

Second Home in Japan

Dilafruz Husanova

Let me briefly introduce myself first. Being originally from Samarkand, Uzbekistan, I grew up in Samarkand, until I turned 19.

Everything started with me while working as a local guide for NHK TV casting 'Itte miyo sekai no toshi' (Let's travel around the world). Back then, I was studying at the university of foreign languages.

All I did was guide the TV crew around historical places in my home town of Samarkand, and speak in my local language. I did not know any Japanese, and communication with the NHK staff was all in English. I had my closest friend with me because she was learning Japanese and could communicate with the TV crew in Japanese, which sounded so hard, let alone writing and reading complicated kanji characters.

But after I started working this first time ever with Japanese people, I found myself interested in Japanese language and culture, so after 2 weeks of NHK work experience, the first thing I did was change my French course at university to Japanese.

I still remember August 2001, when I first landed in Japan, especially its unique odor, which I noticed right away at Kansai Airport, the buzzing cicadas, and the humid weather. My friend and I were picked-up at the airport by our Japanese host family who went above and beyond, all the way from hosting us at their house to showing us around.

Right after arrival, we took a train to Kyoto, the heart and symbol of Japan with its old traditions and historical sites. When we reached our Japanese-style hotel, with its beautiful garden, we were amazed by its beauty and clicked our



Family trip to Karuizawa

(Author)



Family trip to Kamakura

(Author)

cameras non-stop.

Since both my friend and I were studying Japanese in Samarkand, we loved to practice our textbook Japanese with people we met. But realizing that textbook Japanese was rarely spoken in daily life was a bit disappointing in particular, because the Kyoto dialect is far from the standard language we were learning. But never mind, we quickly picked up some Kyoto dialect too, discovering McDonald's is MacDo in Kyoto, and just Mac in Tokyo.

Our friends showed us around Kobe, Kyoto, Osaka and Nara for about a week.

And next came Tokyo. We took the shinkansen from Kyoto Station and enjoyed our first *ekiben* (a boxed meal sold on trains and train stations).

Tokyo greeted us with a million neon lights and we felt it was truly enormous, with crowds almost everywhere. Another good thing was being able to hear and understand standard Japanese in Tokyo.

Nagano came next with its mouthwatering fruits and pleasant weather as a short escape from the humid Tokyo summer. As always, we had good friends in Nagano who hosted us and showed us around the Olympic Village. We were so lucky to have friends nearly everywhere in the country and their hospitality would always leave us speechless.

Oh yes, I almost forgot to mention that I even met the people who were why I started learning Japanese—the TV crew from NHK, and this time I was communicating clearly in Japanese.

When our trip ended, I was left with a huge desire and goal to study in Japan.

So I started preparing to take the Japanese government scholarship exam back in Samarkand and I passed it. Exactly 1 year later I came to Japan again, but this time I was a Japanese government scholar studying Japanese language and culture. I had a totally different experience from my first trip, but it was interesting. I saw Japan from another view, studied and made new friends.

I was confident I could mingle with Japanese students and get along well, since I didn't have a language barrier. I could make new friends, most of whom were hesitant initially due to the language barrier. But when they heard me speaking Japanese, they felt relieved and things moved faster and smoother from there. Initially my classmates wouldn't open up, but residential trips, and study camps organized by the university helped build better friendships.

A group of lady volunteers helped us learn the language and culture of Japan totally free of charge. They introduced overseas students to *ikebana* (flower arranging), *sado* (tea



Family trip to Tokyo Disneyland

(Author)

ceremony), *sumo* (wrestling), *kabuki* (theatre) and other cultural events. Moreover, they would sometimes bring different treats to the student dormitory as well as invite students home to dinner.

They were respected and appreciated by all the students. After completing my scholarship course, I decided to continue my studies and get my masters degree in Tokyo. It was a very fruitful 2 years, combining university research and part-time work experience in various industries. I worked at an apparel store, home electrical appliances store, as a Japanese/Russian interpreter, and Russian/English conversation teacher. But my biggest role was as a coordinator for Aichi Expo 2005, where I was involved in a Russian-Japanese project related to the mammoth exhibit at the Expo. Travelling to the Sakha Republic where it was -40°C and getting involved in mammoth findings was a breathtaking and exciting experience. I met and worked with different people with various backgrounds during this project and it was a great learning chance for me. I observed and learned how business

negotiations are led between two parties, how mutual international relations are built and maintained, and the importance of being a global-minded individual.

At the same time I finished my thesis on international aid and completed my studies. As we had various students in the class, ranging from fresh graduates to people with work experience and retired senior people, as well as overseas students, there was a good diverse mix for sharing different views.

My full-time working experience in Japan was not deep, because I married and had my first daughter. As everywhere, it's challenging to be a working mother with a newborn and its twice as challenging when you don't have your family by your side for practical support. So I quit work and took time to raise my daughter. Once I started being a stay-at-home mom, I realized I needed friends to talk with and share baby-related matters. I started attending different mom and baby classes organized by the local ward office and to my surprise I met many new moms just like me. We started meeting, organizing play dates, and sharing tips on raising

our babies. My initial worries and anxiety of not having my family around went away with the help of my wonderful and helpful *mamatomos* (mom friends). When I had a sick baby, they would drive us to a paediatrician or help with groceries, or take care of our daughter when my husband and I were packing our things for moving. I can't thank them enough for all the support they gave me, and for making my motherhood experience overseas easier, smoother and more fun. I still keep in touch with them, see their children growing up and their achievements and always feel happy for them.

When my daughter turned one, my husband was relocated to Singapore. It was quite a difficult decision for our family, since we were settled in Japan after 8 years. Tokyo felt like our second home and then there was a new challenge in a different and new country.

Ultimately we took the offer, since both of us were looking for new excitement and challenges in a new city. Saying farewell to Tokyo was not easy. Our farewells went on for 2 or 3 months, meeting with friends, exchanging new contacts and promising to meet again in some part of the world in future.

When I first arrived in Singapore, I was always comparing every new thing to Japan. At times, I wanted desperately to go back to Japan. But as time passed I discovered more things in the new city, made new friends, and by then my daughter could join preschool and I started working.

Working added more colours to my new life and helped me settle faster and smoother. I had my second daughter while working. I should mention that Singapore has a more open and kid-friendly environment, offering good chances for working mothers.

While living in Singapore, we travelled to Japan a few times, and each time we were delighted by the delicious food and nice seasons. We only realized in Singapore how good it feels to have four seasons. During our trips, I met my *mamatomos* and their kids, and we were amazed how kids can get along together well even without speaking a common language. Obviously, my kids don't speak Japanese and my Japanese friends' kids don't speak English, but the fun they were having was beyond words.

My *mamatomos* visited us in Singapore too and I truly appreciate this priceless tie we have made.

After living in Singapore for 6 years, when we were sure we wouldn't be heading to Japan anymore for a long-term stay, my husband received a relocation offer to Tokyo. We started thinking on whether to move or not, but decided to try our luck in Tokyo again.

We moved to Tokyo, this time with elementary and preschool, non-Japanese speaking kids. For them, Japanese is a foreign language and they are not used to see us speaking it. But the moment we started talking Japanese in Tokyo, they said they felt so proud of us.

My eldest daughter says she feels at ease, because even if we lose our way, mom and dad can speak Japanese and we won't get lost. Our kids love Japan, especially wearing winter warm clothes, scarfs, and gloves. Well, summer and swimsuits all year round can become boring!

We are exploring Japan again but there is still a lot more to see, learn and explore. I am sure this stay will be fruitful and give us even more experiences and adventures.

I am grateful for having a chance to visit this country. Making true friends, learning and exploring new things, having work experience, becoming a mother here—I could not possibly ask for more. ■



Dilafruz Husanova

Ms Husanova is a graduate of Yokohama National University Graduate School of (International Social Sciences). She has worked in private companies in both Japan and Singapore while raising her two daughters and currently lives in Japan with her husband and daughters.