



First Impressions

Japan was huge on my bucket list...as it is for so many people. Every time I thought of Japan I imagined graceful kimonos, deep green forests, delicate cherry blossoms, clean streets, and innate politeness. But I also loved the Japan of anime, and funky electronics...and an interesting new indie artist Vaundy, whom I stumbled upon on my Spotify feed...whose groovy music became the soundtrack for this trip.

My plan was the usual: complete the tourist checkmarks in a flurry, and then sink deeper in immersive experiences. So I booked a long-term Airbnb on Shirahama beach, planned a long hike on the Kumano Kudo with a friend, and signed up to volunteer on an oyster farm in Kumihama. I wanted to also spend a few weeks in temples stays - shukubo, as they are called in Japanese - but they all seemed to be expensive fully and booked by tourists (alas, the secrets of Koyasan temples were not so secret anymore!).

I did start with a nice stroke of tourist luck, though. For a person who travels as randomly as I do, it was great that the hostel that I chose in Tokyo also happened to be bang in the center of the city's top

recommended tourist spot- Asakusa - home to the oldest Shinto temple *Senso-ji*, and a vibrant shopping and dining district. It was a great start!



The train system here, as in the EU, blew me away with its clarity and simplicity for the traveler. It is really amazing how these countries - where English is not even their main language - make it a breeze for the tourists.

In spite of a myriad of different train networks, I was able to navigate my way through complex transfers with ease, thanks to the clear and helpful signs at every location in the station, guiding me, even listing all the landmarks I will exit to, at an exit. Again, as in in EU, I thought about the improvements the NYC Subway system could make.

I made much use of their famous bullet trains - the *Shinkansen* - zipping across the country, east to west, north to south, “eating bullet trains like candy”, as I wrote to a friend. I was so impressed by them - not just by the speed, or the cleanliness, or the efficiency, but also by the discipline of the crew. Even the cleaning team worked the process like a military drill, standing to attention after each round of cleaning, in their uniforms, with their gloves and brooms neatly put in place, waiting until the leader finished their

round of verification, only then turning and marching out. I've never seen so much pride in the labor of cleaning.

Elsewhere as well, I saw people in suits sweeping the streets, people using toothbrushes to clean crevices from sidewalks, people making it a point to let me know - once even crossing the street to talk to me - that my paper coffee cup could not be thrown in the plastic recycling bin. Civic sense! India could learn so much from here.

Right away I got to feel the courtesy, politeness, and altogether niceness of the people. Random strangers politely asked me - even in broken English - if they could help me with my suitcase, one of them a woman, and once a teenager actually carried it up an entire flight of stairs!

Once I was at Ueno park- a park kind of like Central Park but with many more museums - and after meandering through it for a few hours, I got lost a bit, and asked a lady to point me to the station so I could head back.

“Sumimasen. Station doko desuka?” , I asked in my pidgin Japanese.

She smiled and rattled off a whole sentence in Japanese that I did not understand, but she did point with her hands towards a direction, which I presumed to be that of the station, and so, after a number of *Arigatos*, I headed that way.

After a few minutes of walking, I felt a mild tap on my shoulder. I turned.

It was her again. Very apologetically she showed me a full message she had typed on her phone in a translator app: “ I have free time. Do you want to visit with me to the station?”

I was flummoxed for a bit, trying to make sense of the message, and then understood that she wanted to walk with me to the station to make sure that I found my way. I was so touched that she had yet been thinking of me, and had followed me to offer me more help.

Smiling and bowing, I answered “No, no, I am okay, thank you, *arigato, arigato gozaimasu*”. We waved, bowed once more, and went our separate ways. I saw her hurrying a bit towards the baseball stadium where a game had started.



I loved the attention to product design and functionality! Japan is the place where everything works perfectly - it spoils you. From the bathtub plug that needed no tweaking to have it seal tight, to the hotel room entry card reader at hotel rooms that never went out of synch even during a 20 day stay, to the takeaway coffee cup lid whose spout cover folded back smoothly and snapped exactly into place, a perfect fit every time (and I have had coffee at least three different convenience store chains in twelve different places in the country over two months).

Clothes clips are rounded so they don't scrunch up the clothes. Sweeper pans have a nifty edge that lines up perfectly with the ground. Spatulas have a resting pinpoint built right into them, so you don't have to hunt around for plate to set them down while cooking- you can place them straight down on the countertop. Even something as simple as the cling wrap can move one to delight — it tears perfectly every time!

And the toilets! Never did I think I would be admiring and photographing toilets.

But right away on landing, the airport stalls wowed me with the amount of functionality crammed into them - looking like mini hospital setups with numerous hand rail supports, hooks (so essential for women's purses!), and multiple rolls of soft toilet paper. A washbasin was built right at the back of the flush, that automatically turned on as the flush died down. Then the luxury feature - a bidet, a child seat, a dispenser for moisturizing liquid and special wipes.

This continued on...in stalls of gas stations, in McDonalds, in tiny suburban public parks, even in the stalls of the railway stations of remote village towns...it seemed like some kind of competition was going on in toilet standards. My bum started to get used to this warm luxury.

A Quest to Find an English Book

It had been six weeks since I had read a book, and I suddenly found myself craving one!

There is only so much phone scrolling one can do to during free moments, and now, here, in the beach town of Shirahama, I could not stop thinking about how perfect it would be to relax on the sand, lying on a towel, reading a book.

I regretted not packing a book or two as I usually do, trying to be a smarter traveller this time around, traveling light, thinking that I could easily buy books in whatever I went.

Only this was JAPAN. Rows and rows of books yes, but alas, all Japanese only, I did not realize how their strong cultural bonds could also show up in bookshelves! But the bookstores looked so gorgeous, lined with rows and rows of similar looking series of manga books that people hungrily stood and flipped through for hours.

In Shirahama, I went on a quest for a book. It was a sort of dying small town, with not many shops, and most shops either closed permanently or maintaining very short hours. Not having much hope, I typed "bookstores" in Google Maps. Miraculously there was one...and it was right nearby too! I couldn't believe my eyes, but set out to find it anyway, hoping against hope.

It did indeed exist, tucked behind in a row of closed shutters that late afternoon, in a small room in an apartment building that also housed a hairdressing salon, and a travel agency. But it was charming, like a typical coffee-book-shop, with lots of knickknacks and a small percolator with coffee.

The owner popped out from behind a wall of an even tinier room, she was a young girl who was able to



speak some English. I was very heartened. And there were English books! I was thrilled to see them, and started scanning them rapidly with my eye. Alas, they were mostly photography books!

Later, I realized this was a theme with English books everywhere in Japan - they were mostly picture books, such as those of architecture, or travel or photography.

Dismayed, but yet hoping I could yet stumble upon some random gem, I decided to work systematically through each row, taking a stool to reach the very top shelves. It reminded me of how I would determinedly hunt through the newspapers and books at the back of the *kabaddiwallah* shops

(which recycled paper based products) in India, trying to find something interesting, anything.

Here, despite many determined minutes, unfortunately, I did not get a single book with significant reading content. But I was so desperate - dear reader - that I walked out with a book titled “*Cooking Miso Soup*”, paying the exorbitant sum of 2800 Yen (~\$18) for it!

And, yes, I did peruse those recipes in great detail, lying on a towel on the sand at the beach.

Working on a Oyster Farm in Kumihama



Kumihama was the village I went to for my work exchange program - three hours north of Kyoto ,in a bay on the Sea of Japan. Such a beautiful place!

When my host took me to my room, I was stunned. Beautiful tatami mats on the floors, deep wooden cupboards, a polished low wood table where I could work on my laptop while watching the gorgeous view from windows lining end to end along two walls of the room, giving me both the bay and the beach views at the same time. I slept to the warm sea breezes blowing in.

My host, Atsushi, lived here in a home built by his grandparents. They ran an oyster farming business on the bay...and I had looked forward to enjoying these favorite delicacies. Alas, due to climate change, this was the first year in 18 years that their oyster stock had completely died! This poor community. Their beach, too, was suffering, it was getting the trash of the world swept onto it, so unfair for such a beautiful place. Not only was tourism declining, but the residents were leaving as well -some 3000 houses had already been abandoned.

There was another volunteer at the same time as me, a marketing digital nomad guy from UK. We wanted to be busy, but we did not know what to do. We cleaned out the cockle shells, tidied out the kitchen, but our host was more intent on making sure that we had fun. He introduced us to the local community, taking us around - to the groups learning English, to a dairy farm (which looked straight out

of a Enid Blyton book) and a rice farm, enlisting local youngsters to take us around sight seeing the tourist spots, and to lovely *onsens* in the Kinosaki region, where we lazed many hours in the warm baths.

Yet it was such a beautiful place. A road ran all around the sparkling bay, and Thomas and I loved to bike on it. It was rather hilly, but I enjoyed the delicious effort of it; the freedom of a bike ride and the explorations that come on the way make it all so worthwhile!. My bike was a cool mountain bike with Shimano gears, and it zoomed up and down the hills.



One day biked to a mountain, which we then hiked in the afternoon. On the way back, we decided to bike the other way around home. We chanced upon a sake brewery - turned out it was an award winning one - and ducked in. Luckily, the head sake Master was in there in person and graciously showed us around, gave a whole history of the process, as well as many, many samples. Then, we biked further out into the village, and found a hole-in-the-wall ramen place, with just three tables, and adorned with all kinds of knickknacks, and local pictures, and cuttings from newspapers. manned by a very old lady, who served us simple but piping-hot ramen and green tea.

One day, we stumbled upon a lovely old shrine. It was quiet and green with moss, a Buddhist temple in the front, and terraced greenery sweeping back into the hills, a small stream trickling through. I remembered how I had battled crowds and bad food to see famous shrines in Tokyo and Kyoto. And yet, here I was, in a much more intricately beautiful shrine with delicate gold motifs, set in ancient trees and

stones, enjoying it all by myself...all because I had gone off the beaten path. I did a spot of meditation in gratitude for the moment.

There is something really grounding about the moss in Japanese gardens. The way it winds its way on the ground uniting every root, every post, every rock and pebble, even finding its way up on the trunks of the trees, on sides of the little hills and boulders that were sometimes purposely placed for it, and even on the roofs of the buildings and shrines. The color is vibrant and yet soft green, inviting you to touch its sponginess, maybe step into it - although usually wet. Hundreds of years have gone into



creating all that presence, you can feel the reverence reverberating in the air.

Thomas and I sat lazing on the steps of the temple, watching the bay in the front, and began talking... about life, philosophy and nature... why we were nomadic. It has always been astounding to me how easily and deeply I am able to connect with perfect strangers like this, through my travels. I think it is because they are searching for the same thing as me...they are already part of my tribe.

We continued the conversation as we biked further into the village to shop for groceries, and bought some sandwich snacks, which we ate sitting outside the store.

Then we began talking about the local community, the quiet, almost empty town, and our host— both of us were worried for him. With the loss of the oysters, he had lost his livelihood. His other business was renting out a guesthouse on Airbnb. We tossed around ideas to help him with marketing, and maybe some new business ideas: perhaps he could start a language exchange program, or he could offer fishing trips for tourists. Maybe he could work with local crafts places and create an artist program... I got all excited, but Thomas cautioned that it might all be too ambitious.

We biked back, showered, and met up again in the kitchen to cook our dinner together, since our host usually ate with his family. Thomas boiled the pasta, while I chopped the aubergines and peppers with garlic and onion, using the surprisingly sharp knives. There was some indie music I had put on. We served ourselves two bowls, and I insisted that we eat out, on the beautiful pier, even though it was quite dark. So walked out in the dark, balancing the bowls, and the glasses of water, and cutlery, using only the light of our phones. And ate our meals by the same light, under the wide night sky, the music yet playing softly.

It was a beautiful night, the bay stretching out calm before us. The simple food tasted sublime. We both ate in silence, soaking up that deep feeling of peace.

After we finished eating, Thomas turned to me, and said “Yes, let’s give back to this place. Let’s revitalize it!” I grinned, delighted.

We started brainstorming sessions with Atsushi the next day. He brought out some white paper and sketch pens, and we all sat around the low table in the living room of the guesthouse, and built out ideas and a sketch of a plan.

Here is the website we built over the next three months, finishing and launching it way after we had left Kumihama...left Japan even.

<https://www.gentlemoon.jp/>