

JAPAN - visited 99

When I first heard about the contest I was ten and not quite ready to formulate an essay, but at the age of twenty-five I once again became aware of the opportunity to participate in a Tour de Japan. This time I was ready and was rather satisfied with the essay topic: 'What can Denmark and Japan do to improve the global environment toward the 21st century?' (I'm one of those persons who would prefer to go outside when nature calls instead of using dearly drops of water). Should I be asked to elaborate on the list of reasons for participating in the essay-competition at least three answers appear. Firstly, Japan and the whole of Asia for that matter has always had a somewhat exotic touch to the name. What kind of country is Japan and how are Japanese people like? I have seen Shogun at the movies, I have seen Sumo wrestling and the Winter Olympics on TV, I have enjoyed sake and sushi, but I have never experienced Japan and its inhabitants on first hand. Secondly, the topic really got me thinking about the global environment and made me read a lot of literature on the subject. Furthermore, the idea of windmills (my essay concerned wind power) fascinated me and brought me much closer to the core of wind energy. The writing of the essay was fast becoming an enlightenment experience for me. Finally, the whole matter of participating in a contest like that and perhaps winning it gave me yet a reason to write my ideas and thoughts down on a piece of paper and hand in it at the Japanese embassy in the heart of Copenhagen.

My heart jumped twice when Mr. K. Mitsuma of the Japanese embassy called me on the phone, 'Kristian San, you're the chosen one', he said in a hoarse voice. Feeling a lot more reassured than Anakin Skywalker did when posing in front of the Jedi Counsel, I rode my pod racer around the corner, delivered the two pass photos Mr. K. Mitsuma had asked for and hurried home to study the Karate Kid Trilogy, have a sip of tea (green, of course) and wait for three months. Spending the summer waxing and mentally focusing on a trip to the Land of the Rising Sun, I was ready to swallow new impressions and tempura in big bites, and involve myself in Japan and its people. However, I never dreamed that the trip to Japan would have such an immense impact on me. From the very minute I landed in Tokyo I knew this would become a fortnight never to forget. Nouri San and K San looked absolutely stunning when the twenty-five of us arrived at New Tokyo International Airport (Narita), and already being acquainted with the lovely group of 'highly potential' Europeans (mind you, I was one of them), I knew very well this would be more than the usual one-day-trip buying cheap and strong German beer. This was much more than a ticket to Travemünde and back.

Counting no less than four vodka-loving, knife-stabbing Finns; four beer-loving, Mercedes-driving Germans; three football-crazy, God save the Queen-fanatic Brites; two voulez-vous-coucher-avec-moi-ce-soir (yes, please) fromage-eating Frenchman; two we-once-had-an-empire-bigger-than-Great-Britain white socks-wearing Portuguese with lovely brown eyes; two girls from the Benelux-countries wearing their wooden shoes and showing off their sex (and didn't we just love that); one small Austrian with a big ; one Real Madrid supporter who seemed far more intelligent than I remember Spanish people to be (Mr. J said that, not I); one Icelandic bloke who works for a newspaper (everyone works for a newspaper in Iceland, that is all they do, read or write in newspapers and drive around in their imported American cars); one Norwegian fellow with black gold up to his ears; one blonde Swedish girl with that innocent look to her eyes (one wonders

once in a while); one Greek girl (the girl from my adolescent dreams standing in her g-string (oh no, that's right they don't wear that), well standing in her bikini then, guiding me to the best Kebab shop on Samos and smiling a typical Greek smile, I wanna go to Greece again); one I know-my-stuff-really-well (and I bet you do) Italian girl with a spark in her eyes; one (I'm not gonna say Great) Dane with a back-pack full of ironical and satirical inputs trying to do his best to impress the lot; and finally some 11 million Japanese residing in Tokyo, it seemed like the big melting pot was cooking for full steam.

The drive from the new airport to New Ohsaki City was packed with information everyone forgot the minute they were out in the air. But we did not need to worry, it would be repeated again and again, and shown on posters and posted on billboards. Nevertheless, we managed to forget everything, even the meeting time next morning (somewhere around nine or ten). Luckily Edo-Tokyo Museum was still there when we arrived and it looked rather impressive too. The museum building is modelled after the ancient Japanese elevated grain storage houses. At its peak, it measures 62.2 meters, about the same height as the tower of Edo Castle. The museum has a floor space of some 30,000 square meters. Unfortunately, the inside lacked the splendour of the exterior but still managed to give a basic idea of the history of Tokyo. Precisely one hour later we were ready to eat our first lunch in Japan at 'Aoi-Marushin' in the Asakusa area. I have never really got the point in chopsticks, why not just use knife and fork? Anyway, my ignorance toward foreign cultures recoiled now. Soup, tempura and noodles flew in circles around me. It reminded with of the beginning of 'The Second Coming' by W. B. Yeats; 'turning and turning in widening gyre; the centre cannot hold'. Try to imagine me in the middle of things trying to hold onto my circling food that just will not stay on the plate or the table for that matter. I did not have seconds. A bit on the hungry side after the hullabaloo, I decided to go for a Royal with cheese.

The unripe tomato-coloured Tower of Tokyo was next in the text and feeling somewhat heavy after my big meal, I decided to jog up the stairs. Bad idea as a box of fries with plenty of mayonnaise is not the best energy source before a major workout. Finally to the top I realised that I was wet to the bone and my fellow Europeans would probably not appreciate my odour, no matter how masculine it might be, and I had to make my way back down via the stairs. Eight hundred steps later I collapsed in the back of the bus, ready to do nothing but visit the Sento down the road from New Otani Inn. To be honest I had hoped that both genders should bath together, but I was in for a disappointment. The only one able to observe all of us was the Sento maid, who refused to change places with me. So I had to be content with old Japanese men and pale Europeans trying to squat down on the small stools without touching the floor with their extremities hanging loosely in mid-air. Some managed, some did not.

At the karaoke bar, Big Horn, same night, some sang, some did not. But even though we were quite a way from truly imitating our most beloved artists such as the Boss, Beatles, Beach Boys and the Monkeys, it seemed like we were all having a marvellous time, and with 'leaving on a jet plane' hammering through the loud speakers, we climaxed and wanted more. However, we never sat foot there again, partly because there are so many excellent places to go in Japan when karaoke is your game and partly because it was not our game at all. My game, however, was situated in Sega World right next to the T2 machine. When I jumped onto the platform and started to dance the night away even Arnold looked amazed. There were four different colour circles on the

platform, each one representing a sound, and when the music started the screen told you which one to step on. This stuff I could relate to.

The following days went by fast. We attended an orientation session by the First West Europe Division, the European and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and we received two brown envelopes containing some pocket cash- one with 70.000 yen and one with 360 yen for the train back to the Inn. We visited the Tokyo Stock Exchange, very fascinating, and I bought a paper knife and a pen, and the Panasonic AV&CC Systems Square, also very impressive, especially the lovely guides. We attended lectures on Japanese culture, education and politics or was it economy, visited the Communications Research Laboratory and the National Diet, met with Japanese university students and ate at the finest restaurants in town. We saw Tokyo Metropolitan Ariake Incineration Plant and Fuji Television, and had the pleasure of experiencing a Kabuki performance at the Kabuki-za theatre. We went to the Tokyo Central Wholesale Market (Tsukiji Fish Market) and rounded the busy days in Tokyo with a visit to Fuji Plant, Isuzu Motor Corporation.

Now it was time to relax and enjoy some fresh air, so we headed south by ANA-675. Safely dropped at Hiroshima we hurried to one of Japan's '3 most beautiful spots', Miyajima. It is a place where history and tradition, blue sea, verdure and mountains replete with attractive highlights. Unfortunately I missed all that. I was battling with a deer about to eat a poor person's luggage. It was really going at it, chewing all his maps and even his dirty socks. Being a descendent from the brave and proud Vikings, I decided to chase the deer away. But it would not move and threatened to go after me with its big antles and brown eyes. Luckily for the enormous creature I had to catch the next boat home to my new Japanese family. They were so sweet and polite it brought tears to my eyes. They took me everywhere, we went to the other side of Japan and back, we listened to ceremonial music in the outskirts of Hiroshima (that was an experience), and we went karaokeing followed by meals the size of my Japanese mother. Leaving, on the Shinkansen (don't know when I'll be back again) tears were rolling down our cheeks.

Kyoto was one big temple and when you have seen one, you have seen them all (this is of course not my view), but the town still managed to create a huge surprise. The bus suddenly refused to open its door and panic was arising in the hot air . Luckily I have been properly trained for situations like these and I acted intuitively. With a bellow I managed to rip out the emergency exit and eat it, and we could safely step down a ladder provided for us by the temple guards. A new bus arrived and even though we felt a bit insecure we decided to take the risk and climbed aboard. 'We still have many temples and a Japanese Traditional Tea Ceremony Party to see', our always-informative guides told us.

The farewell party at the Inn back in Tokyo made us all realise that it was time to say good bye and many many thousands thanks for a wonderful trip, a trip not to forget. Arrigato gozaimasu.