

A Frenchman in Japan

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My interest in Japan began when I was around 15-years old. At that time, I would often watch *anime* (TV cartoons) and read *manga* (cartoon books). Over the years, this interest grew into a full-fledged passion for Japan. I started to learn Japanese at the beginning of my 3 year at Lille1 University Polytech'Lille, engineering school. Although I did not pay any tuition fees to study Japanese (as it was a third language), in return I was expected to engage in an internship in Japan. This internship was initially scheduled for 2011, but due to the Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March, my parents were against me going.

Last year, I decided to come to Japan and thanks to my Japanese teacher Prof. Jean Luc Rigal, and the kindness of Mr. Kunio Aoki, I was able to get an internship at the Railway Museum. This is how I attained my dream of discovering the country that so fascinates me—Japan.

It was the first time for me to be totally immersed in life in a foreign country. I was initially apprehensive. Even after studying Japanese for 2 years I still could not really speak the language or read kanji. I thought I would speak English most of the time and for small expressions I would use Japanese. Would I make mistakes? I had read a great deal of information about Japanese culture and I knew about the things that I must absolutely not do, but I was still concerned about whether I would be able to respond to all situations.

However, once I arrived at Narita I was relieved and reassured. All the information was also written in *romaji*, thus enabling foreigners to pass easily through the airport without any trouble. I subsequently realized that these convenient facilities are generally available at all stations. This is really something that struck me—although there is a great deal of information, it is always

displayed clearly. For example, when looking at the ground on the station platform, there are signs telling you where the train door will be, and what the number of the car will be depending on the line used. These small details may seem commonplace for Japanese people, but for a foreigner, they can dramatically change everyday life. Everything becomes easier, and one hardly needs to ask the station staff for help.

Thus I easily boarded the Narita Express (NEX) bound for Shinjuku, where I was scheduled to meet Endo-san. On the train, I appreciated the comfortable seats and ample leg room. The different scenery fascinated me from the rice paddies to the townscape and the rectangular shaped buildings. Everything was so different from what I had seen until then, and my eyes took in every little detail. I arrived safely and met with Endo-san as scheduled and to my relief she could speak English. We then went to meet Mr. Aoki, who welcomed me to Japan, and then Endo-san explained the schedule for my training and internship.

The Japanese are adept at hospitality and they pay attention to every little detail. I had no problems in moving in to my apartment, as Endo-san and Takahashi-san explained



Inside the Railway Museum History zone

(Author)

to me where it was situated. Not only were they kind enough to take me to my apartment, but they even showed me round the neighbourhood and pointed out the shops that would be necessary for daily life (the supermarkets and electric appliance stores, etc.). These explanations were tremendously useful. Thanks to them I didn't have to spend hours finding a supermarket or get lost in the maze of streets. The area around my apartment was easy to understand and I got my bearings easily. I think that this sort of attentive kindness is something one can experience only in Japan. Not only did Endo-san and Takahashi-san show me round the immediate neighbourhood, they also gave me a map that detailed other stores of interest. The Japanese certainly know what is needed in order to feel at home and relaxed.

Then my internship at the Railway Museum began. My self-introduction to the staff members at the museum was limited to two standard phrases I had learned during my Japanese classes. I was then able to chat with staff members, but I soon realized most do not understand English (or my English at least). Due to this fact, throughout my internship I made efforts to speak in Japanese as much as possible to deepen interaction with the staff members. Thanks to these daily efforts I learned new Japanese expressions and gradually became able to hold a conversation with the staff members. I do not know whether the fact of my trying to speak Japanese helped me to make friends, but in any case, everyone seemed to appreciate my efforts. By using only simple Japanese words, I could make myself understood and I found that they lost the shyness they showed when speaking English, and I feel that this helped have real conversations.

Being a foreigner has significant advantages. People come up to you out of curiosity, meaning that I did not have to make the first step. At the museum, I could talk with all age groups, from the very young to the older employees. It was an extremely rewarding experience, although I must admit that I had more difficulty understanding older people. Sharing our cultures was very interesting, and it helped me to create real friendships with various people. What really made me most happy was going out in the evening after work with my colleagues. It is at times like these, away from



About to take the Enoden.

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work, that hierarchical relations in the workplace become more blurred. It also helps understand the true character of other people. Afterwards, I found that this kind of interaction is called *nominication* (communication through drinking). When I told my colleagues that I knew this word they all laughed out loud.

On my days off, I planned to explore the Tokyo area. However, I found that doing this on my own was not much fun. When I talked with my colleagues about this they decided to come with me! This was really enjoyable as the situation changes dramatically when you are with someone who knows the area. It makes the experience all the richer! Together with my colleagues I was able to visit Asakusa and Nikko, where I could enjoy the stunning scenery of the Toshogu Shrine, the crests of the Tokugawa family and the Kegon Falls. Unfortunately, due to bad weather, I could not see the top of the falls. In addition, I also visited Kamakura, where I saw the Great Buddha and visited the Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine. I also enjoyed the splendid scenery at Enoshima, before travelling back along the coast on the 'Enoden' line to spend an evening in Yokohama, with a magnificent view of the Ferris wheel. I was also able to have the amazing opportunity to visit Mt Fuji with a friend who did not hesitate to introduce me to his family, where I stayed in the family home! I never thought that I would be able to have such an experience. All the memories of my stay come back to me as I write these lines. I will never forget these experiences and I will be sure to offer the same hospitality when my friends come to visit France because for me it was a great experience.



In Tono, with the JAL scholarship students.

(Author)

During my internship, Tanabe-san asked me if it was possible to find children's picture books about trains in French. This question was somewhat surprising, but the reason was because the museum was opening a new space for children on 21 July. They wanted to fill the library in the children's corner with many books in foreign languages. French books are particularly difficult to find in Japan and so I immediately launched myself into the challenge of finding the required books. In this way, I would be able to leave a trace of French culture and of my own time spent at the museum, and express my gratitude to the museum. I contacted my mother in France and asked her to find one or two books that would match the criteria of the books for which Tanabe-san was looking for. My mother involved the entire family, including my brothers and my father, in searching for the books. They eventually found three suitable books and immediately posted them directly to the museum. I feel very proud to have a family I can depend upon in this way. The fact that they had helped me make this present to the museum motivated me still further for the rest of my internship. I truly felt the support of my family, even though there was a great distance between us. Although I was not looking for anything in return and was pleased to have been able to give a present to the museum, something unexpected occurred. At the end of my internship, I had farewell lunch with the museum director and

other department heads. They brought up the subject of the present once again and it was obvious that they had really appreciated the gesture. I explained that the books were a gift from my family and we would be happy for the museum to accept them. I then received a present from the museum director and department heads. I opened the package, thinking that it must be a small commemorative gift to mark the end of my internship. However, when I opened the gift it turned out to be a wonderful pocket watch, the same as those worn by train drivers! Not only that, it was also engraved with the name and date of opening of the museum (14 October 2007). I was so surprised as to be speechless. Why would I be given such a wonderful present? I am just an ordinary student, not an influential person. They told me not to be concerned about the monetary value of the watch and that they were giving it to me as a token of appreciation for helping the museum. They also told me to come back to Japan, if possible with my family. One thing is for sure—I'll be back and hopefully with my family. This watch has priceless sentimental value to me because it contains all my memories. Every time I look at it I get the feeling that it is saying 'come back!'

During my internship, I also had the opportunity to participate in the JAL Scholarship Program in Iwate Prefecture from 1 to 4 July. About 20 foreign students from Asian countries were selected to participate in this program,

which was held to help the residents of Kamaishi City who had been affected by the tsunami, and listen to their stories. In this context, we had the opportunity to meet with the mayor of Tono City, and learned that it is the only major city linking the coast to the backbone of Japan (where the shinkansen passes), which made it a strategic hub for the organization of relief efforts to the stricken areas. Because my Japanese ability is insufficient I could not understand everything the mayor said, but I must admit that his words struck a chord in my heart. All the other students had a high level of Japanese and I felt a little out of my depth at the beginning. But once I overcame that initial feeling it was truly a tremendous experience. Among the things that remain etched in my memory are the ceremony with the monks on the Kamaishi coastline, the volunteers who explained their work to us, and the fish market, to name just a few. On a happier side of the trip, we also stayed in a traditional Edo period (1603 to 1868) house in Tono City, and we visited a primary school where we had the opportunity to play with the children and attend their classes. It was really funny, because as the only European in the group, I seemed to be an object of interest. Some looked at me as if I were a strange creature, others wanted to play only with me. We had to make a small presentation in Japanese to explain where we came from and teach them how to say hello in our own language. During this presentation there was an amusing episode. The school had prepared a map so that we could show the children where our home countries were, but it had to be changed because the map did not show France! The same day we went to the junior high school next door, had a discussion with the students and even had a meal with them. We were also able to attend classes and then participated in a kind of question and answer session with the students in the school gym. During the meal, I spent a long time talking with a young Japanese boy named Yosuke. He seemed really interested in my culture. I gave him my email address so that we could stay in touch, but he did not know how to use the internet, so I wrote a letter to him. I hope to start a penfriend correspondence with him because I enjoyed talking to him. His words when we left were particularly touching, 'mata kite kudasai' (come back again). I will never forget those words. I do not know if I will have the opportunity to return to Iwate Prefecture, but if I do, I will certainly go and greet everyone.

I think that most foreigners would not have the chance to experience the things I could see and do on the program. I was truly blessed with a wonderful opportunity. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Mr. Aoki for giving me the chance to participate. I was able to talk with people I would normally never have had the chance to meet and it left a deep and lasting impression. I have learned a lot from many people during those 2 months and during those 4 days

and discovered a lot more about the Japanese culture I love so much.

I had always been told that the Japanese are very strict in their work and that it is almost impossible to build inter-personal relationships. I now realize that the latter is wrong. Although the Japanese language may be difficult, just through conversation and discussing our cultures it is possible to create real person-to-person connections. If you treat the other person with respect, then everything is possible. Breaking the barrier of politeness is not easy, but once you have overcome that initial barrier you can speak with an open heart and make real friends. I'm thinking particularly of Araki-san, Yuka, Kasai-san and Masato-kun. There may be some people who will say that they are not like ordinary Japanese, but one thing is certain: they are great people. The things I will in particular on my return to France are Yuka's kindness and our endless discussions about Japan's history; enjoying delicious food and visiting various places with Araki-san; discussions on 'Black Sun' with Kasai-san; and last but not least, Masato-kun's smile. This first experience of Japan confirmed that I was not mistaken. Japan is truly a magical land when we begin to understand its customs, its people, and its language. I will continue studying the Japanese language and culture so I can once again visit and re-visit this unique country we call the 'land of the rising sun'. ■



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