

Eight Months Later: Confessions of a shell-shock victim

Peter Metcalfe

A country the same size as New Zealand with 40 times the population crammed somehow into towering, 21st century, cities, with large, unspoiled mountain areas and idyllic 11th century rice paddy villages in between. People whom I could only describe as charming and who were polite to the extreme. This is how I remember my somewhat nebulous idea of Japan 8 months ago in June 1986 just a few days before I arrived here.

The reality turned out to be like nothing I ever expected.

When I first flew over Japan on my way into Narita the first thing I saw was Mt. Fuji poking its head through the morning mist of the early sunrise. The sight was so breath-taking and when it was followed by kilometres of green, neatly tended rice fields it seemed that my earlier images of Japan were correct. However Narita does not give a very accurate picture of Japan at ground level. It was not long on the bus trip from the airport to Shinjuku before we arrived in the city. It did not seem to begin gradually but suddenly appeared. One moment I was passing through beautiful tree lined hillsides and the ever present rice paddies and the next I was surrounded by walls of factories with the same view stretching, seemingly endlessly, off into the distance every way I turned. When I had imagined 12 million people living in one city I had, somewhat naively, not imagined that the city would be so big. For an hour and

a half the view of factories continued uninterrupted, except for bulky (as I later found them to be called) "mansions" interspersed with strange green shapes towering on the horizon which looked like enormous fishing nets hung out to dry and whose purpose I could not even guess at. Of splashes of nature and 11th century farming villages there were none. There were mountains stretching away into the distance but as the haze of the day increased, although it was only about seven o'clock, they too soon disappeared.

Central Tokyo grabbed my already somewhat stunned brain and decided to give it a few more slaps just for good measure. Although here I began to see more traces of greenery, and at this stage I began to wonder if I hadn't already passed through Tokyo and was heading into the countryside again, the hustle and bustle quickly corrected me and showed that I was in the heart of the megalopolis. Buildings twice as tall and four times as modern as the latest architectural wonder in New Zealand stretched off in every direction. There seemed to be nothing else.

The next treat in store for me was Shinjuku station. In New Zealand the motor car is King and if you catch a train its because the Tanker truck drivers and Bus drivers are on strike and the car's having a valve grind. Catching a train is an exercise in pioneering. Once you've spent the night before scouring ancient maps to find out where the nearest station is-usually in a long-forgotten gully behind the tanning factory-you have to prepare food and water and hiking gear for the expedition. The next morning you rise bright and early at 4:30 am to allow for getting lost and failing to notice the station which has been covered from view by a by-pass or a new suburb which wasn't marked on your copy of the latest edition of the New Zealand railway route map: published 1912.

You then sit patiently for a few hours waiting for the super express before it is brought to your attention by a passing tanner that the line was discontinued in 1963 due to lack of use.

Shinjuku station therefore was a little surprising. I actually remember very little about the journey from the station entrance until I finally arrived at the platform. Battle-fatigue is a good description of what Shinjuku station does to the new arrival. At this point I realized that the reality of living in Japan was going to be a little different from my preconceptions.

Tokyo is a remarkable city. any boundaries appear to be purely for administrative purposes. although I have only been south as far as Kyoto, if there was any discernible break in the urban expanse I failed to notice it. Where were the beautiful, secluded temples and forests I had seen in the Auckland office of Japan Air Lines. They existed but I soon discovered they too had an unexpected twist.

This brings me to the second and by far the most interesting aspect of Japan-the Japanese. In my first few weeks I wondered if my plane had not taken an unannounced turn at 30,000 feet and arrived in another solar system. My first meal in Chigasaki was watched over by a young waitress who stood 2 feet away on the other side of the counter and stared at me for the whole time I was trying to beat a pair of chopsticks in the game of 'How many strands of ramen do you have to pick up before you finally coax one into your mouth' and not winning. There were forks but I was in Japan dammit! and I was going to be ethnic. I was bowed to by old men who passed me on bicycles, unfettered curiosity followed by embarrassment filling their faces. I was pointed and giggled at by groups of 50 or so schoolgirls as I tried to master the ticket machines at Chiga-

saki station. I was also sent hurtling against the walls of crowded trains by old ladies who could beat an All Black winger in a race if there was an empty seat at the goal line. At one time I even had half the inhabitants of a small Junior school, with arms stretched out, helping me hitch a ride in Hokkaido. Needless to say I got a ride in 3 minutes flat. Not that I really needed the kids—I usually got a ride in 3 minutes flat anyway. Old men of 90 stopped me in subway stations or crowded streets to ask me in perfect English if I required any assistance (Why do they need me for anyway? They already all speak English.) One man, when I was slightly under the weather and trying to collapse my collapsible umbrella on the train, reached over, took it from me, and proceeded to calmly fold it up-milimeter perfect. He then handed it back to me and turned to his friend again. All without a word. But these were some of the wonderful and comforting things I had expected of the Japanese. Surely the only country where giving assistance and advice to foreigners to unbelievable lengths is almost the national past time. And they don't even play cricket.

After a while, however, it began to pall slightly. I realized that although every Japanese can speak English it is always the same 20 phrases over and over: 'Where are you from?'; 'How long have you been in Japan?'; 'What do you think of Japanese food?'; 'What is your blood type?' (I still haven't worked out that one). When I was trying to learn about the personalities of the people of the new country in which I had chosen to make my life it became disconcerting to only get as far as answering questions about my medical history. I almost gave up ever hoping to learn Japanese after conversations such as the following:

Japanese shop assistant: 'Yes Sir, Can I help You?'

Me: 'Hai, Kore o futatsu kudasai'.

JSA: 'Yes sir, will that be all?

Me: 'Hai, Ikuradesuka?'

JAS: 'Lets see now. One thousand seven hundred yen. Here's your change.'

Me: 'Domo arigato gozaimashita.'

JSA: 'Thank you very much. Please come again.'

And the like. I often wondered how it must be for Mexicans or Belgians or Greeks to suddenly become American. I suppose they have to just learn English quickly. Its certainly easier than learning Japanese.

Another aspect of the Japanese is the sheer number of them. I knew that there were places of exceptional beauty in Japan from the posters at JAL but again my preconceptions didn't take into account the fact that those poster photos were all taken at 4:30a.m. on a Monday morning. Many of the stunningly beautiful places I visited such as Kenrokuen park and Kanazawa castle in Kanazawa; Shiretoko hanto; lake Akan and most other famous tourist places in Hokkaido; the Daibutsu in Kamakura and Nara, and everywhere in Kyoto had their beauty and impact obscured by the forest of people also trying to find a secluded spot. It must be expected in a country of 120 million people but to someone from a country of 3 million it was sometimes disappointing. Generally, however, the people I met at such places and the friendly exchanges more than made up for the disappointment of the scenery. Most of my time at these spots was spent making friends and chatting to young Japanese-usually male students to whom blood transfusions didn't seem so pressing.

It has been said that one goes through four stages mentally when one is becoming accustomed to living in a new culture:

Stage 1 : Culture, Society and day to day life are all new and are

accepted favourably. There is real excitement and hope about living in the new country.

Stage 2 : Once accustomed to the new environment it loses its freshness. The constant daily wrench of new experiences begins to take its toll and tiredness and homesickness begin to appear.

Stage 3 : The two countries are compared and one's home country is thought to be superior in every way to the new. The new culture's bad points are felt very strongly.

Stage 4 : A realization comes that the two cultures are simply different and both have good points and bad points. One begins to feel at home in the new country.

Having passed through a very similar experience myself I now believe that all four stages are necessary to gain a true understanding of another culture. Especially one such as Japan which for so long was so separate from and unknown to the West. I have now come to the realization that the differences between two cultures only serve to heighten the similarities between the peoples of both countries. It is my belief that many more people especially the young should go to other countries, not just as tourists for a 2 week tour of hotels and restaurants, but to stay and learn about the new nation. In this way it becomes a place where people the same as oneself work and play and it stops being a land of superficial impressions and tourist posters.