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Why Japan?

Although I'd always wanted to live in a foreign country, my two-year working holiday in Japan happened virtually by chance. I hadn't studied Japanese at school, I didn't have any particular interest in things Japanese, in fact my knowledge of Japan and its culture was pretty limited. I wanted a change of pace and, like everyone, had heard about people teaching English in Japan, working minimal hours and making good money. I was eligible for a Japanese working holiday visa and so I went. Looking back on it now it all seems fairly straightforward, but at the time I was racked with all the doubts and anxieties that accompany any move away from familiar ground.

Living in Japan has changed how I think about the world and my place in it, how I see myself and what I value in life. I left full-time work in Sydney to live amidst rice paddies on the outskirts of Miyazaki, a coastal city in southern Kyushu. I worked for maybe 14 hours per week, which brought in enough money to live on, and the rest of the time I wrote, took pictures, surfed and hung out with my new friends. It was, to me, an idyllic, simple existence. There were other advantages, like experiencing an Asian culture first hand and living day-to-day in a foreign language, allowing it to seep in a natural way. And I can now say that throughout all this I've gained some understanding of one of the most misunderstood countries on the planet.

That's my story, but there are as many 'living in Japan' stories as there are people to tell them. One way to decide if you're interested in living in a foreign country is to talk to those who already have. To start you thinking, here are a few impressions from *gaijin* who've lived in Japan.

Reasons to go

Why experience life only in Australia? We're so lucky, in the age we live in, we can go overseas and experience different lifestyles. You always come back a different person for that. If you're adaptable and accepting of different

cultures, you can't help but gain from the experience. Jess Halford, working holiday maker from Sydney.

After almost eight months [living in Japan] I'm still not used to working only four hours a day. There's so much free time and if you're motivated you can fit a lot of things into your day and still lead a pretty cruisey existence. I didn't go for the money, and working only twenty hours a week I wasn't going to make a truckload anyway. However it's definitely enough to get by on depending how exorbitant your expenses are with the likes of going out every night, which is ridiculously easy to do. Andrew Quirk, working holiday maker from Dunedin, New Zealand.

I went there originally to make a bit of money, but also to have the experience ... I think everyone goes through waves of love and hate in Japan ... everything seems great one day and the next it sucks completely. I don't know anyone who's gone there and hasn't found work. Japan doesn't have to be expensive, my apartment was about ¥40,000 a month but I conducted lessons there so it paid for itself. If you're a high maintenance sort of person who needs a lot of support and friendships, you can get that from the foreign community no problem, but to the extent that you can and you feel capable and have the desire to mix with the local people, I think that's pretty valuable. Stewart Clark, an Australian who now lives permanently in Japan.

I'd studied Japanese at high school so it seemed a natural step to go to Japan on a working holiday. Living in Japan changed my outlook on many things as it was so different to anything I'd experienced before. I became more independent, in a sense it forced me to take responsibility for myself and my actions. When I came back to Australia I found work using my Japanese and assisting Japanese coming to Australia on a working holiday. Having been in that situation I realise now how important it is to have some assistance, and a place to go for advice. It has been interesting watching it from the other side of the coin. Even now I sometimes look at a tourist [in Sydney] and see myself lost in the middle of Tokyo. Wendi Aylward, who now manages Exchange HQ, a resource centre for working holiday makers in Sydney run by Council Exchanges.

I gained a sense of independence, of being able to strike out on my own in a country that's obviously very different from mine. As far as coming to a totally different culture, Japan is probably one of the most affable countries in the world. Japanese people are so non-confrontational. They themselves

tend to lead their own people around and make sure everybody's taken care of, to the point where they explain to you things like 'The train is coming to a stop now, please be careful not to be jolted forward!' Every little detail is taken care of. It tends to belie your fears a lot. People bend over backwards to help you. Can you imagine being in America and apologising to a Japanese person because you couldn't speak Japanese to them? And yet that's what they do here in Japan: they apologise to foreigners for not being able to speak English. It's such an easy place to be. Peter Moses, an American who has been living in Japan for ten years.

I've learned that in Japan, kindness will come out of nowhere and slap you silly. As well as people staring at you because you're a foreigner and other stuff, compared to any other country in the world it's a piece of cake to live here. You overestimate the effects of culture shock in the beginning, and you underestimate the long-term effects [Japan can have] on you. Vince Panero, an American who lived in Japan for five years.

How the Japanese view us

Japanese perceptions of other countries vary, with young people usually better informed than their older relatives. Overall, they tend to know more about the US and even the UK (thanks to the influx of films and advertising from those countries) than about Canada, Australia or New Zealand. It's not uncommon, for instance, to have to explain that the seasons are reversed 'down under' compared to the northern hemisphere. This means that being in Japan is a two-way learning street and you can give as much as you receive. To illustrate this, I asked a few Japanese friends what they feel they've gained from interacting with the *gaijin* in their midst.

Japan is an isolated country in many ways, its culture is very strong, and as a result most Japanese think foreigners come from another world, another planet. Japanese have an inferiority complex about foreigners because foreigners look cool, and so on. When I was a university student I was like a stone in front of the foreign teachers, I couldn't talk to them. But since I've met more foreigners and been to Australia, I've changed my attitude. I think now we're not so different. There are some differences though, good things. Foreign people can express themselves very clearly and they're very warm. When they

scold a child, for instance, they hug the child afterwards, but Japanese people don't. I think it's good for foreigners to come to Japan because it's becoming more normal to communicate with them. In a few years it's even going to be compulsory for Japanese elementary [primary] school students to study English. Kazue Morimoto, an English conversation student.

I like the way foreigners think. Meeting my foreign friends and meeting my Japanese friends is so different. The Japanese I know all talk about their work, their companies, they don't seem to think about life as a whole. Whereas the foreigners I know give me advice about my life, and we talk about life a lot. Aiko Tsunesada, an English language teacher.

It's easier to work with foreigners than with Japanese. The foreigners I've worked with have a sense of responsibility towards their jobs. And as far as different nationalities, the Australians I've met have a nice relaxed manner, they're easy to work with. Not shy, not noisy, they're interested in other countries, they don't just want to speak about Australia all the time and they don't shout like some Americans I've met! And the New Zealanders I know always work hard and play hard. Mari Narita, an English language teacher.

If I only spoke Japanese, I'd only know about Japanese culture. Learning English helps me get to know other people, it's all about communicating with other people. Also Japanese people always call me either Tanaka's wife or Shuntaro's mother. No-one calls me Miho, but foreigners always call me Miho. They treat me as an individual. I really like that. Miho Tanaka, an English conversation student.

Still have doubts?

There will always be reasons why you shouldn't, couldn't or wouldn't go to Japan and it's true that Japan doesn't suit everyone. There are people who go, decide they don't like it and jump on the first plane home, but this can happen in any country. Then again if you're reading this book, chances are you have at least some interest in going there and maybe that alone will see you through at least until you realise you love it there! Now about those doubts ...

Isn't it expensive to live in Japan? The short answer is: it can be, but need not be. If you want to eat Western food, live in a Western-

style apartment and hang out in Western bars and clubs, then you may as well be working back home for all the money you'll save, not to mention the cultural experiences you'll miss out on. Admittedly the prices for some things can be exorbitant—as my friend Pete Moses once said, 'A watermelon for \$25! You don't want to eat it, you want to frame it!' For some details on current costs in Japan, mostly Tokyo, visit some of the websites mentioned in this book but also see www.thomascook.co.uk and www.timeout.com. For current exchange rates visit www.xe.net/ucc/ or www.oanda.com.

The trick is to live as the locals do. Japanese food is healthy and reasonably priced, and living conditions can be simple: you don't need much furniture in a Japanese-style apartment when all your living's done on the floor. It doesn't mean you have to become Japanese—you'd be hard pressed to pull that off anyway—but you can eat and live well on say, ¥2000 a day. Remember, if you're spending dollars or pounds in Japan it can become expensive because of the exchange rates, but once you start earning yen you'll be set. And for those working full-time in Japan: income tax is only seven per cent! Also, many employers, particularly large English conversation schools, pay for your transport to and from work, find affordable accommodation for you and sometimes assist with other expenses.

Don't I need to speak Japanese to work and live there? When I arrived in Japan I didn't speak a word of Japanese, but within a month I was working and even had a few Japanese friends. You don't need to speak Japanese to teach English, which is what most *gaijin* do, although for some jobs (e.g. in ski resorts) the more Japanese you know the better will be the jobs you'll get (and the more you'll be able to negotiate better fees and working conditions). And don't rule out the possibility of learning to speak Japanese whilst you're there: while reading and writing Japanese can take years to master, conversational Japanese is easier than many other languages. Besides, when you're living in that language on a daily basis it's even easier.

In the meantime, however, it's reassuring to know that Japan caters for English-speaking foreigners like nowhere else. There are English signs everywhere and English language movies, books and newspapers. You'll also find plenty of people wanting to speak to

you in English, especially in the cities, and there are always other *gaijin* around when you do get homesick for a little 'real' English conversation.

But I don't know anyone in Japan. Japan is one of the easiest places I know to make friends. When I first arrived in Miyazaki I didn't know a soul but within a few days I'd met Pete, an American, who told me that he and most of the other *gaijin* living there already knew I'd arrived and was looking for work! Sometimes you might feel there are no secrets in expatriate communities, particularly those in small cities or towns. This, however, can be a good thing; it makes meeting people easy, which makes finding work and a place to live easy too. Most *gaijin* can remember what it was like to be new in Japan and not know anyone (or anything!), so they tend to look out for other newcomers.

It's not even that difficult to make friends with the locals, since many Japanese speak English and are eager to meet and talk with *gaijin* (and not always to practise their English). Even if they don't speak English, most Japanese are at least curious about foreigners and open to meeting new ones, and it never ceases to amaze me how well people of different cultures can communicate without the aid of a common language.

I'm not a teacher! Before I went to Japan I'd never taught anyone anything. Fortunately, prior experience is not a prerequisite for teaching English in Japan. Teaching jobs in Japan generally require minimal lesson preparation, little knowledge of English grammar or spelling, and little of the student management skills we usually associate with teaching. It's more important that you have a pleasant manner, an interest in people, plenty of patience (to wait for nervous students to reply to seemingly easy questions) and compassion (to understand that they're doing their best given the nature of their society and the pressures they are under).

I don't want to work 18-hour days like the Japanese. You'll be happy to hear that a working holiday visa only allows you to work 20 hours a week and most full-time teaching jobs in Japan (i.e. if you're on a work visa) involve 25 to 30 hours a week. That said, many *gaijin* choose to supplement their incomes with a little 'unofficial' overtime

by teaching private students (even if they're not working as an English teacher during the day). But even if you do land a job working for a Japanese company, chances are you won't be expected to slave away like your Japanese colleagues, because *gaijin* tend to dwell in an outsiders' zone, free of certain expectations and social rules.

I don't want to live in Tokyo or Osaka. Just because 75% of Japan's population lives in the metropolises on the Kanto plain (Tokyo, Yokohama, Kawasaki) and around Kansai (Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto), doesn't mean you have to live there too. There are plenty of smaller cities, towns and villages scattered throughout Japan for the urban-weary *gaijin*. Sure, most of the highly paid jobs are in the larger cities, but there's still a need for English speakers in smaller cities and towns. Even if you want to work in a big city it's still possible to live on the outskirts—amidst mountains or by the coast—but within a 40 minute train ride of work.

What will my friends back home say? Just as most Japanese don't know a lot about other countries, many of our countrymen (and women) don't know much about Japan beyond the stereotype of overworked salary men living in capsules and working in overcrowded bustling megacities. When I returned to Australia after living in Japan I felt like an unpaid diplomat, doing my bit for international relations by answering friends' questions about how I could live and, more to the point, *enjoy* living in Japan of all places!

There are certain segments of society within our home countries that hold rather negative attitudes to the Japanese and it's just as well to be prepared for them. There are those who focus on Japan's environmental record which has been tarnished by activities such as whaling, logging and the use of driftnets. There's the entire generation who fought against the Japanese in the Second World War and still regard all Japanese people with suspicion at best. Perhaps the most effective way to deal with all these attitudes is simply to be aware of them and remember that most of the people you'll meet in Japan will be as far removed from all these events as you.