



Mysterious Japan Travel notes from Malika-san

THE FRAGRANCES OF JAPAN

Every time I arrive in the wonderful land of the rising sun I feel as if I have actually never left it.

I alight from an Uzbekistan Airways airliner at the Narita airport in the eastern part of Big Tokyo and walk through a long corridor. I recognize the country's fragrance. How much do I like this smell of purity. The aromas of balm and shampoo. An inscription 'Made in Japan' flashes across my mind. Made with high quality. They are excellent in everything. Even in fragrances.

There you will never come across the aroma of strong-smelling perfume. Theirs are the tender scent of Zen or the hardly perceptible fragrance of violet. Gently smelling flowers can be seen all around the city. Though not excessively fragrant, the flowerbeds are strikingly beautiful. Different restaurants feature either the smell of fried fish or... no smell at all.

The smell of Tokyo varies depending on the district. In most parts it is the fragrance of purity – it permeates everything.

MY FAVOURITE CITY

It may come as a surprise to some of you that it is not Tokyo or Osaka or even Kyoto with its temples and Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku ji). My favourite city is Fukui on the island of Honshu.

'What!' Even Japanese are usually shocked by this statement. 'Why?' they normally ask. The city features a unique temple, Eihei-ji, which still functions. It is almost 800 years old. Eihei-ji is one of the two principal Zen Buddhist temples representing the Soto school – a confession that possesses the largest number of temples in Japan. The name of the temple can be translated as 'the temple of the eternal world.'

I have taken a strong liking for the peacefulness, quietude and calmness of the temple. Next to it there is a workshop manufacturing dolls from bamboo and Japanese paper. The production technology is similar to that used in the making of the Samarkand silk paper.

The dark blue of the Sea of Japan near the port of Fukui is also amazing. The Pacific Ocean has a different light blue colour.

However, the most important aspect my love for the city is based upon is its people, and particularly Otaki-sensei and Ishizaki-sensei – my good friends and teachers.



THE MEANING OF LIFE

I ask my friend and teacher Otaki-sensei:

‘What do you think is the meaning of life?’

‘Oh, Malika-san, it is hard to answer your question. Perhaps, for me life is important, because, although I am 80 already, I can walk by myself and feel more or less good.’

I ask Kato-sensei, a world-famous archaeologist:

‘Kato-sensei, what does life mean to you?’

‘Life is wonderful, because we can travel.’

It is true, the Japanese are the most active travellers. You can remember that, in whichever country, you always encounter disciplined and well-organized groups of tourists from Japan. You can often notice a Japanese with a camera on the background of any photo you take during your tour of the world. A Japanese without a camera looks like an Uzbek without a car made in Asaka. Those who can work can relax. However, I shall tell about it later.

UGOKU OR HATARAKU?

At first sight you may think that Japanese are sometimes indifferent when you speak to them. Keeping within themselves storms of emotions, Japanese stay emotionally intelligent and share their rich life experience very readily.

Here is a conversation I had in my recent trip.

Satoshi-san asks me:

‘Malika-san, are you ugoku or hataraku?’

In order to understand what Satoshi-san was asking you need to know that ‘ugoku’ and ‘hataraku’ are verbs having, as it seems, the same meaning – ‘to work.’ However, there is a fundamental difference.

‘Ugoku’ 働< means ‘to work without loving what you do.’

‘Hataraku’ 働< is the same hieroglyph with ‘hito’ added to it, which changes it into ‘to work with love’ or ‘to do what you like best.’

‘Malika-san, it is obvious you are hataraku, but do not forget to rest.

Japanese, indeed, can work and can relax. One of their favourite places of recreation is Disneyland in Tokyo, the largest one in the world, situated on the outskirts of Japan’s capital. The Ueno Zoo, the oldest zoo in Tokyo founded in 1884, ranks among the best in the world. Fukui has its own ‘Jurassic Park’ featuring a wide range of terrifyingly realistic dinosaurs. Osaka is famous for its oceanarium with a gigantic whale shark,



which swims peacefully surrounded by a large number of multi-coloured sea fishes. The 634-metre Tokyo Skytree, the world's tallest television tower, the observation deck of which provides a wonderful view of the capital city, is also a very popular attraction. Parks, Disneyland and other public places gather long queues of Japanese waiting patiently for their turn. Those who are in a hurry can purchase 'quick tickets': they are more expensive than the ordinary ones, but they enable people to enter without waiting.

NO SNAKES IN MENUS

False ideas are extremely enduring. I still have to convince people that Japanese food does not contain any snakes or, say, beetles. Nor does the Japanese kitchen abound in spicy dishes!

There are many places in Tashkent, where one can eat sushi. But the best region to taste this dish is, certainly, Japan. Oh yes! This is a paradise for gourmets specializing in sushi and sashimi. Slowly, you pick some ohasi with the chopsticks and put the amazingly beautiful roll into your mouth. It is rice and fish, the latter always raw and of very different kinds. I prefer sushi with eel. And misoshiru – soup with paste miso dissolved in it. Or thin slices of sukiyaki beef, which you watch boiling right on the table in front of you.

The Japanese appreciate food for both its taste and beauty. The art of cookery is raised to the highest level in Japan. But it is hard to eat much Japanese food. Either we are not accustomed to it or it is too diverse.

Desserts in Japan are usually low-calorie and not very sweet. Nor do Japanese put sugar in their coffee. There are many coffee houses in the country, though. I recommend that you try konnyaku jelly. Delicious! It tastes of peach, apple or tangerine. Yokan marshmallow is also very good. Everything is put in small bowls, confectionaries are small-sized, but all is very beautifully served.

You have all heard about the tea ceremony and, perhaps, even witnessed it. The first time I took part in a tea ceremony was in the abovementioned Eihei-ji temple. Otaki-sensei and I were waiting for our turn. Finally, they brought us sweets and then the authentic Japanese green tea, strong and astringent. The woman that brought it bowed her head low and gave me a cup with the tea. I also greeted her with a bow and took the cup. The gesture of respect and trust. I did not talk to her, but this ceremony let me realize how much Japanese appreciate guests.



THE JAPANESE TRUSTWORTHINESS

Every time I wonder at the reliability of the Japanese. They will go out of their way to do what they have promised. Perhaps, this is caused by the genes of the brave samurai running in their veins? For me friendship has always meant trust in a person. And I always trust Japanese. So, all the Japanese are my friends. They are excellent friends, believe me.

In earlier days I thought it impossible to plan everything beforehand. How can one be always so disciplined? One can get tired of it! When I asked this question, I did not receive an answer. The samurai traditions alive, I thought and plodded on.

TAXI DRIVERS AND CARS

If you want to get somewhere alone by taxi, be ready to pay a considerable sum of money. To ride in a taxi is quite expensive there, as only to get on it costs some six dollars. Plus almost one dollar for each 280 m. So, 10 km would cost you about 35 dollars. But, if you are a company of several friends, why not club together and have a ride? It is worth it, as taxi drivers in Japan are like anywhere in the world: if you speak Japanese, they will tell you and show you anything you like. Only if the taxi driver wants to talk to you.

I remember a conversation with a lively taxi driver in Osaka. As it turned out, he had been in Uzbekistan. He asked me where I had learnt Japanese so well. I decided to play a trick on him and said that my mother was Uzbek and my father Japanese. 'So how did your parents meet?' he asked. We had talked all along the trip until, in the end, I gave in and confessed that was a joke. The driver gave me a cheerful look and said in flawless Russian: 'I knew that.' We laughed. I wanted to tip him, but it is not accepted in Japan. The reliable and low-consumption Japanese cars are popular throughout the world. Every sixth car on the planet can 'speak' Japanese. How beautiful they are! The roads are full of new high-tech cars. Interestingly, the islands feature a lot of companies that sell second-hand cars exclusively abroad. Most of these 'second-hand' vehicles are not more than two or three years old. I would have put one of them into my suitcase had it had enough room for it. Perhaps, next time?

WHAT YOU SHOULD REMEMBER ABOUT JAPAN

Japanese are highly courteous. They treat all guests with respect and honour. They like foreigners for their naturalness and understand that they are not familiar with the



Japanese etiquette. Japanese are tolerant of people from other cultures, but you should remember several taboos.

It is unacceptable to talk or laugh loudly, particularly in public places, touch people you are not acquainted with, particularly in public transport. You should not cross a street on a red light. Wait patiently for your turn. Do not show your little finger to people. If a Japanese bows, you should bow in response, though foreigners may simply shake hands. Take off your shoes, when you enter somebody's home.

A KOKESHI DOLL

Japanese like to visit Uzbekistan. The kindness, hospitality and warmth of the Uzbek people are congenial to them. They like the blue domes, majolica and mosaics of Samarkand, the magic streets of Bukhara devoid of any pomposity (the Japanese prefer minimalism in everything and appreciate natural beauty) and the minarets of Ichan Kala. The Japanese tourists also arrive in Uzbekistan in order to visit Termez and see the ancient Buddhist monuments. They also come to our country to commemorate the 813 Japanese people buried in eight cemeteries across Uzbekistan. After the Second World War 23 thousand captive Japanese were sent to Uzbekistan, where they were involved in the construction of a number of objects. The first person I heard that story from was my father. He was then ten years old and he gave a piece of bread to a captive Japanese, and the latter presented my father with a handmade wooden handle topped with a tiny kokeshi doll.

Perhaps, this is why I return to Japan again and again? 'Surely, I will come back' I say to myself and, certainly, to you, my dear Japan. Next time we will fly to the Ogasawara Islands. Forty islands one thousand kilometers from Tokyo. There I hope I will sail to an open sea to see dolphins and gigantic sperm whales. And, if I am lucky enough, to hear the whales singing, which is the sweetest sound of the ocean to me.

Each time I visit Japan I bring home a bottle of sake, a couple of inimitable Japanese fans and... a kokeshi doll.

Malika RUSTAMOVA

Photos by author and Anvar AVAZKHODJAEV