

LOST IN TRANSLATION



Hello Everyone (or should I say Gonichi-wa)

Most of you who are receiving this email know that Kym and I are presently in Japan. Some of you I did not have a chance to speak to personally before we left, in the rush of packing, organising and (most importantly) buying thermal underwear in the Sydney 35°C heat in the five days we had before departure.

So here I am, sitting in the Westin hotel room in Nagoya on a clear, crisp winter day, overlooking the Nagoya Imperial Castle across a mean-looking, deep mote that I'm sure has claimed a few lives over the centuries. Kym has gone to work and I thought that since most of you have not been to Japan and given the diversity and difference of the Japanese culture and country to ours, I'd start a travelogue of sorts to share with you some of the experiences, learnings and idiosyncrasies that are Japan. That way I get to reminisce and relive the experiences and you get to have a taste of what it's like to be here.

On Tuesday, 1 February, we were off to a great start. After having stuffed three large suitcases full of winter gear, boots (which of course for me alone had to range from practical walking boots to FMB's, to boots with grooves that will grip the snow and ice where applicable so that walking around wouldn't be a permanent skating, gliding and landing on my derriere exercise), and Kym's camera gear (which took up one suitcase alone – yes, you can expect some wonderful photos), we knew we were in for some grovelling with almost 70kg of weight! But, between Kym's business class ticket and flashing his Qantas badge at the check-in desk, we were not only checked in without having to pay excess luggage but they even upgraded me from Economy to Business so I could sit next to my husband during the entire flight – and travel in comfort.

After a great flight where we even managed to get some sleep, we arrived in Tokyo at 6.00am (right on time) – the Japanese have a knack of doing everything right on the minute but even Qantas planes land on time in Japan! Narita Airport is about 90 mins from Tokyo and catching a cab is not an option since the fare is about ¥30,000 (\$A385-390!). This leaves you with the options to take the Bus Shuttle Service, which tends to be slower as you drop off from hotel to hotel, or catch the Express train into the city. As a comparison, both of these cost about a tenth of the taxi fare (per person).

We decided to take the train, although lugging three large suitcases, a laptop bag, my makeup case (which is not trivial), handbag and two bulky jackets up and down stairs and across platforms only proved that my husband and I should have had a packing rationalising discussion before we left. This somewhat challenged my "We pack well and travel lightly" motto, which I prided myself on following.

Since the Express train wasn't arriving for another 25 mins, we decided to take the next train, which would still get us into Tokyo 15 mins earlier. The carriage was empty when we boarded the train since the airport marks the end of the line so we had our pick of seats. I wanted to spread out across an entire bench in the middle,

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but my husband, in his prudent approach and Japanese wisdom motioned me to three seats in the corner of the carriage. "Commuter hour", he said, "it could get quite full". He was wrong – it got jammed, sardine-like, packed.

Most Japanese are small, thin and unassuming people. Even with thick winter coats, they are still small, compact and malleable. They squeeze in silently and find gaps where us Westerners would not even think to put an umbrella. They hold on to whatever bar or handle is available, or just stand there shoulder to shoulder trusting that if the train jerks the sardine space will hold them upright. They can even sleep standing up – this, to me, having just managed to get a few hours sleep on the plane in what is comparative absolute luxury, was unbelievable. They close their eyes, their fingers still wrapped around their Fendi or Louis Vuitton bag, and doze off. They only wake up to shuffle out the door at their designated station – or to pack themselves even tighter to let more people pile in.

By the end of our trip, we had barricaded ourselves with the three suitcases and we were in a Western enclave of our own. I was holding on to my handbag, the make-up case, our coats and sharing the seat with the laptop. Kym, on the other hand, had on his lap the smaller of the suitcases, which was periodically jammed into his chest as more passengers got on. There were people leaning in on top of the suitcases, practically at a 45° angle, showing us how to efficiently maximise the use of space. It was definitely a lesson in humility, in making the most of what you have, in not complaining, in being and letting be. I imagined the same scene in Australia, in morning rush hour. There'd be so much pushing and prodding, elbowing and swearing that you'd be lucky if you got out with your belongings still intact, never mind having caught up on your night's sleep.

Once arrived at the Westin Hotel in Tokyo, the situation changed dramatically. We weren't allowed to touch a bag anymore, only point to identify them. In Japan it's rude to not let people do their job, whatever that may be – it's a sign of not trusting them and it humiliates them. So no matter what their size, you stand back and let them lift 70kg of bulk, with a pained smile on your face, lots of "Arigatos" and little appreciative head nods. I'm getting very good at the little head nods as that seems to be the only way to communicate appreciation when the language divide is so great.

For the language divide is oh-so-great. Nothing can quite prepare you for it. Every sign you see is in funny-looking, pretty and aesthetically pleasing but incomprehensible characters. EVERYTHING – from shop signs, to huge ads in bright lights, to street names (if you happen to see any, as most streets are not actually signed), to menus, to price tags in shops (I've learned to just look for the number followed by the yen sign) – everything is in kanji. There are also different ways things can be written, so even if you've studied some Japanese a long time ago (as Kym has done), if it not written in the formal way you've learned it you have buckleys at getting anywhere. To add to the complexity, there are signs that if mixed with others take on a different meaning.

This leaves you with a few options. You can either summon up all your intuitive powers and guess, or play dumb, smile and do the little head nod trick, or just simply know you haven't got a hope and resign yourself to that. In general, the

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Japanese speak very little English. Even when they are supposed to and it's part of their job requirement to work in a Western hotel chain, you cannot expect a great deal of comprehension. For instance, this morning when I went down to breakfast, I got asked my room number. This is how the conversation went:

'Room nine-fourteen.'

'Hai.' She smiles and shows me the piece of paper with 147 written on it.

'No, no. Nine-one-four.'

'Oh... Hai.' Shows me the piece of paper again – 814. Not bad, much closer this time.

'No, not eight - nine', I draw an imaginary nine in the air.

'Oh, sorry – sorry...'. She scribbles out the eight and replaces it with a seven. Shows it to me – 714.

So I try again. Anyway, you get the picture. On the fourth attempt, we got it, which wasn't too bad because really, we could have been there all day given the number of combinations there are that make up three numbers. Now Kym has taught me how to say 9-1-4 in Japanese so I'll just try that next time and pray they understand my Gaijin accent.

You also learn to simplify your vocabulary and phrase construction dramatically. This is a great exercise in economy of words and learning to get your point across succinctly. So what may start out as "I was wondering if you have availability for a room for the previous night also", becomes "Do you have a room for Saturday too – before Sunday when we already have a booking?", which finally mutates to "You have – room –Saturday?".

There are also the L's that you learn to swallow and vowels that you add after every hard consonant. So our name is said Le-no-xu, the Westin Castle Hotel becomes Wes-tee-nu Ca-su-ru Ho-te-ru and in a department store you might see a shir-tu and skir-tu price tag, if only you could read the anglicized version in kanji.

The food however is delicious. Once you get past the fact that you haven't got a clue what you are eating (which we're still working through) and if you like most things raw, or at the best marinated, of the seafood variety, it is fresh and spectacular. We are lucky in the sense that both Kym and I love Japanese food – in fact, given a choice, we'd have it 5 times a week in Australia. Here, however it's a little daunting when you stare at a menu full of pretty hieroglyphics with all sorts of smells wafting from the kitchen, your stomach screaming 'feed me now or pay later' and the dreaded notion that if you happen to point to the wrong thing you might end up ordering kaki green, purred sea urchin sushi!

And naturally, noone really speaks English. You ask a question and everything is a yes – nothing is too hard, everything can be done and accommodated. Up until there is that pregnant pause when you expect an answer other than 'hai' and an obligatory nod – that's when it gets sticky for them and disappointing for you as you realise most of what you've said for the last five minutes has gone misunderstood. This of course makes you doubt the accuracy of the previous 'hai's you've been getting and makes your host panic so much that they pull out the emergency phrase 'Just a moment please'. With that, they disappear, embarrassed

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and you're left wondering if they'll come back, if you'll ever get fed or worse still if you'll end up with the dreaded green squirts on your plate or other foreign edibles that look like one thing but taste like something completely different.

Of course, this can all be avoided if you find a restaurant with pretty photographs of everything on the menu that you can just point at. Then the only thing you can blame is either your eyesight or your interpretation of the photos. This is what happened on our first night in Nagoya night when instead of beautiful pink belly tuna salad that we thought we ordered, we got beautiful pink cured ham salad!

We were in Tokyo for only a day, so we did not see much. Tokyo packs a population of 20 million people - Australia into one city. It is a spectacular city, a contradiction of concrete jungle and traditional temples, the new and the old cohabiting side by side, diverse fashion and trends, technology that blows your mind straight out of some futuristic sci-fi film and possibly the best shopping in the world. I'll reserve that judgement until later but from what I've seen so far, I don't think it's a far fetched statement.

You can get EVERY brand, every label, every genre in Japan - from catwalk haute couture to the pret-a-porter collections, from French grunge to Italian designers, from US Gap to traditional Japanese samurai and geisha outfits. It blows your mind. Having been lucky enough to travel through Europe, the UK and the US, I can honestly say I have never seen such a range - not in Harrods or Selfridges, not in the Galleries Lafayette, Macy's or Bloomingdale's. And this is just in the Takashimaya store in downtown Nagoya - admittedly it does stretch across 12 large floors of an office tower with half a floor in the food hall just dedicated to chocolate of every variety and nationality conceivable!!

From Tokyo we came straight to Nagoya, which has a population of over 2 million people, making it larger than Brisbane or Adelaide. We caught the Shinkansen and comfortably glided over 400 kms in less than 90 mins (including stops along the way). The Shinkansen lives up to its reputation as the fastest train in the world, having left right on the minute and arrived right on the minute in Nagoya. You can literally set your watch by their train system. Yes, it's lucky I am travelling with Kym or I wouldn't be catching too many Shinkansens on my own..!!

There is not much to see in Nagoya from a tourist point of view - apart from a massive Toyota factory and museum since the city is Toyota's birth town. Nagoya was completely bombed and flattened in the 2nd World War and has been rebuilt since. Hence, the city is town planned with large boulevards, square grids and logical highway infrastructure. It's amazing to think that everything that stands in front of you today has been built in the last 60 years. The Imperial Castle, which we see lit up at night from our window, was unfortunately also destroyed in WWII and rebuilt after 1959.

The weather has not been too bad - generally 2-3 layers plus a coat suffice. Nagoya has been a little colder than Tokyo, getting down to 0-4°C at night. With gloves on and boots, you can walk around at night for a short period, even though the ears and nose start tingling (as we have resisted to don beanies and hats - saving those for Sapporo).

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The winter uniform *de rigueur* for trendy Japanese women tends to be a cardigan twin set, skirt, boots (these are always FMB's) and long coat. I haven't quite been able to ditch the trousers or jeans in favour of skirts so I will happily risk being labelled as an American tourist in favour of warm legs. I have a suspicion we stand out anyway, Kym being 6'5" and me being taller than average in Japan. And that's just on the basis of our physical stature. Then there's the obvious Gaijin (foreigner) aspect since there are so few foreigners in Japan. Wandering in the streets you hardly see any Westerners and if you happen to come across any, they stare at you as if you're some long lost relative they've just recognised.

Today we are off to Sapporo for a few days for the Winter Festival, which officially opens tomorrow for one week. I can't wait to see snow again (although we did see some hardened patches when we first arrived in Nagoya) and a land coated in white.

Until then, keep well and for those of you in Oz stay out of the sticky February heat.

Sayonara, hugs and kisses,

Ioana & Kym

PS. Unfortunately I haven't been able to send this out for the last two days so I am now sending it from Sapporo, which is fantastic and not even that cold (ie. -2°C or so) - but more on that in the next Japan instalment (that should include some photos).

xxx

