowing me to concentrate on my studies. But there was a substantial difficulty immediately after my arrival—house hunting.

I had 3 weeks to find an apartment before the ETP started. Fortunately, I was accepted by a Japanese family for a short homestay. Their support was a great help and thanks to them, I had an address and telephone and fax numbers that I could give to estate agents. Moreover, I had Internet access to facilitate exchange of information with estate agents. Apart from this logistical support, this family also provided moral support, helping me integrate quickly into Japanese culture.

I already knew that the housing market in Japan is completely different from that in Europe. I had read that leasing an apartment is an expensive affair, but my own experience also showed me that it is arduous and time consuming. At first sight everything seemed simple. Many apartments are vacant and rents are decreasing due to the deflationary recession. In addition, Tokyo has apartments for every taste—Japanese or western, in individual houses or multi-story buildings, in calm residential areas or lively centres. Finding an appropriate place to live didn't seem likely to be difficult under these conditions, but my experiences proved otherwise; it is a genuine problem for foreigners to find housing in Tokyo.

As recommended, I bought the *Chintai*—the best known magazine for house hunting in Tokyo. Unfortunately, I couldn't read Japanese at this time and was not able to decipher the advertisements. I was dependent on my Japanese friends and my host family and we met nearly daily. They helped me with the first selection and with the contact with the estate agents and owners.

Based on this experience I can divide the Tokyo housing market into three groups.

The first group probably consists of more than 90% of all apartments, which are only let by Japanese to Japanese. Some of the reasons may be a result of language differences. This fear is well-founded, because most foreigners usually don't speak Japanese and most Japanese speak no English. Since all the contract documents are written in Japanese, this can lead to misunderstandings and problems. But for cultural reasons, there remains an aversion to dealing with non-Japanese, regardless of their speaking ability.

The second group encompasses most remaining rental apartments, which can be rented by foreigners. But first, all the formal conditions have to be met, and second a bond of trust has to be developed between the landlord and tenant. Therefore, every appointment with estate agents takes a great deal of time. Endless explanations regarding my situation in Japan, documents about my company, information on the ETP program and various business cards were necessary to satisfy the information required by the landlords. The smallest details regarding the potential tenant are recorded by the estate agent and all this takes place before even talking about an apartment!

The third group is comprised of so-called *gaijin* (foreigner) houses. These apartments are let without the usual Japanese formalities and requirements. No guarantor is needed for example. As a result, the rents for central locations are unbelievably expensive and an appropriate quality of life is not always assured. A European ETP colleague found a 21-m² apartment in this group for ¥200,000!

I focussed on finding housing in the second group. The Japanese procedure for renting an apartment is very unusual for Europeans. In Europe, the apartment is visited first, often with a large number of other prospective tenants. Then, if a potential tenant is interested, talks start

y ter- taly eri- ing eir ring hil- ake ors 2 on the ou- less ly's	TAKANAWA, SHINAGAWA , 222 sq. m., deluxe, 4 bedrooms, balcony, ¥950,000, also 4 bedrooms, 207 sq. m., ¥700,000.	house PLAZA 6941.
	NAKAMEGURO , great view, super deluxe, bright, 2 bedrooms, terrace, 143 sq. m., ¥700,000, 3 bedrooms, 185 sq. m., ¥850,000.	MIS
	SHINANOMACHI , 126 sq. m., 3 bedrooms, good-size living-dining room, balcony, ¥550,000.	AMEF Antiqu rental, Tokyo LEAS http://v

Gaijin apartment ads on English newspaper (The Japan Times)



View of Mt Fuji from my living room.

(Author)



Kitchen and dining room shared with my roommate

(Author)

with the landlord or estate agent. As long as the prospective tenant has a regular income, the contract is usually finalized. But this procedure is exactly the opposite in Japan. First, you talk to the landlord or estate agent to develop a bond of trust. This procedure can last a long time and needs patience, especially when the same questions are asked again and again and the same explanations repeated. At the time, I didn't understand why long discussions have to take place before an apartment can be visited because all preceding discussions seemed a waste of time if the apartment did not suit my taste. But my Japanese friends who were negotiating with the landlords and estate agents for me, had more patience. Even so, these discussions often didn't lead to an apartment visit. Moreover, although I managed to visit some 30 apartments, the housing battle wasn't won even if I liked an apartment. First an application form was filled out and presented to the owner. From then on, all I could do was wait for the landlord's decision. Only two of the many submitted applications resulted in a provisional let, but my happiness at success was soon dashed in both cases when the suggested rent suddenly jumped to a level that I could not afford! Some landlords didn't reply to my applications and if I asked, I was told that the apartment

had already been let. The search started over and house hunting became my principal occupation for 3 weeks. I spent 6 or 7 hours each day in negotiations with estate agents and visiting apartments. My classes at the ETP Japanese language school had already begun and I still hadn't settled down. The situation of most of the other ETP participants was different. They were supported by their companies in Japan with regard to house hunting or lived in gaijin houses, which I absolutely wanted to avoid.

Then one day, an ETP colleague came to me with an inquiry. He had found a beautiful apartment that was too large for one person and asked me if I would be interested in an apartment share. I had already had good sharing experiences in Germany and was familiar with the life, so I visited the apartment. It was in a nice central location on a calm green hill between Ebisu and Daikanyama stations just 10 minutes from the Japanese

language school and 15 minutes from the university where the ETP seminars on behaviour in Japan are held. In addition, the apartment was a gem—very bright and spacious with a marvellous view of the city. The rent was too expensive for one but quite sustainable for two. Needless to say, I took it and now I can even admire Mt Fuji (some 100 km distant) from my living room in clear weather.

Even if very strenuous, house hunting in Tokyo proved to be an interesting experience—I achieved insight into the Japanese commercial culture; I got to know the confusing Japanese address system and the character of many parts of central Tokyo very well, and I became familiar with the Japanese concept of politeness and patience encapsulated in the phrase, *gambatte kudasai* (don't give up). ■



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