

## Two Days in Tokyo

by

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“Two days in Tokyo! You must be nuts.”

Those were my exact words when my husband proposed this trip. He had a conference in Japan and knew I had always wanted to visit this country. It was one of those ‘once in a lifetime’ trips that are irresistible. We left a cool Alberta summer for the hot, sultry climate of July in Japan. As we slept in the first class cabin of our plane, we passed over the Aleutian Islands and crossed the dateline. Two days in Tokyo became four days away from home.

Our host met us and helped us scramble onto the airport bus with our bags. Since we knew no Japanese, this was helpful. Parking at the airport is impossible and the bus is the best way to get downtown. Once there, taxis ferry you where you need to go. Our first view of Tokyo was from a flyway that passed so close to apartment buildings one could see people drinking tea.

Downtown Tokyo is overwhelming. The rushing traffic (cars drive on the left side of the road) on top of jet lag makes for great confusion. With a population of around 13 million, the streets are bustling. Our host held us back as the taxi pulled up. Good thing too, as the side door opened automatically. White (and they are very white) lace covered the seats so I felt like royalty sitting in the back. After quick instructions to the driver, we darted into traffic. The taxi whisked us through the downtown, scooting past Edo Castle and heading for the suburbs.

The conference to which my husband had been invited was near the hospital where our host worked. Our hotel was a modern building looking like one in North American but inside it was very Japanese. The impressive atrium had a six foot long umbrella stand for guests to use. The lobby was sleek with ultra modern furniture and a front desk that stretched along a massive stone wall. In one corner was a big screen TV featuring an endless scene of swimming aquarium fish. The calming effect of a koi pond in this modern venue.

Our room was small (real estate in Tokyo is a premium which is why everything is so expensive), had twin beds, two yukatas (cotton kimonos) and an array of slippers. We laughed because none of them fit my husband's size 12 feet. However, it was the bathroom that captured our imagination. Only the Japanese would have a computerized toilet. A touch of a button would allow one to sit on a heated seat and listen to music. One minute it was a toilet, the next a bidet. It even had a courtesy flush for those awkward moments!

It was almost midnight (our time) when we joined our host for dinner. Another speaker from Europe had arrived so we walked to the restaurant together. Japanese love Italian food and I guess as non-Japanese, our host felt safe with treating us to an Italian dinner. It was still a Japanese experience as the wait staff all wished us "Bona sera" while bowing.

The next morning, we had a choice of Western or Japanese breakfast at the hotel's buffet. My husband ate his corn flakes while I plunged into the tantalizing tastes of Japan. I indulged in fried fish, rice, cod roe, pickled plums, miso soup and seaweed-

wrapped delicacies. As we ate, I watched young girls going to school in uniforms reminiscent of my daughter's favourite TV show at the time, Sailor Moon.

As my husband attended meetings and I went downtown to explore Edo Castle. I had a brochure with a photo of the castle, so with this in hand, I hailed a cab. My only Japanese was Hello (kon-nichi-wa), yes (hai), and thank you (arigato). I wondered if a cabbie would be brave enough to pick me up, as it was obvious I was not Japanese. I showed him the picture of Edo Castle, he nodded, said 'hai' several times, then dropped me off at the Imperial Palace Plaza. There is no tipping in Japan so the fare you pay is what is on the meter.

With the shiny skyscrapers on one side of the Imperial Palace Plaza and the castle's flared tiled roofs decorated with stone fish peeking through the trees, it was like I stood on the cusp of two different centuries. Toyko itself did not become Japan's capital until 1868. Before that, it was a small fishing village called Edo, meaning estuary. The name Tokyo means eastern capital. Kyoto was where emperors ruled Japan until the shoguns usurped their power.

Edo castle was built by Ota Dokan in 1457 and in 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu became shogun. He then made Edo the centre of the Japan's political and military government. The shoguns ruled for over 250 years until Emperor Meiji moved there in 1869.

The thick castle walls are punctuated by large wooden gates and surrounded by three moats. Following the tiny brochure map, I wandered through the park to the Sakuradamon gate. Its wood doors were a foot thick and studded with iron bracing.

I left the castle grounds, walking along the Saburada Moat toward the National Diet Building. This is the seat of the Japanese parliament and is a mix of architectural

styles having Roman columns topped with a Mayan-like pyramid. As I strolled down a side street enjoying the passing scene, thousands of government workers poured from the surrounding buildings. Wondering where the people of Tokyo enjoyed lunch, I followed the crowd. I had heard that Japanese, afraid their English is bad, won't speak to you on the street. They don't want to lose 'face'. As this crowd of public servants jostled each other, none came close to where I walk. It was like having an invisible box surrounding me.

Most of the crowd ended up in Hibiya Park, a wonderful place of secluded ponds, fountains, wooden bridges and statuary. It was so peaceful after the noise of the city streets that I decided to sit awhile. Not an easy feat since every available seat was occupied by a person using chopsticks to eat from a bento box. I passed a class of young boys with brightly coloured bento boxes chattering happily as they fed the ducks their rice. Each wore the same baseball hat. This meant they were too young for school uniforms.

The July heat had left me with no appetite so I was not tempted to buy lunch despite enticing displays of plastic food in every restaurant window. I returned to the Imperial Palace Plaza to catch a cab back to the hotel. I had brought a hotel postcard with me which I showed the driver. It worked like a charm.

Back in our air conditioned room, I realized how thirsty I was and water wasn't slaking it. Japan is unique in that you can buy anything from a vending machine. One on our floor sold beer so I bought a 750 ml can of Kirin's which I drank before napping my jet lag away.

That evening we had a wonderful meal with our Japanese host and her husband. Even though the food was French, the presentation was Japanese and a feast for the eyes. The only quandary I faced was that the soup had a sliver of pure gold floating on its surface. How do you eat around that?

After my husband's seminar the next morning, he excused himself to see a little of the city. The afternoon presentations were not of interest to him and his host understood. We took a city bus tour and it served as a small taste of Tokyo.

First stop was the Tokyo tower. The view was spectacular despite the haze and smog. You certainly can get a grasp of how large the city is when you can't see the end of it from 150 meters up. We did see the top of Cinderella Castle in Tokyo Disneyland which was a reminder of how westernized Japan is becoming.

Our bus stopped at the Imperial Palace Plaza before passing through the Akihabara and Ueno shopping districts. We then disembarked at the Asakusa Kannon Buddhist Temple. This is an amazing compound of small shrines, koi ponds, and huge red Japanese lanterns. At an immense pot of burning incense, I watched Japanese faithful 'catch' the pungent smoke and draw it down over their heads. It reminded me of the ritualize bathing of an aboriginal sweet grass ceremony.

Beyond the temple was Nakamise shopping street. We had time to buy a few souvenirs. I wanted a Japanese fan so we explored several shops before finding one I liked. The woman serving us was thrilled we had walked all the way from the temple to choose her shop. She couldn't speak English so demonstrated that the fan I wanted was used in dance.

Japanese make gift-giving an art form and this clerk was not going to let us leave the store without wrapping each of our purchases. Then she chose some little souvenirs to wrap as a gifts for us since we had chosen her store. We spent several minutes bowing our thanks and saying 'arigato'.

The bus then drove through the Ginza district, famous for shopping and entertainment before leaving us at the Tasaki Pearl Gallery. The Ginza began as an enclave of silversmiths in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries but has become much more than that. Haute couture fashions and jewellery stores line the streets but you can also find the famous Kabuki-za Theatre where Kabuki, with its elaborate costumes and actors with white, mask-like faces is still perform.

Exhausted, we grabbed a cab back to the hotel to prepare for the conference's banquet. I am a stickler for being on time so we arrived exactly at 6:00 p.m., the time stated on our itinerary. The banquet room was full. The hundred or so delegates turned then bowed as we entered. I flushed red when I realized they waited on us to begin the banquet. Our host beckoned us to join her at a small table laden with a dozen bottles of beer. Not a single one had been opened or poured. A table in the centre of the room was laden with Japanese, Chinese, Italian and North American foods and festooned with colourful flowers. It was untouched.

I glanced around the room and noticed there were no dining tables or chairs. We made small talk until the other guest speaker arrived. The banquet began as the waiters ceremonially opened the beer bottles. We stood at our table as delegates who wished to speak to my husband approached. Finally, it was time for the pre-dinner speeches. I had no clue what was being said until the invited guests thanked our host. Then we ate. As a

courtesy to the non-Japanese guests, only forks were on the banquet table. Two hours later my feet, unaccustomed to my high heels, were killing me. I prayed the banquet would end and exactly at 8:00 p.m., it did. Our host spoke a few words in Japanese and everyone left.

We departed for home the next morning. Despite being in the city for only two days, we felt we had experienced a taste of its people and culture.

Can you really see a city in two days? Yes, indeed!