

A WINTER WONDERLAND



Hello Everyone once again,

Welcome to the next instalment of our adventures in Japan.

After spending a few days in Nagoya, we left for Sapporo on a relatively warm winter day. The sun was bright enough for sunglasses, which so far hadn't been required, and the coats could be left loosely open, which so far hadn't been the case. We headed to the airport but not before dropping off an entire suitcase and satchel bag to the hotel where we were staying on our return to Nagoya a few days later. This meant we could travel relatively footloose and fancy-free ie. we only had to lug with us two big suitcases instead of three (and I hadn't done any shopping yet!)

Sapporo is part of the Hokkaido region, Japan's northernmost island. It is closest to Russia and, with both sea-ice and active volcanoes, it is an amazing combination of fire and ice. The plane seemed to hover marginally above the soaring, snow-blanketed peaks and made you feel like a voyeur to a private, untouchable world of ice gods.

The flight was short (approx. 90 mins), uneventful, but pleasant. They gave my long-legged Gaijin an exit row seat and I piggy-backed on the fortunate seating arrangement. Interestingly enough, they don't feed you on domestic flights. People tend to buy their own bento boxes, pull them out once in the air and make-believe they are dining in style at 10,000 feet. We didn't know this so we just watched people eat. They do serve you drinks and the hosties are very nice, polite and very Japanese - this means they bow even lower and thank you even harder. For instance, I was gob-smacked by a hostess who, at the end when all the passengers were leaving, played a continuous - but live - tape of "Thank you for flying with us. Have a nice day. Thank you" at least 50 times over!

The weather was slightly nippier when we found ourselves outside again - about 0°C nippier. But there was snow everywhere! Hokkaido would have had about three metres of snow in the last couple of weeks and although mentally I knew that would be the case, actually seeing it made me giddy and high. It brought back so many wonderful memories of winters in Romania, when as a little girl I used to live for snow dumps, snow fights and snow castles and revel in the feeling of frosty fingers, runny noses and red faces. As a responsible adult though I had to behave, and resisted the urge to leave husband and luggage behind to plonk myself in side-of-the-road, virgin snow.

We took a shuttle bus into Sapporo, once again to avoid the exorbitant cab fare. The airport is, like all Japanese airports that service major cities, not close. It didn't matter as the dusk bus ride through our winter wonderland was fairytale-like. After over one hour, we arrived in a town that is actually a thriving, bustling city of about 2 million people.

The bus dropped us off at another hotel, which was only a couple of blocks away from the hotel we were staying at - to be precise, one centimetre on the map. What we didn't account for was that the centimetre had to be traversed on snow covered pathways with shoes that glided rather than gripped and suitcase wheels that got stuck rather than rolled. The

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centimetre also turned out to be about 1 km in the fresh -4°C as the frosty night descended, our noses ran and fingers became gloved ice blocks around the luggage handles. We did manage to stay upright but I learned to walk like a geisha with small, shuffled, precise steps as if in a very tight dress and we now have a small insurance claim to make for one of the suitcases that just about lost a few wheels in the iced slush.

That night we watched, from the warmth of our hotel room, snowflakes trickle from the sky and slowly float down to gently coat an already powdered ground. The next day this beauty was revered and glorified by hundreds of thousands of deft hands in the giant displays of ice sculptures in Odori Park, the 1.5 km park that stretches through the heart of the city. Every year at this time, Sapporo celebrates the Yuki Matsuri (Snow Festival). About two million people flood into the city (from Japan and abroad) to marvel at ever more ambitious ice sculptures that in the past have included the Taj Mahal and St Paul's Cathedral.

This year, for the 56th annual Snow Festival, we weren't disappointed. There were about six large – enormous in fact – ice displays. Some were panel like baso-reliefs, others are three dimensional sculptures that can be viewed from all sides. Each year, a couple of themes are singled out and homage is paid to those events or relevant edifices. For instance, this year Nagoya is hosting the 2005 World Expo in Aichi, which is hoping to attract over 15 million tourists. We saw Nagoya Castle, a sight that we are now familiar with, this time in ice. The likeness and level of detail were truly remarkable.

Some of the ice sculptures are cute, some small (only 2-3 metres high), some tell children's stories and legends, others are of majestic proportions having had as many as 3,000 people work on them for a month and as much as 2,000 tonnes of snow used to make them! They all have one thing in common – the massive work, dedication and perspiration (even in sub-zero conditions) that have gone into them. They are laced with people's pride, who do this not for money or glory but just for the pure enjoyment of working together and making a contribution to the festival.

Odori Park was swarming with adults who were reminded of what it's like to be young and carefree, temperamental cameras that struggled in the sub-zero weather and gleeful kids who had forgotten about the cold in the excitement of what lay in front of them. We spent the day in the snow, soaking it in – thank God for the thermals! We even took a tumble on the menacing black ice that had turned parts of the park into an ice-skating ring. At least we were considerate enough to take it in turns so we could empathise with each other's sore bottom rather than selfishly focus on our own.

That evening, after regaining some feeling in immobilised fingers and toes back in the hotel room, we hit the town again. Susukino, home to over 4,000 bars, restaurants and entertainment venues, was the place to be. We wondered around what I now know to be a typical Japanese pulsing city centre – large boulevards with huge, multi-coloured digital displays on all four corners of intersections. It's a cacophony of light and animation and, with snow on the edge of footpaths two metres high, it painted a surreal picture of modern noise and natural, serene beauty.

We were starved and the -6°C outside temperature only exacerbated the feeling of grumbling stomachs. Sapporo is famous for its king crab, which we actually ended up having at a special Hokkaido restaurant back in Nagoya. This is a story in itself – no one in the restaurant spoke

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the slightest bit of English, the entire menu was in kanji and had no pictures of anything, and even when we ordered and the food arrived, we didn't know how to cook it on the special hot plate that was deposited in front of us. Luckily, we had a most gracious and patient waitress, who took pity on the stupid but courageous Gaijin, decided to take us under her wing and fed us – literally. She even brought out a mini encyclopaedia with pictures of seafood to show us what sort of fish we were having!! And yes, the crab was the biggest, juiciest, most tender crab we've ever had.

Still, it's times like this that I think Kym is amazing (he's going to get a big head when he reads this) since no man in his right mind would go to the trouble of finding a restaurant on the web that not even the locals know, get a map of where it's located from the hotel's reception (all in Japanese, of course) and then sniff his way on streets with no name in the middle of a city he's never been to, like a blood hound on a mission – the mission to find just the right restaurant.

In true form, that night in Sapporo Kym was keen on sniffing out a little ramen alley we had read about in a tourist book. Ramen Yokochō has 15 ramen shops jostling side by side just two metres apart. Most of the shops only sit 10-15 people and, given most Japanese go to a ramen bar only to down their food and walk out again, they are in and out within 15-20 mins.

Having found our little Yokochō, we were surprised to see a queue of about 15 people outside one of them. We saw some American tourists that looked frozen but hopeful as they were getting close to front of the line and asked them what the attraction was. The Americans weren't tourists but expats who lived in Tokyo and ate ramen four times a week, who had come to Sapporo for the festival and were not going home before having a meal at Higuma Ramen – a little shop famous all over Japan for its miso ramen and, their own specialty, higuma ramen. Naturally, this is the only encouragement that my little courageous Gaijin, who loves his ramen, needed to proclaim, 'Well, since we're here, we should probably queue.'

So we did – in the freezing cold, for more than 40 mins as it turned out (since we found out that our little shop was littler than most others and only sat – squashed, shoulder-to-shoulder and uncomfortable – a grand total of 9 people!) But oh boy, was it worth it – the ramen, the stock they cook it in, the aromas that filled the room that was no more than 3 x 3 metres, were out of this world (and I even ate some pork, Mum!). On a freezing cold winter night, with the Susukino nightlife on your doorstep and Odori Park draped in millions of fairy lights awaiting, the ramen hit a spot deep inside – a spot that warms the heart and stays with you forever. (Oh, and all for the grand sum of 1,400 yen for two huge bowls that I struggled to finish, compared to what a meal for two in a 5* hotel might cost you – a mere 20,000 yen!)

The following afternoon we unfortunately bid good bye to our winter wonderland – but promised we'd return and squeeze in some skiing when more time permits.

Back in Nagoya and housed at an even more central hotel than the first time, it was time for me to get serious about the business of shopping. Takashimaya, Japan's equivalent to Selfridges/Harrods and what David Jones only wishes it was, so happened to be in the same tower as the Marriott Hotel we were staying in, with the department store taking up the first 12 floors of the building. This gave me a lot of home ground to traverse, without even having to put a coat on or catch public transport. By the end of my little shopping expedition, let's just say that I became familiar enough with Nagoya Takashimaya that I could probably draw a fairly accurate floorplan... of all 12 floors!

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I must admit however that shopping has proved to be an interesting, at times entertaining, experience – shopping for clothes, that is. Kym hasn't even bothered looking for himself, resigned to the idea that he is a giant in a Land of Lilliputians. We did fortunately find a good old reliable Gap store in that had a massive sale and – wouldn't you know it – all the giant clothes were still left, so we filled half a suitcase we don't have with giant jumpers, jackets and ski vests.

I, on the other hand, have come to the sobering conclusion that I am of mini-whale proportions in this country. This, I somewhat feared and half expected from other Western women's – strangers in a strange land – accounts, but nothing quite prepares you for the harsh reality that you're constantly having to ask for a LARGE in everything (which translates to a size 8 – 10 in Australia).

My Gaijin-Japanese communication has gotten very practised when it comes to sizes.

'Large? You have large in this?' I say.

Blank stare. Smile. Head nod.

This doesn't mean they actually have a large size or understand you, so you shouldn't get excited that you're about to walk out with a successful purchase.

'Bigger size. Higher.' I gesticulate. 'Larger. Bigger. You have?'

Head shake. Smile.

'No. E-Mu only – solly.' (this, by the way, stands for M for medium and has nothing to do with our native Australian bird).

My turn to nod and smile – in resigned disappointment.

Everything is available in e-Mu, which is pretty much an American 2 – 4, something I'm clearly not. But, like a honed corporate chick, I keep trying and persevere, and occasionally hit the jackpot and succeed walking away with a well deserved purchase. So I've come to accept I'm a Large in this country of skinny midgets and my shoe size (Australian 7.5) is only a half size off the largest size that's available anywhere. However, I figured it's just as well things don't fit me because the range that's available and the sheer choice that you have of quality products sourced from all over the world would flex the plastic a little too much, would necessitate buying at least another two suitcases and may place relationship with husband on tender hooks. Hence, being a Western mini-whale is, after all, a blessing.

The part that perplexes me though is how the skinny midgets stay so thin. They eat, they do the whole shebang of rice and noodles, and soba and ramen – all carbs galore – which they slurp through deftly held chopsticks, rapidly, solicitously and efficiently. They are not bulimic, nor anorexic. They don't have all the eating disorders that plague us Westerners, but they must have golden metabolisms – lucky, blessed cows.

In addition, as if the fact that the carb free diet is non-existent in this country is not enough to make us jealous, come mid-afternoon the sugar rush hits and they all scurry into tea houses, cafes, pastry shops and sweet-tooth institutions to satisfy their craving. The Japanese have more cafes and parlours that serve sugared, air-filled, fluffy, creamy, puffed things than the French. I'm not joking. Come 3.30 - 4.00pm, there are queues outside these fairy-floss parlours (as Kym and I have come to call them) dedicated to inflate the body but which in Japan still fail to take the e-Mu's into e-Lu territory.

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To test the Western willpower even more, the fluffy, puffed, fairy-floss things are to die for – from French choux pastry to fruit tarts and flans, whipped blueberry cheesecakes to creamy Belgian chocolate mousses, 3-tiered, intricately layered sweet nibbles to Swiss chocolate little morsels, crunchy nutty cakes to traditional green tea delicacies. You drool, your mouth waters and taste buds start the rollercoaster ride as you longingly stare at them in windows and debate whether you should join the queue and happily wait the 15 mins or be strong and walk on by.

The Japanese are big on chocolate – the equivalent of \$6 billion is spent on chocolate consumption in the month of February in Japan. For a country with a population of 127 million people, that's quite an average. To make things even more depressive or impressive for us (whichever way you want to look at it), Japan also has the lowest incidence of cancer, diabetes and heart disease in the world. So maybe the answer to our dietary and health problems is simply eat lots of rice and noodles and wash it down with green tea and a regular – daily in fact – serving of a fairy-floss treat.

Valentine's Day being just around the corner only seems to justify the need for copious sweet and chocolate consumption even more. Every shop window has some sort of reference to it, from the enormous pink hearts flung in department stores' windows to more subtle references to buy chocolates and boxer shorts (in the same box, colour coordinated).

To add even more insult to injury for us girls, on Valentine's Day the women are the big buyers of chocolates and the ones who give presents to the guys. They go out to dinner together, but the guys are the ones that get treated AND get presents. The women just consider themselves lucky to have someone to buy dinner, chocolates and boxer shorts (if they are lucky) for! So if you thought the single 30-something women had it hard in Sydney or in Carrie Bradshaw's land, don't even think about moving to Japan.

Then there is the Japanese fascination with all things green tea. There are the obligatory green tea and red bean muffins that accompany any good breakfast, green tea ice cream, green tea cheesecake, green tea scones in lieu of English scones at high tea time, green tea shampoo and conditioner that Kym likes to believe will make his hair suddenly sprout back, and – wait for it – green tea Kit Kats. Now the latter, I might add, are actually very nice and are an infinite preference to Kit Kats of the passionfruit and tomato variety – don't even ask..!!

We are now in Kyoto and it's Valentine's Day, so we joined the fairy-floss mania and indulged in a sugary heart of delicious chocolate and cream puff something, drowned by some beautiful French wine. Kyoto is magical, unlike any Japan that we have seen so far – so different, so old, so untouched by Western civilisation in places, so touched by the Gods in others. But more on that in the third edition of our travels.

Keep well and be good.

Lots of love,
Ioana & Kym