

Japan: like nowhere else in the world

By Sean McLennan

Japan. Land of the rising sun. A country behind a veil of mystery, where silence speaks to the spirit and what is left unsaid is often more important than words. Yeah, *right!*

The Japan of today bears little resemblance to the Eastern mystical idealization we in North America have fixed in our heads. A single phrase that would characterize the greater Tokyo metropolitan area: sensory overload. A more enrapturing, arousing, awe-inspiring, overwhelming, claustrophobic experience you will not find anywhere else in the world.

The “real” Japan is a place of contradiction and extremes. Here is one of the world’s leading industrial, commercial nations, yet even in downtown Tokyo you will find centuries-old buildings nestled between skyscrapers. It creates an eerie juxtaposition of old and new which reminds you that barely more than a century has passed since Japan left its feudal era. From the moment you step off the plane, you experience a barrage of recordings and signs; you are literally bombarded with information. Everything from instructions on how to correctly mount the escalator, to subtitles offering the names of songs and celebrities in TV commercials. The hoards of people on public transit have not been exaggerated in the North American media; god forbid you try to take the Tokaido Line at rush hour (and, if by chance you do, be sure to position your arms comfortably before you get on, ‘cause you won’t have the opportunity to move them until you get off).

Life in Tokyo is fast paced and chaotic. Yet, at the most unexpected moments, in the most unlikely places, the



TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

chaos will eject you into somewhere spacious and quiet—a grove of trees, a tiny Shinto shrine, a deserted alleyway; somewhere where you can actually see the sky with the red Japanese sun setting over Mt. Fuji—and it will take your breath away. That is when the silence speaks to your spirit. Because the cacophony has become so entrenched in your psyche, its release can be as powerfully stimulating as the noise itself.

Japan is an intimidating experience for travellers—particularly budget travellers who are intent on spending as little money as possible. Remember “little” is relative. When I lived in Japan, I wouldn’t have dreamed of leaving the house with less than ¥5000 (\$50, give or take) in my pocket or I might not have gotten home. The good news is that there is absolutely no tipping! Even cab drivers give change. It is possible, however, to survive without a tour group by employing

a little perseverance and determination. Especially in the urban areas where it’s not hard to find English signs and English speakers.

Accommodation is by far the biggest concern—an off-season room in a mid-range hotel is going to run you \$120 per night easily. And get rid of your Western standards of size; that room will be big enough for two people, but they’ll be tripping over each other. Your best bet is to look for a *ryoukan* or *minshuku*, which are more traditional-style Japanese dormitories / inns for travellers. Although quality varies to a ridiculous degree, the facilities are shared and you sleep on futons on the floor; they are typically more spacious and provide a more authentic experience for about half the price. Guidebooks are also an absolute *must* for travel in Japan.

Food is much less of a concern as long as you’re somewhat open-minded. Many of the smaller places are on par with Canadian standards and, thankfully, there is a Japanese tradition of highly visual menus. Often there are full-size models in

the restaurant windows. You might not always know what you’re getting, but chances are it’ll be excellent. Even inexpensive convenience store food is of top quality, so if sustenance came to that, you could survive on it (I did for nearly two years!).

That being said, the prices at nicer restaurants serving Japanese delicacies (like sushi and *sukiyaki*) begin to go up exponentially, so make sure to note some of the prices on the way in. By and large, the biggest consumption expense will be beverages. Soft drinks are rare in restaurants: a cup of coffee can go for upwards of \$5, and you can expect to pay \$10-\$15 for beer. In fact, the drinks at McDonald’s are more expensive than the hamburgers.

One final tip: bring cash. Credit cards are only accepted at really big chain stores and traveller’s cheques can only be cashed through an incredibly drawn-out process at a bank (and some department stores). Japan is still primarily a cash society—it was only just recently that direct-deposit overtook monthly wads of cash as the preferred method of salary payment, and rent and monthly bills are still typically paid in cash. If you’re worried about carrying around large amounts of money, don’t be. Your only danger of losing it is from dropping it carelessly yourself (in which case, you might even get it back), or from the other people in your tour group. Petty crime is practically non-existent, even in the seedier areas of Tokyo.

Gay life in Japan is, well... different. There has not been the same historical religious opposition to homosexuality that we see in North America and other Judeo-Christian dominated countries. In fact, homosexuality was accepted and somewhat expected during the days of the samurai. In that respect, unlike North

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America, it enjoys a certain degree of cultural acceptance. Also unlike North America, it is extremely taboo. It exists. Everyone knows it exists. No one acknowledges that it exists. This is because, although there is no particular animosity towards homosexuality, there is a strong cultural emphasis on family and conformity—and homosexuals don't fit

well into that societal norm. Consequently, the gay community remains underground and many within it are very often married. It also seems that "homosexual" in Japan is equivalent to "homosexual male." The status of women's rights in Japan is complicated, but in general conservative, so it isn't really surprising that the official position seems to be that lesbians don't exist.

Yokohama, where I lived, is

technically the second largest city in Japan at around 3 million people. I say "technically" because the boundaries exist only on maps—Yokohama Station to Tokyo Station is a fifteen-minute train ride through undistinguishable urban sprawl that spans yet another city, Kawasaki. Despite the size of Yokohama, the scope of its gay resources included one bookstore, one theatre and two "snackbars" that were so well hidden that I only found one of them after nearly four hours of searching.

The moral of this tale? Go to Tokyo, where there is at least a reasonably sized gay neighborhood with an assortment of gay shops and clubs. The district is called "Shinjuku Ni Chome" (knee cho-may) and is a section of one of Tokyo's largest commercial areas, Shinjuku. Don't even think of trying to get there without a map and explicit directions. You haven't experienced the overwhelming immensity of Tokyo until you've walked out of one of Shinjuku Station's forty-some-odd exits and traversed a crosswalk the width of an eight-lane highway with ten thousand other people. Over a million people a day pass through Shinjuku Station; it spans several city blocks and it's easy to get lost.

The rest of gay Japan outside of Tokyo is similarly well hidden, especially if you don't speak or read Japanese. I have heard rumours that Nagoya, Japan's fourth largest city, has a really vibrant and more open gay community, although not having been there myself, it's hard to compare.

Fortunately, there are better ways to occupy your time than clubbing with the boys: namely sightseeing and shopping. If you're staying in the Kanto region (around Tokyo) don't miss a day trip to Kamakura, about forty-five minutes down the coast. It's the Kanto's most culturally and historically important city, and home to dozens of ancient shrines and temples, as well the second largest Buddha in Japan. If you're looking for "old" Japan, this is where you'll find it.

If you have the time and the money, get away from the Kanto and visit some of the other major cities in Japan: Sapporo, Kyoto, Osaka, Nara, Hiroshima... Every city in the country is a completely different world, each with their own style, architecture, historical significance and local culture (the Japanese are really big on local culture!). At times, the diversity makes it hard to believe that they are geographically as close to each other as they are.

Shopping in Japan is unparalleled. Imagine the size of a typical city mall. Make it fourteen storeys high, add an IMAX and an amusement park, and you would have Takashimaya, one of the twelve or so similar department stores surrounding Shinjuku station. Imagine an HMV the size of the Bay. Imagine twelve floors of the Future Shop packed with electronics years ahead of anything in

TOKYO'S SHINJUKU DISTRICT



North America (the Japanese government has a three-year moratorium on the export of new technology). There is nothing in the world of gadgetry you can't find in Japan—and you'll find it in a wide assortment of personalized colours.

Whatever image you have of Japan, whether it be from Shogun or Pokémon, I guarantee you it is incomplete. It's not a really tourist friendly—rather, non-Japanese tourist friendly—place, but it is well worth the effort and the cost to visit. It's like nowhere else in the world. And that's why we travel, now, isn't it?

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he's currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.



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