

Another Side of Japan

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Before visiting Japan for the first time, like most everyone, I thought of Japan as a leader in business and technology. But this image is only one side of Japan and there is another that should not be overlooked—Japan’s strong cultural traditions and beautiful scenery. They are important factors that help explain the nation’s success and make Japan a powerful and interesting place to visit. My training programme in Japan also gave me the opportunity to visit some well-known hot springs and natural scenery away from the major cities—something many visitors to Japan never manage to experience.

While living with a local family and working in Akita (about 670 km north of Tokyo by train) for 2 months, I was surprised by the friendliness of local people; they were so kind, made me feel at home and took good care of me. Such hospitality is rarely found in today’s society where most people just have time only for business relationships. When we had free time, we sat and talked, and sometimes we went sightseeing at weekends. We visited some really interesting and beautiful places, like conserved samurai houses at Kakunodate, where three families in the Uchi-machi district have opened their ancestors’ houses to the public. I was fascinated by the traditional house-building techniques from the Edo period. The road to the village passed through beautiful mountains covered with trees in their autumnal colours. Although Thailand and Japan are both in Asia, Thailand is tropical and only has three seasons—winter, summer, and wet. Consequently, trees in Thailand do not have beautifully coloured leaves like in Japan because there is no autumn. However, the luscious blooms of Thai tropical orchids make up for this! En route, we sampled lots of delicious foods and fruits, including *nashi* (apple pears) which I had never seen before, and *mikan* (mandarin oranges) which don’t grow in Thailand. Another interesting

taste was Japanese rice. Although rice is a staple of the Thai diet, Japanese and Thai rice are quite different. Thai farmers grow the *indica* variety of rice, which is a longer grain than the *japonica* variety grown in Japan. Although I initially thought Japanese rice was soft and sticky, I soon came to like it, especially Akita-grown rice. The tastes of Japanese and Thai foods are totally different. Thai food is hot and spicy (as anybody who has eaten *tom yam kun* knows) while Japanese food tends to be plain.

Akita is not only famous for its high-quality rice and *sake* (rice wine)—it is also supposed to be where Japan’s most beautiful women (*bijin*) are found;

perhaps the three are related in some way! Every town we visited was selling local *omiyage* (souvenirs), explaining why most Japanese travellers bring back souvenirs for family and friends. Omiyage can be anything from dried *kaki* (persimmons), a sweet but astringent fruit that is not grown in Thailand, to the many varieties of delicious Akita sake; local foods seem the most popular omiyage.

Before leaving Akita, I had the chance to visit my Japanese friend at home. His house and garden were quite different from anything I had seen in Thailand. The floors of some rooms were covered in Japanese *tatami* rush mats. I was very surprised to discover that in Japan, room



Celebrating at Kanto Matsuri in Akita

(EJRCF)

sizes are still measured by the number of mats covering the floor, rather than in square meters. Even more confusing, the size of tatami mats is not standard throughout the country; in Tokyo, one tatami measures 180 x 90 cm, while in the Kansai district around Kyoto, it is 190 x 95 cm. So a 6-mat room in Tokyo is smaller than a 6-mat room in Kyoto.

There were no chairs or sofa in the parlour, just a low table and *zabuton* cushions as seats. Visitors are always served green tea and perhaps some *manju* (cakes filled with sweet bean paste). I was also lucky enough to join a *sado* tea ceremony. The lady making and serving the tea wore a beautiful kimono and made the tea with such delicate movements that it seemed almost like a theatrical performance. Moreover, I thought green tea tasted really good—even better than my favourite cappuccino. On the whole, Japanese food is quite different and interesting and some kinds must be eaten with a certain technique, otherwise the taste can't really be appreciated. *Soba* (buckwheat noodles) is one such dish. The soba noodles are served either hot or cold in a thin *tsuyu* (sauce) made from a mixture of boiled *konbu* (seaweed), *katsubushi* (shaved dried tuna flakes) and soy sauce. To appreciate the taste of the soba noodles, one must slurp them from the sauce into which grated *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish) and *daikon* (radish) have been mixed. The slurping creates a rather loud noise that would be regarded as bad manners in a French restaurant—I guess Japanese tourists have to be careful when eating spaghetti overseas! For fun, one can try to eat as many bowls of soba as possible (it is quite low calorie). In Morioka City, the record is 216 bowls. My friends and I tried to make a new record, because the soba is free if you can beat the old record. Although I tried my hardest, I could only manage 37 bowls, well below the average of 50. Of course, soba is served with sake, also called

nihonshu, which can be either hot or cold. In winter, which is very cold in north Japan, a few cups of hot sake can be very warming. But in the hot summers, ice-cold sake has the opposite cooling effect. Another popular event where plenty of *nihonshu* is often drunk is at the local *matsuri* (festival). Each town and village throughout Japan has at least one *matsuri*, usually during the summer season, but sometimes during the New Year holidays or on other auspicious occasions. I visited the summer *matsuri* at Niitsu. It was crowded with every family in the area celebrating and paying homage to the local gods. Traditionally, a group of men and sometimes women work together to parade a large and heavy wooden *omikoshi* (portable shrine) on their shoulders through the streets. The shrine is decorated with a variety of symbols, and sometimes people climb up on it too. Musicians beat a steady rhythm on *taiko* drums to help the people carrying the shrine coordinate their footsteps in a sort of swaying dance. It is hard and thirsty work, so quite a few people cool themselves with *nihonshu*, with the result that the day gets very festive towards evening, creating a very different impression from the normal image of the staid and sober salaryman. Some people say that this tradition of cooperation at *matsuri* explains why Japanese are very group-oriented in business and generally work towards an agreed common goal. Thailand is similar to Japan in respect of festivals, which are held by many villages. During the festival season, Bangkok becomes a deserted city as Thais return



Servicing commutator at Tsuchizaki Workshop in Akita (EJRCF)

to their hometowns to join the festivals. Every highway out of Bangkok is jammed, and every bus, train, and plane is packed to capacity. The most famous festivals that bring a lot of visitors from other countries to Thailand are the Songkran festival and Loy-kratong festival.

On the whole, it seems quite clear to me that most Japanese pay attention to social policy. A small, but telling example that is practised by almost every household is the separation of household waste into burnable and unburnable categories for collection on different days of the week. Woe to anyone who puts out unburnable garbage on the wrong day of the week! It's a pity that Thais are not so careful about pollution in congested Bangkok. But I hope that some of the air pollution at least can be alleviated by the city's recent opening of the new 23-km *Skytrain* service. ■



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