



Japanese friends: for your amusement; this is a totally uncensored copy of what is going to my non-Japanese friends. I hope you will be interested in and not offended by a gaijin's reactions.

I still take photos on film (results still awaited: Jessops in Durham aren't providing their usual overnight service), so can't attach them to this message. For those who see them in due course: the reason why they include photos of me is that the Japanese body paying for my visit wanted my report to be accompanied by photos (though with modern technology the evidence could all too easily be faked); the reason why they include so many photos of me is that, when you ask a Japanese to take just one or two photos, he or she is likely to take four or five.

I had a very stimulating and enjoyable visit, finding it fascinating to experience a country which is outside the western tradition but as advanced and prosperous as the countries of the western tradition.

(My only previous such experience was a few days in Singapore on the way to Australia, in 1988.) I stayed in four cities:

Osaka, from which I also visited Himeji, which has Japan's best castle,

Kyoto, from which I also visited the temple-rich Nara,

Nagoya, from which I also visited Ise, which has one of the most important Shinto shrines,

Tokyo, from which I visited the temple-rich Kamakura and (with an overnight stay) Nikko, temple-rich and with spectacular mountain countryside just beyond (getting to that involved a road making one of the highest climbs in the shortest distance I have known).

(In each of these cases, "visited" means "was taken to".)

I was also in Tokyo taken to the kabuki theatre, with stylised plays performed by an all-male cast, in a setting where there is a raised passage from the back of the stalls to the stage which the principal characters sometimes use for their entries and exits.

Weather: one day with a couple of showers and two wetter days in the first half, no rain after that. At first over 70F = 21C; when I arrived in Tokyo low 50's F = 11-12 C; then rising to over 60F = 15C; turning colder as I left (and I gather colder still and wet since then).

Japanese gardens are havens of peace in busy cities: water, rocks, trees and bushes rather than flowers; and they cherish moss, to the extent of providing stepping-stones to save it from being trampled on, whereas for me moss is an enemy which grows where I want grass.

Countryside partly agricultural (esp. rice) and partly wooded where flat, largely wooded where hilly. I finally got a clear view of Mount Fuji when flying out. I hit the right time for autumn colours, but they were a week to ten days late, to the distress of the travel agents. Towns are spoiled visually by having electricity cables overhead in the American manner rather than underground.

As well as seeing sights, I gave lectures and took part in seminars, and met many old and new friends with whom I had good conversations on academic and on other matters. Japan isn't the only country in the east where Classics is studied (there is some in India and in China), but as far as my knowledge goes it is the only one where Classics is studied on a scale and at a standard which can stand comparison with the west.

My hosts were extremely welcoming: I was well looked after but given enough time to explore on my own too. I found people more socially adept than I had expected: e.g. at dinners attended by a large

number several people would change places in the course of the meal. In particular I was looked after by Yuzuru Hashiba (Osaka -- and also in Kyoto), Asako Kurihara (Osaka), Yoshiyuki Suto (Nagoya), Mariko Sakurai (Tokyo), Akiko Moroo (Chiba, just outside Tokyo) and Noboru Sato (a Tokyo research student whom I had met in Britain and at the Rhodes conference earlier this year).

(The one valid generalisation about Japanese names which I discovered is that names ending in -ko are regularly female.)

Among people I met were Donald Murray (2005 Durham Classics graduate teaching English in Nagoya: he had visited Japan twice before); Aki Taki and family (Durham M.Litt. under Michael Stokes: he has a couple of toes in university classics doors and is still hoping for a proper classical job, but spends most of his time teaching English in a school); Neil McLynn (Oxford-trained Late Roman historian, with a Japanese wife: has a university job mostly teaching modern politics, but manages to do some classical teaching). I just overlapped in Tokyo with John North (University College, London) and was preceded in Tokyo and Kyoto by Paul Cartledge (Cambridge): I agreed with Paul's contrast between Tokyo ~ Moscow and Kyoto ~ St. Petersburg; Tokyo and Moscow have enjoyable things in them, but are not enjoyable cities overall as Kyoto and St. Petersburg are.

I was taken to a tea ceremony (short version) near the beginning of my visit, and to a hot-bathing establishment towards the end (to the latter by two women, so once inside I had to fend for myself; having been at an English boys' school half a century ago, I found that it didn't embarrass me to be naked in the presence of my fellow men).

As I said on some of my postcards, the one thing which Libya and Japan have in common is that each uses a script which I can't read (in Japan I mastered only the sign for "yen" and the two signs which spell "Tokyo"), which makes it harder to pick up words than in a country which uses the Latin alphabet, though I did pick up some words. Also each is a country in which on some occasions one has to take off one's shoes (in Libya in mosques, for Japan see below).

Otherwise they are as different as could be. Japan is modern and high-tech, efficient, prosperous, safe, clean, civilised.

Modern: but the older buildings of Tokyo University are in a Japanese version of gothic, and there and elsewhere it was consoling to find that occasionally the interiors of university buildings are even a little shabby.

High-tech: sometimes too much so for the poor gaijin [a.k.a. barbarian]. In one hotel I had to go

back to the reception desk to ask how to make the lights in my room work; modern w.c.s, in hotels and elsewhere, have beside them a control panel (which I never dared touch) to make them function as a spray / bidet. On the television some news bulletins are provided with an English translation, some American programmes are shown with a Japanese translation, and B.B.C. World (available in only one of my hotels) also is provided with a Japanese translation: a special button on the remote control enables you to switch languages. (To keep barbarians informed, there are also English-language newspapers.)

Efficient: e.g. public transport, where the frequency of services and number of passengers, even at weekends and late in the evenings, and the good organisation and running make Britain look very backward. I knew that the _shinkansen_ [a.k.a. bullet trains] are very good trains, and trains which run at 270 km/h = 170 m.p.h. with almost 100% punctuality, but I didn't know until I went there that on the Osaka - Kyoto - Nagoya – Tokyo line they are not occasional specials but their average frequency is one every 5-10 minutes. One of Tokyo's stations, Shinjuku, is said to be the busiest in the world (and that's a station not served by _shinkansen_). At busy stations / times people form orderly queues where each train door will be (I travelled on the Tokyo underground between 9.00 and 9.30 a.m., when it is still very busy, but not between 8.00 and 9.00 when the pushers are at work to fill the trains; on the other hand, on underground and suburban trains in Tokyo some people sleep, presumably having programmed themselves to wake after exactly 13 1/2 minutes or however long). But on the Tokyo underground some interchange stations are complicated and involve long walks.

Prosperous: even Japan has its losers, and I saw some homeless people, particularly in Tokyo, and indeed one man selling _The Big Issue_. At current exchange rates hotels, restaurants and public transport are cheaper than in Britain. I don't know about salaries, but taxes are low (and have been lower than they would have been otherwise since 1999 in an attempt to stimulate spending: it is now thought that the results are showing and the older levels of tax can be restored).

Clean: streets and buildings are meticulously swept; the provision of public lavatories is better than I have found in any other country; they are free, and are clean and wholesome, but usually there are no towels or hand-dryers but after washing one's hands one is expected to dry them on one's handkerchief.

Safe: a low crime rate, and children of I should judge upper primary age use public transport unescorted (but towards the end of my visit a girl in Hiroshima walking home from school was murdered -- and an immigrant was arrested). However, see below on cyclists.

Civilised: sometimes over the top, by our standards. Drivers of trains, buses and taxis commonly wear

white gloves; taxis have antimacassars, and often a white cloth on the back seat (passengers sit in the back unless there are more than two of them), and the driver has a special control to open and close the left-hand passenger door -- which creates problems for Japanese who expect the same to happen in other countries. (One doesn't give tips, either to taxi drivers or to anybody else.) There are school uniforms, some derived from naval uniforms, others from British school uniforms. In one department store I found uniformed lift attendants, calling out the equivalent of "Second floor, ladies' underwear; going down", while several have uniformed staff to greet you at the entrance and offer information. I can take, and even return, a slight bow, but I find it harder to cope with a deep bow, and am moved to laughter when two television newsreaders begin and end their bulletins with synchronised deep bows. A number of people go around in face masks, to protect themselves from outside pollution and / or to protect others from their infection. But set against all that the national addictions to sumo wrestling and to pachinko = amusement arcades [low-grade gambling machines].

There is good provision for the disabled: blister paving at pedestrian crossings, ramps for wheelchairs, braille and low-level controls in lifts, often in the larger public lavatories one position has rails for a disabled person to hold. Women's emancipation has proceeded as far as in the west in law, but in practice it's still hard for women to combine marriage and a career except in a few fields such as education – and with a shortage of males in the imperial family the Japanese are agonising over whether it would be right to have an empress rather than an emperor (one person said it would be better to let the emperor take a concubine, as in the past; Classicists will think of Anaxandridas of Sparta).

Motor vehicles are, inevitably, overwhelmingly far-eastern (including many models not sold in the west); the chief exceptions are up-market German cars and large Volvos. The Japanese drive on the left; their major cities abound in spaghetti junctions [a.k.a. complicated networks of flyovers and underpasses]; road signs are a mixture of the European and the American. Traffic police do their job with long batons, and one can imagine their ancestors' doing it with swords.

I had not been prepared for the large number of cyclists, even in city centres: they ride without helmets, usually on the pavement [a.k.a. sidewalk] rather than the road, and -- surprisingly in so well regulated a country -- all too often without bell or lights.

Despite my fears, I found enough announcements in the Latin alphabet / English to enable a barbarian to explore on his own. I used the underground and suburban railways in all the cities I stayed in, and buses in Kyoto. Major streets have their names in the Latin alphabet as well as Japanese script (though in Tokyo you often find the name of the locality or the nearest major building on a sign which you

would expect to give the street name), but minor streets usually don't have names at all, and postal addresses are impenetrable, so exploring away from main streets, even with a map, can be an adventure. In Nagoya main railway station I found notices in Portuguese too: Japan has started importing as unskilled workers the descendants of Japanese who emigrated to South America in the nineteenth century.

The Japanese tend in the direction of, but don't go quite as far as, the Anglo-American practice of installing railings wherever anybody might conceivably fall, as opposed to the southern / eastern European practice of letting people take responsibility for their own safety.

Museums are very well presented: there is usually some labelling in English of the permanent collections, less often of special exhibitions. You have to deposit umbrellas (usually in a lockable slot to which you take away the key), but although you can you don't have to deposit bags, even for the tour of the imperial palace courtyards in Kyoto (bags are searched before you go to the top = 45th floor of the Metropolitan Government Building in Tokyo).

Restaurants often have in the window models of the food on offer and in their menus photos at which one can point; but I also found some frustrating menus where the main categories (e.g. meat, hot drinks) are identified in English but the individual items within those categories aren't. The Japanese say they don't eat much: in fact a typical meal consists of a modest quantity of several different things, and an elaborate meal a long succession of things or sets of things, produced in no very obvious order (so that one can't be sure whether one is near the end or barely half-way through), which add up to quite a lot (and make it difficult to remember by the end just what one has eaten). I enjoyed nearly everything I ate (though sometimes might have enjoyed a thing less if I had known what it was), and became reasonably proficient with chopsticks though I found some things easier to eat with them than others. With meals the Japanese drink green or black tea; lager (brewed in Japan, but expensive: at least two of the major brands have paradoxically on the labels of their bottles the words "draft [sic] beer") and the rice wine known as sake (which is pleasant but hasn't a very strong flavour) -- and sometimes all of these are on the table simultaneously and people switch between them. At some restaurants / in parts of some restaurants one sits on a cushion on the floor or a raised platform, at a low table: I managed, but I can't say I found it a comfortable way of eating (as one grows older one doesn't bend so easily).

American cultural imperialism is represented by McDonald's, Starbucks and Mister Donut everywhere (and I kept away). Otherwise the chief providers of western food are Italian restaurants: food about as authentic as in U.K.; but they often serve red wine as well as white chilled, and although coffee shops

know about the Italian ways of serving coffee Italian restaurants often don't. I usually ate Japanese with other people; on my own sometimes Japanese and sometimes other (including in Tokyo two visits to an Indian restaurant near to my hotel and Tokyo University). In my hotels I regularly had the western breakfast: the Japanese was more of the same kind of food as one gets for lunch and dinner.

Religion is a conflation of the native Shinto (in which there are no images, and ordinary pilgrims / tourists are kept at a distance, and their cameras at a greater distance, from the most sacred places) and the imported Buddhism (in which there are many images: I found it easier to relate to temples in which there was a small image at the back of a sanctuary area, which were more like another religion's equivalent of a Christian church, than to those in which there is one / are many overwhelmingly large image(s) -- and I amused my hosts by giving western readings of the expressions of some of the images: there is one highly prized statue which I saw as a woman holding a cigarette to her mouth!

[Which reminds me to say that smoking is cheap and widespread, and that no restaurants ban it and many don't even have a non-smoking area. Wherever you go there are cigarette-vending machines, and also soft-drink-vending machines.]

I was told that the religion of the average Japanese is on the same level as that of those nominal Christians who go to church for Christmas and for hatches, matches and dispatches [a.k.a. baptisms, weddings and funerals] -- but my informant is such a person and may have exaggerated the extent to which other Japanese are as he is. Some things are common to different religions: hands together and head bowed as a posture for prayer; paying small sums to light a candle; sellers of tat [a.k.a. cheap objects of low aesthetic value] for pilgrims and tourists on the way to and at major religious sites. A Buddhist "temple" is actually an area containing a large number of buildings, of which some are clearly ancillary but several seem to be used for the same purposes: I suppose one compares a major church which has several chapels within it.

In Tokyo I went to the Yasukuni shrine, commemorating the war dead, which the present prime minister has made notorious by his visits to it. I had mixed feelings: I think the Japanese ought to be able to commemorate their war dead without being supposed thereby to glorify all that their warriors did (I don't know how Germany deals with this); on the other hand, the museum at the shrine gives a very strongly pro-Japanese version of the last 150 years, in which all wars are presented as the other side's fault, and those against whom the Japanese fought may well feel unhappy about that. (Another sign of national pride in the present government is encouragement to date by the emperor's regnal years rather than by the Christian era.)

There are Christians in Japan, and indeed there is a church which is a constituent church of the Anglican Communion. In Kyoto I found two churches functioning mainly in Japanese but with one Sunday service in English, and went to one of them (a congregation of about 15, mostly American schoolteachers); in Tokyo there is one church functioning entirely in English (congregation over 100 and a good choir); both used the American Episcopal prayer book and hymn book. I was told that Christian weddings have become fashionable and the churches are happy to perform the weddings and take the fees. And the Japanese have taken to Christmas as a secular festival: Christmas trees and other decorations started appearing in public places in the second week of November and steadily increased. (What I had not expected was what I saw on the way to my hotel on the day of my arrival in Osaka: an evangelical church whose tower proclaimed in English, "Jesus loves you".)

Taking shoes off: one does it in people's homes, in some restaurants or parts of restaurants, and in many but not all Buddhist temples (and I couldn't work out and my friends couldn't tell me the reason for the exceptions: one temple in Nikko even had notices telling people to keep their shoes on).

Outside western Europe, I like to visit department stores, where I can see what is available at what price without being put under too much pressure to buy things I don't want. On that criterion the Japanese have no need to go shopping in the west: they can get a good range of high-quality goods from all over the world at home. (Department stores are also good places to eat: on their top floors they have a range of restaurants in different idioms.) In another part of the spectrum, young people are fully up to date with the latest western youth fashions, though bare midriffs and metal inserts in strange places are mercifully rare. I saw Harajuku, the area in Tokyo where the wild people congregate, but around mid-day on a Saturday, when most of the people looked far tamer than the shops they were browsing in: probably most of the people who go there looking wild were attending classes in their independent schools, soberly dressed in school uniform.

The natural hair colour is always black: chestnut brown hair dye has become popular with women of all ages and with some young men; blonde and exotic colours exist but are rare (but on Harajuku see above).

The most obvious disadvantage of Japan for residents is the small living quarters (I visited two flats and one house). Similarly hotel rooms tend to be smaller than in the west, and baths have to be ultra-short to fit into the space available.

I left Kyoto just before G. W. Bush was due to visit for 23 hours: that seemed likely to paralyse the place; a taxi driver said 6,000 police were expected. For my last two nights there I had to move from

a good hotel near the imperial palace (which was going to be taken over by security people) to my worst, near the station: it was the most expensive but had the smallest rooms and a very perfunctory breakfast (presumably intended for businessmen who used the hotel only to sleep in and whose employers footed the bill). Putin visited Tokyo while I was there: he didn't paralyse the city but impinged on me twice. He arrived on a Sunday, and the church I went to was near the Russian embassy; the service was repeatedly disturbed by the shouts of demonstrators marching to the embassy. And the day I originally planned to visit the imperial palace gardens was the day he was to be received by the Emperor, so the gardens were closed and I had to revise my plans.

And that is probably more than enough to generate the message that your in-box is unacceptably full. If you get the opportunity to visit, do take it. A happy Christmas to all my readers.

Peter