

An Unexpected Journey to Japan: A Personal Log

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“Hey, even if you surround yourself with so many books about Japan, it will never reach the actual happiness when you experience Japan yourself,” my team leader told me. An enticing invitation to visit Japan to experience the country itself. A country that until today, exists only in my imagination.

I have been self-studying the Japanese language for a decade or so—I can read a novel in the original Nihongo and absorb more or less its plot. My pronunciation had actually been praised by a Japanese journalist. It was too good, he said. I can also explain some language-related stuff but never once in my entire “Japanese experience” have I set my foot on the country.

There were days where I just read random things about Japanese society and culture. I learned that some Japanese live a very Westernized lifestyle, which can be seen in European fashion houses lining up in Omotesandō,¹ in their English and Italian luxury cars, and in the cuisines that they enjoy. The confluence of ultra-high modernity and the preservation of a thousand-year-old culture never failed to amaze me. The culture that they preserved still lives in their technologically efficient society. Various festivals or *matsuri* filled with colorful traditions are celebrated yearly with enthusiasm, and show how Japanese culture is firmly rooted in its native soil.

My imagined Japan has been running vividly for so many years. For so long though, I have only been romanticizing how ideal it would be to live there, to meet her people, to speak her language, and to witness her traditions.

Thus, the moment I read the email last October 2019 that I would be going to Japan, I ran to our office pantry and nearly cried in happiness! Everything seemed surreal and dreamy. I never expected to make it to the University of the Philippines; and now they are sending me to Japan! There were so many first times for me: going out of the country, applying for a visa, riding a plane, etc. The program advisor for Japanese studies, Dr. Jocelyn Celero (Dr. Jho), asked me during the briefing, “You’ll never forget us, right?” and yes, this whole experience will stay with me until I die.

Our first order of business was to eat. We explored the Nishiki market but unfortunately, most of the stalls were already closed, so we settled in Saizeriya, an Italian restaurant. Dr. Jho told us that the food there is cheap and delicious, and she was right! The beef steak that I had was fatty and juicy, and the Japanese rice was so packed that one cup was enough for me. And talk about *nomihōdai!*² Since I could read Japanese, I saw a notice in all the food establishments that we visited that says, “the rice we serve here is domestically grown.” I noticed this too on the chopsticks. I never knew that they are this particular of their own rice. Now I see how much the Japanese respect their farmers and food.

I almost never felt tired during the whole trip even though we did not have a decent amount of sleep. It was the beginning of winter, so one morning, the temperature dropped to 3°C at 11 AM as we were walking in Kyōto. *So, this is Japan huh*, I thought. It did not dawn on me that I was already in Japan (probably because I was still refusing to believe everything was real) until the raw chilly air blowing from the entrance of Kansai International Airport hit my cheeks. We got around by bus, a series of complicated train rides and thanks to Google Maps, we were able to go to our destinations by foot.

Observing people, I saw several Japanese breaking the stereotypes of their being disciplined (though these are too minor): a man crossing a side street while the red light was still on; high school students talking loudly in the train; and naughty kids in the train platform. However, we also had our own misdemeanors: eating in the bus stop seat because the Lawson staff did not allow us to eat inside the store, and finishing my *onigiri*³ inside the train. I nearly bumped into someone because I was not paying attention, and took photos of places where it was not allowed, but overall, it was an orderly chaos.

The temples and castles we visited are so grand and amazing. In Nijō Castle in Kyōto, the sheer number of rooms inside concretized for me the bureaucracy of the Tokugawa era, which I had only read about. The size of each room emanates how much respect they gave to the Shōgun. Unfortunately, we were not able to visit the Kyōto Imperial Palace because of its enormous size and time constraints. Still, we saw from a distance we would need to walk just to reach the main gate alone.

In Nara Park, we took photos with the deer. Their horns were already cut, and it seemed that they only see people as source of food. Near the park is the Kasuga Shrine. We were lucky to see a group of people practicing for the upcoming Kasuga-Wakamiya Onmatsuri, a festival that aims to secure a good harvest and drive away misfortune. The banners held by participants were reminiscent of the war banners held by samurai long ago, except some of them now only state the festival's name. In Tōdai-ji, we passed through a small hole in a large pillar, which is said to be the same size as that of the giant Buddha's nostril inside the temple.

From Nara, we went back to Kyōto and rode the *shinkansen*⁴ to Ōsaka. In the hotel, we had dinner with the Panasonic managers. I have to admit, eating *kaiseki-ryōri*⁵ made me feel like a clueless kid, but it was amazing! I ate fresh sashimi, octopus and rice; and I loved the orange jelly inside a carved orange! The managers wanted to brief us on what to expect when we meet the president of The Konosuke Matsushita Foundation the following day. That night introduced me to the formalities of Japanese business.

After dinner, I asked Dr. Jho if I could take a walk so when she agreed, I immediately put on my jacket and sneakers and headed out. I walked for several minutes, absorbing the Nakanoshima lights and the cold air, checking the signages to make sure I was not lost. That was the moment I felt I was finally alone. I stopped at a Family Mart and bought Meiji Milk. Then I headed out to a bookstore called Bunkyōdō and looked through the shelves. I settled on a Mishima novel which the staff carefully wrapped in paper.

Our trip to Panasonic Eco-Technology Center in Hyōgo Prefecture materialized, for me, the respect the Japanese have for the environment. The company is not just recycling materials; they are mining all elements that they can find from broken appliances. With the government's encouragement, electronics corporations are competing with each other in this recycling process.

Before going to Japan, I told myself to make friends there. So, I did not hesitate and asked for the contact info of students from Ryūkoku University and Ōsaka University. I am enjoying talking to them in Japanese, and get enough practice in the language.

On our final day, we had dinner at Dōtonbori and went to buy *omiyage*⁶ and books. I enjoyed helping my tourmates (Ces, Faith, and Dom) to look for books they could buy. It felt nice helping them navigate through complicated kanji characters in the bookshelves, and I really enjoyed their company. Between Ōsaka and Kyōto, I prefer Kyōto. Maybe it is just the time of the day, but the ancient capital matches my search for inner peace. It is a large, bustling city, but I observe a certain air of peace there.

As I told many people, I never expected to make it to UP, much less to be sent to Japan for free. These good experiences with good people will never grow old on me. Many experiences affected my perception of Japan, and I thank many people for this. A country I have romanticized for so long, it is now a memory that grips my heart gently and warms me.

About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ Posh avenue in Tōkyō known for luxurious stores.

² All-you-can-drink. It is a common menu option in Japanese pubs.

³ Japanese rice ball filled inside with various fillings: meat, fish, pickled foods etc.

⁴ Bullet train

⁵ Traditional Japanese multicourse cuisine

⁶ *Pasalubong* (gifts for friends and family back home).