



DREAMS OF *Japan*

By Renee Sklarew

As Tokyo prepares to host the 2020 Summer Olympics, tourism to Japan is expected to soar. Our writer got a head start on the crowds with a visit to Tokyo and Kyoto this past summer.



My father was an engineer who traveled often for work and always returned home with a souvenir for me. After a trip to Japan, he brought me a handmade doll dressed in a red kimono and wooden sandals. It became my favorite present. Dad told me stories about Japan's majestic temples and neon-lit skyscrapers. The country soon became my dream destination.

Fast-forward 40 years, and my dream was about to come true. My husband and I decided to take our daughter to Japan to celebrate her college graduation. I asked friends and colleagues for recommendations, and everyone agreed that we should visit the two poles of Japanese culture: the futuristic urban metropolis of Tokyo and the ancient alleyways and spiritual sites of Kyoto.



Clockwise from top left:
Tokyo SkyTree
PHOTO BY RENEE SKLAREW
Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto
PHOTO BY RENEE SKLAREW
Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo

A CONTRAST OF CULTURES

Once a humble fishing village, Tokyo began its transformation in 1868 when Emperor Meiji moved the country's capital from Kyoto to Tokyo. Population and development soared in the new capital until World War II. After the battle raged on the Pacific Front for three terrifying years, American forces firebombed many of Japan's industrial cities. Incendiary bombs destroyed 16 square miles of Tokyo, and Japan estimates that 130,000 people died there—more than from the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

Kyoto escaped these air raids, thanks to U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson, who had visited Kyoto several times in the 1920s and felt it was important to save Japan's cultural legacy. Ultimately,

the U.S. military was ordered to spare the city's 2,400 temples and shrines.

TRANSLATING TOKYO

My family and I like to launch our vacations under the tutelage of experts, so we contacted Japan's Goodwill Guides. This expansive program recruits volunteers who are fluent speakers of foreign languages and enjoy teaching visitors about Japan's past and present. After you request a tour date, your assigned Goodwill Guide emails you, and together, you plan the itinerary. Your only expenses are treating your guide to lunch, paying their admission to any attractions you visit and, sometimes, paying for their transportation.

Our Goodwill Guide in Tokyo, Kunio Okazaki, was a dapper former

engineer who likes to keep busy in his retirement. He met us at our hotel and commenced a pace similar with other Tokyo citizens moving about their day—that is, nonstop. He hustled us into the Tokyo Metro, the busiest on earth, and instructed us to buy a Pasmo card, Tokyo's refillable subway pass.

We then followed Okazaki on a whirlwind tour of the capital's hectic streets to enter Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo's famed intersection. For 90 seconds, we joined throngs of pedestrians scrambling across 10 lanes of traffic. It was controlled chaos that felt orderly and congenial. Surrounding the intersection, billboards pulsed with K-pop music and manga cartoons. Shibuya Crossing is an iconic Tokyo attraction, but the intersection's real function is accessing Shibuya Station, Japan's busiest transit hub.

Okazaki knew that my daughter would love Shibuya's Harajuku District, the center of Tokyo's pop culture. On the tightly packed streets, groups of teens in school uniforms shopped for trendy sneakers, posed in photo booths and ate crepes that can be had with a choice of 100 toppings. We stepped into Daiso, Japan's 100-Yen Shop—comparable with our dollar stores—to buy inexpensive gifts. My daughter was thrilled to find that Japan's 7-Eleven stores (commonly called SEVEN in Japan) sell an astonishing array of candy. Her favorites were Pocky, cookie sticks

Clockwise from top left:

TeamLab Borderless Digital Art Museum, Tokyo

Entry to Nijo Castle, Kyoto

Fushimi Inari, a Shinto shrine in Kyoto, is known for its thousands of vermillion gates straddling the trails behind the main buildings.

Nishiki Market, Kyoto

Sushi and sashimi from Tokyo's Tsukiji Outer Market

NASHIKI MARKET PHOTO © JNTO

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dipped in chocolate, and black currant gummies called Fruitips.

Next, we went to Tsukiji Outer Market, which has served seafood-lovers for more than 80 years. Walking through the crowded alleyways, we took in the sights and smells of grilled crab legs, fried fish cakes and freshly sliced sashimi that you can eat there or take home. My husband sampled octopus on a stick, while I shopped for pottery. Afterward, Okazaki took us to his favorite restaurant for the lunch special, which included plates of rainbow-colored sushi, miso soup and green tea.

My favorite spot in Tokyo was the TeamLab Borderless Digital Art Museum. An ultra-techy Japanese collective had opened this museum just weeks before we arrived. Inside its "borderless" rooms, we interacted with dynamic forms of light and color as shapes danced before our eyes and responded to our touch. From crashing waves and wobbly psychedelic mushrooms to rainstorms made of LED lights, this museum is eye candy for the social-media generation and a fitting symbol of the ultramodern Tokyo we experienced.

GETTING TO KNOW KYOTO

To get to Kyoto, we took the supercharged Shinkansen train. On the way, we caught a glimpse of Mount Fuji, Japan's tallest mountain. We were thrilled, since the symmetrical peak featured in so

much Japanese imagery is usually hidden behind rain clouds. After traveling 320 miles in a mere two hours and 20 minutes on this comfortable bullet train (it takes seven hours by car), we disembarked at Kyoto Station, a complex containing a tourist information center, Kyoto Tower, six hotels, a theater, department stores, food halls and four shopping malls. This modern marvel stands in striking contrast to the lantern-lit streetscapes, tranquil rock gardens and traditional tea houses found in much of Kyoto.

Our Goodwill Guide here was Kyoto University student Nickie Tanuki. Having studied in the U.S., Tanuki loved practicing her English and was well versed in American and Japanese culture. My daughter engaged her in discussions on Japanese politics,

history and customs while we walked to Nijo Castle, built in 1603 by Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the powerful Tokugawa shogunate that ruled Japan for some 260 years, until 1868. An opulent entry gate carved with exotic birds and gold medallions leads to grand structures, including Ninomaru Palace, where the shogun lived and governed. Also inside the complex is Ninomaru Garden, built in 1676 to impress emissaries who called on the shogun. Every spring, the garden's manicured landscape is peppered with pink blossoms dropped by the plum and cherry trees.

Afterward, we followed Tanuki through Kyoto's congested streets, some of which looked as if they had barely changed in centuries, to reach the Fushimi Inari Taisha, founded in

the year 711. Kyoto's most important Shinto shrine, it is also one of Japan's most-photographed attractions. Ten thousand vermillion-colored torii gates wind through the shrine's verdant landscape leading to the top of Mount Inari. The reddish color of the gates is believed to increase the power of the *Kami*, or spirits, that protect worshippers from evil and disaster.

Our last stop was Kyoto's Nishiki Market, a shopping arcade that opened 400 years ago. Today, this glass-enclosed passageway, which stretches for five blocks, features culinary delights such as dried pickles and sweet-rice dumplings. During our time in Japan, we had eaten a lot of ramen noodles, green tea ice cream, and spicy pancakes called *okonomiyaki*, but the best bite of my trip was a soy-milk donut—chewy

on the inside and crunchy on the outside—from Nishiki Market.

A DREAM COME TRUE

After visiting Kyoto, we headed back to Tokyo to catch our plane home. Although sad to leave, we were also thankful for this magical visit that had allowed us not only to see some of Japan's most important landmarks but also to experience the hospitality of the Japanese people. We vowed to return for further exploration of this luminous archipelago, with its snow-capped mountains to the north, island beaches to the south and diverse cultures in between.

When we arrived home after nearly 24 hours of travel, I looked in my living room. There was my Japanese doll perched in her case, waiting patiently to welcome me home.



TIPS FOR TRAVELING IN JAPAN

- While it's not difficult to find free Wi-Fi in transit stations, hotels and restaurants, you can rent an inexpensive pocket Wi-Fi device at the airport. Use the GPS for navigating and finding subway/train stations.
- Take an umbrella; Japan has frequent rainstorms.
- You *must* buy your economical Japan Rail Pass before embarking on your trip. The passes are sent directly to your home. Japan Rail and Tobu Railway serve all parts of Tokyo as well as cities such as Kyoto and rural communities, too (jrailpass.net).
- Bring your ATM card. Most businesses in Japan only accept cash, especially those outside the city.
- Learn a few basic Japanese phrases. While Japanese people delight in practicing their English, it's polite to greet and thank people for their service in their own language.
- Check Agoda.com, a travel website that sometimes offers lower rates at Japanese hotels.
- Tipping is not customary in Japan and can often be interpreted as rude. Instead, to show your gratitude to a host or tour guide, bring along inexpensive American souvenirs from your hometown.