

# A Gaijin in Tokyo

Johanna Levy

Paris and Tokyo are two cities to which I am attached in a very sentimental way. I was born in Paris and until I was 11 years old, I lived there without knowing there was anywhere else. Then my family was transferred to Tokyo.

Tokyo is a huge metropolis composed of many different districts, each with quite a different ambience. Although its huge size could be frightening to many foreigners, the countless small services and kindnesses generate a comfort seldom found in Paris and soon put me at ease.

The climate is not wonderful, but during the June rainy season, every shop entrance provides plastic covers to accommodate dripping umbrellas. Better still, some shops have umbrella stands where customers can leave their umbrellas to shop in comfort, without fear of theft. And if you have a cold, there's no need to buy tissues because millions of handy tissue packs are distributed every day in the streets as media for advertising. Disposable mini-ashtrays are also distributed free of charge so smokers don't throw their cigarette butts in the street. Almost every restaurant and coffee shop provides free

books of matches and when you want to extinguish your cigarette, you just throw it in one of the countless water-filled ashtrays found almost everywhere. In the scorching summer heat, pretty *uchiwa* fans with attractive calligraphy are also given out in the streets.

The list of giveaways is nearly endless, and I often found myself coming home loaded with samples of shampoo, moisturizer, nail polish, and sometimes even soup. For a young Parisienne, it is extremely surprising to be offered free practical items in the street with no obligation. In fact, gift giving is an established part of Japanese life and many people exchange small gifts at the mid-summer and year-end seasons. Similarly but differently, on Valentine's Day, Japanese girls are obliged to give their male colleagues and friends chocolates and the men reciprocate exactly 1 month later on 14 March by giving them back small presents on White Day.

Unlike in Europe, most bicyclists ride on the pavement and warn pedestrians of their presence either by a polite *sumimasen* (excuse me) or 'tring' of the bell. Most bicycles are just left on the

sidewalk without even needing to lock them. And you can be pretty sure that they will still be there when you return. Safety and honesty are the most surprising aspects of this metropolis. One day, I left my train pass in the ticket machine but it was returned to the ticket office by an honest traveller. Likewise, a head-phone stereo left in a shinkansen was waiting for me at Tokyo Station amongst hundreds of other forgotten items.

In the subways, every effort is made to make life easier even for the most stubborn non-Japanese speakers. In addition to illuminated displays indicating each stop, a voice politely announces the present station as well as the next one. How far from the haughtiness of the Paris Metro!

In Japan, the traveller is a customer and receives great consideration, including excuses for having been kept waiting, warnings to mind the opening and closing doors, kind reminders to stand behind the white line on the platform, or, on buses, to hold on tight to the strap because the bus is about to turn left or right. In short, there is infinite courtesy at every step of the journey.

Fare cheating is never implied and if the correct fare was not paid at the start of the journey, a fair adjustment is required at the exit without reproachment.

Sometimes, cultural differences surprise Europeans due to apparent rudeness. For example, Japanese have no custom of holding a door open for the next person, or of offering seats to elderly people. But this is simply a different behavioural norm rather than intended discourtesy.

Courtesy is also the hallmark of sales staff, and what a pleasure it is to be one of the first customers to enter a department store in the morning, and to see the sales clerks and department heads bow as the 'customer kings' pass by. Even the smallest purchase is beautifully wrapped, enhancing the value of the gift.

No less courteous are the road construc-



Bicycles neatly lined up outside JR Sugamo Station

(S. Koga)



Statues of Jizo, the guardian of children, at a street-side shrine (S. Koga)



Traditional sembeiya shop selling rice crackers (S. Koga)

tion workers who stop to let you pass or leave a note in your mailbox apologizing for having to make noise! Moreover, road works are often carried out quietly at night to reduce disturbance.

But safety and courtesy are not the only pleasures of living in Tokyo. Everyday chores are made simple. For example, convenience stores like 7-Eleven are open 24 hours a day, and you can pay all your utility bills, book tickets for concerts, develop photographs, download the latest video games, and, of course, have your favorite take-out noodles heated up. They'll even deliver golf bags and luggage using one of the many nationwide *takkyubin* delivery services. It helps if you speak some Japanese, but if you can't, most staff will show patience helping you get what you want.

Adding to these advantages is the pleasure of strolling in the city, experiencing surprise after surprise.

At first glance, Tokyo may look grim with many buildings that often have no charm at all, not to mention the countless power cables and telephone lines hanging from utility poles, piles of garbage bags waiting to be collected and that are often pecked open by the huge ravens that populate the city in increasing numbers. Even if you are strolling through modern high-rise buildings, or shopping for the

latest electronic gadgets, you may suddenly come upon a delightful little street shrine, houses roofed with blue tiles, shops where artisans make *washi* paper, *sembei* rice crackers, *geta* wooden footwear, *wagashi* traditional confectionary, or wonderful pieces of lacquerware and porcelain, reminiscent of old Edo.

And then there is the astonishing greenery of Tokyo. Where else can one feel the passage of seasons with such acuteness?

The early-April cherry blossom season is one of striking beauty that must be experienced. The flowers are at their best for just a day or two when families and workers make merry under the pink haze, drinking beer or *sake* rice wine. The TV weather forecasters even show a 'cherry blossom front' indicating the progress of the blooming trees from south to north. The Japanese say the falling petals

symbolize the transient nature of beauty and even life itself.

A similar ritual takes place in autumn when many people drive to the mountains around Tokyo to see the autumnal colors of the maple trees blanketing the mountainsides. Winter is punctuated by the calls of street vendors selling scalding-hot stone-baked sweet potatoes to alleviate the cold. Small cosy street stalls tempt homeward bound *salariman* office workers to enjoy the late-night delights of *oden* (fish cakes and vegetables simmered in a nourishing broth) washed down with hot *sake*.

So many other things celebrate my love of Tokyo. I should talk about the people who, despite the stress of long working hours, always remained ready to help me, but human relationships are more difficult to describe! ■



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Ms Levy is a second year student of Japanese language and culture at Paris Dauphine University. She spent her school days in Tokyo when her father was stationed there as the representative of a French company. She worked as a trainee in Japan in the summers of 1997 and 1998.