

# Impressions of Japan

Dejan Lasica

Between 6 May and 14 June 2003, I took part in a course called Railway Management, organized by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and sponsored by the Japanese government. The knowledge and experience I gained from Japanese experts during the course will be of great importance to my work in my home country of Serbia and Montenegro.

In this short article, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about the things that made an impression on me outside the technical lectures.

Just arriving in Japan meant getting to know new and unfamiliar things and expanding both my professional and personal knowledge.

After landing at New Tokyo International Airport (Narita) some 70 km from central Tokyo and taking a 2-hour limousine bus and taxi ride to the Tokyo International Centre (TIC) near Shinjuku, I found myself at the reception desk, where a friendly staffer was waiting to give me the information I needed about my lodgings and a detailed programme for the next 38

days. The programme contained the titles of lectures, names of the lecturers, hours, locations, times of departure from the centre, where we were to stay and much more. I was struck by this right at the end of the course when I realized that it had been planned so well that we had departed from the schedule only once during the entire programme—when we left TIC 10 minutes earlier than planned! In addition to our daily obligations, lectures and visits, we had free time, especially at weekends. In addition to my group of 9 participants, there were another 500 people taking part in various other courses at the centre at the same time. I got to know many of them, exchanging valuable insights on the cultures, traditions and ways of life of different countries. The friendships I made may have been the most precious part of my stay in Japan. Today, I have friends in Japan, Cambodia, Korea, the Philippines, Poland, Iran, Oman, Egypt, Djibouti, Malaysia, Indonesia, and many other countries. Getting to know a little of Japan's history, political system, educational system,

culture and traditions was very valuable. I will never forget the temples in Kyoto, the Memorial Park in Hiroshima or the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. All these places bear the mark of the country's unique traditions and culture and have a powerful effect on the visitor.

Our walks through Tokyo were a true adventure but the continuously congested roads made the extensive subway lines the fastest way to reach most destinations. An especially interesting place was the Akihabara (Electric Town) district where we were amazed by the range and quality of all kinds of high-technology electronic goods. In addition to Akihabara, other interesting places are the Ginza business and shopping district that is home to many famous companies and high-class stores, Asakusa with its imposing temples, the Shinjuku commercial district, and Ueno Park. A visit to Kamakura, the site of the Kamakura Daibutsu (Great Buddha) statue, made a lasting impression.

I found most Japanese people to be very kind and helpful. I often needed help finding my way around Tokyo and other



Cocktail party with participants and lecturers at end of Railway Management course

(Author)



Everything electrical is available in Akihabara Electric Town (F. Narita)



The Great Buddha (Kamakura Daibutsu) dates from the mid-13th century.

(Kamakura City Hall)

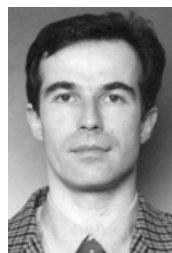
cities, and almost always received assistance from passers-by. One interesting observation is that older Tokyo residents generally speak better English than younger ones.

Japanese cities outside Tokyo are filled with greenery, making them quite pleasant. The design of high-rise housing complexes near TIC is very practical—neither too large nor too small, but with remarkable and extensive flowering hedges of azalea, etc.

Life in Tokyo and Osaka is fast-paced and more dynamic than in smaller cities like Hiroshima and Fukuoka. This can be seen at every step—in Tokyo no one has much time for anything, while in Hiroshima, friendly residents will often lead a lost foreigner to the place he or she is trying

to find. I found the most gracious hosts in Hiroshima, but it was my visit to Kyoto that stayed with me the longest.

The inhabitants of Japan seem to feel very safe and secure in their country. By that I mean that anyone can walk through any part of a city, even at night, with little fear of anything bad although the police are almost invisible and do their work discreetly. What I did not like was the



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A Harajuku fashion parade!

(F. Narita)

western influence on the younger generation. Their fashions, hairstyles and attitudes are a stark contrast to the image one gets of Japan otherwise.

Overall, Japan to me is a country, which, alongside its scientific and economic accomplishments, has much to teach us about genuine human values, self-knowledge and looking at life from a different perspective to the one we are accustomed to in Europe.

In conclusion, I would say that a visit to Japan is a privilege for anyone from my country, and I highly recommend visiting Japan to anyone who loves to travel and to seek out new cultures and customs. ■