Holy Cow, Japan is a lot different than I thought!

by Amanda J. Gragg
I thought I knew a lot about Japan before my trip, but I was ever in for a surprise!
FOOD CULTURE IN JAPAN

While it seems obvious that food in Japan is different than food in the United States, the reality of it did not hit me until my arrival in Japan. My new professor had purchased some food for my apartment, so that night when I was hungry I had some. I hated all of it. The next morning I went looking for the grocery store. I was overwhelmed by how different it was from what I am used to. I couldn't read any of the labels. When I was close to being in tears, I realized there was something at the front of the store that I did recognize. It was a donut shop! I was so relieved.
Restaurants were a lot different in Japan that I expected...

There are no buffets, but restaurants often have salad bars, drink bars, and sometimes even soup bars. At most places, the table has a button you can push when you are ready to order your food. When you are done, you go to the register at the front door to pay for your meal. While the food is great, one of the nicest things about Japan is that you aren't supposed to leave a tip!

Japanese restaurants sell both Japanese and Western food. Western food is almost always adapted to Japanese taste. The most frequented Japanese restaurants are noodle shops, sushi restaurants, and yakitori restaurants that sell anything that can be skewered and grilled. While fast food restaurants are commonplace in the United States, there are less in Japan and there are no drive-thru windows.
I was surprised that the "buffets" in Japan charged us for the food we didn't eat (left). We enjoyed eating at Victoria's Steakhouse often because they had a whopping 1-lb steak (top right), and we went downtown on the weekends to eat yakitori (bottom right).
I was surprised by the number of American restaurants in Japan. McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut were everywhere in Japan. While these restaurants had some of their classic dishes, many things were different. McDonald's had a teriyaki burger, and portions were very small. KFC didn't have coleslaw or mashed potatoes. How on earth could KFC not have mashed potatoes? You also had to be careful when ordering pizza, because a lot of it had corn and mayo on it! I'd never seen that before! I went to Denny's in Tokyo, and there weren't just additional Japanese items, there wasn't any American food on the menu at all! The Tokyo TGI Friday's and Hard Rock Cafe served their regular menu. Amazingly, all of their waitresses spoke English! It was the first time I had eaten nachos in months because there is no Mexican food in Sapporo! It felt like I was back in the U.S. again.
Many foreigners were eating at Hard Rock Cafe in Tokyo (left), but none of them were at Denny's because there had no American cuisine (bottom right). However, there were many places with American food, and most vending machines even sold Coke and Fanta (top right).
One night a Japanese friend invited the English-speaking exchange students over for dinner. Her parents own a fish farm in Okinawa, and they sent us a cooler full of clams and sea urchins. As you can see it was a tight squeeze, but it was an experience like no other.
In the summer, I traveled with friends to a farm in the mountains to pick and buy cherries. There we had a cookout the Japanese way. We ate a dish called genghis khan, which is made of lamb, onions, cabbage, bean sprouts, and green pepper all soaked in a special sauce.
I was very apprehensive about this dish, but to my surprise it became one of my favorites. The cherries we picked were a lot tastier than I expected. I went home with two boxes of cherries at no charge, because the Japanese ladies thought I was cute!
Since our friends treated us to seafood and a Japanese cookout, we decided we would treat them to an American cookout! What better way to do that than by grilling hamburgers?
Our cookout did have some unexpected laughs. It had never occurred to me that my Japanese friends would put their potato salad on their hamburgers and then try to eat it with chopsticks. Somebody get that kid a fork!
While I thought my Japanese friends' eating hamburgers with chopsticks was funny, little did I know that five months later I'd be eating my birthday cake with chopsticks! Nor was I aware that there was a plot to put icing all over my face. What fun!
TRANSPORTATION IN JAPAN

Before I went to Japan I had only been on an airplane twice. To get to Sapporo, I had to take three different airplanes and travel for twenty-six hours. I was scared to death, but finding my way around the airport was easier than I expected.

After crossing the hurdle of the plane ride, I knew that public transportation was another experience I was about to have in Japan. Growing up in the Midwest, I had never used public transportation. I knew I was going to be in for an adventure, but I had no idea how far I would actually go.
The Rainbow Bridge (left) crosses over Tokyo Bay to Odaiba. You can get there by bus, car, ferry, or the Yurikamome, a transit car that is fully automated. I never thought I’d be on a train without a driver! Especially when you look at the traffic from Tokyo Tower (right).
Train stations are happening places, and I was surprised by the liveliness of locations like Ueno Station (left) and downtown Sapporo (right). People are always on the move, whether they are walking, riding, or driving.
Bullet trains (top) are the fastest way to get from city to city. I was surprised by the number of people that used them to get to work (bottom left). Most people read the newspapers, books, or manga (Japanese comics) while they are waiting for the train (bottom left).
I was amazed at the number of people it takes to run the transit systems in Japan. There are people who sell tickets, ones who sell meals for the ride, conductors, and flagmen at every station.
I didn’t expect to be relying on public transportation on a daily basis, but it’s a good thing I did. The streets are crowded with taxis and buses, and the signs aren't that much help if you can't read them.
I was surprised by the variety of entrances to the subway. Sometimes they were in buildings, but often there were stairways leading down from the street. With so many people on the subway, no one would think that traffic was bumper to bumper on the street.
Before I left Japan, I'd mastered the use of many types of public transportation.
Transportation ended up being one of my biggest adventures.

I never knew that I would master all the types of public transportation in Japan. I had never ridden on city buses and I had only seen subways in movies. I was afraid of trying to go places by myself, so I relied on others to go with me when taking the bus or the subway.

I got brave enough to travel short distances on my own after I had lived there for two months. In the third month I planned and went on a trip across the country with a friend. By the time I left Japan, I used the city buses and the subway several times a week with ease. Learning to use public transportation in another language was a struggle for me, but now I am not afraid to make use of public transportation in the United States when it is available.
TRAVELING ACROSS JAPAN

During my stay in Japan, Kim Foltz, my math teacher and friend from high school, came from the U.S. to travel the country with me. After spending some time in Sapporo, we traveled to Tokyo by train. From Tokyo we went to Fuji City with the intention of seeing Mt. Fuji, but that never happened because of the weather. Next we went to Kyoto by bullet train and spent several days touring the city using bus passes. We went to Hiroshima after that, where we visited the Peace Memorial Park and the Atomic Dome. We traveled back through Tokyo a few days later to spend more time taking in the sites and swimming in Tokyo Bay with the flying fish. It was the best vacation I've ever taken. Some of the famous places we visited are even depicted on Japanese coins. When I started college, I never thought I would get to travel like that.
I was surprised to see vast parks in a country that is known for having very little space (left). Then again, those parks were surrounded by several towering skyscrapers and streets with four or more lanes (right).
I spent most of my time in the bustling city of Sapporo.

The city I lived in during my stay had a number of its own sights to see. Sapporo is one of the most modern cities in Japan and has grown up as a Western-style city. This is shown by how the streets are all in blocks like a city in the U.S., unlike other Japanese cities that might appear unorganized to Western eyes.

I visited several beautiful parks in Sapporo. Everyday was sightseeing for me because the mountains were clearly visible on my walk to school. Along with the nature of Hokkaido, I also saw several other sights in Sapporo. I attended a baseball game at Sapporo Dome, visited the Ainu Museum, and shopped at several markets and stores in the city.
I was surprised to see shops on an alley in Ueno (left). I spent many hours looking through them. Not far away was Ueno Park and within that was Ueno Zoo. While we took a picture with a fake panda (right), they also had real pandas, a sight I'd never seen before at a zoo.
On the way to the hotel from Ueno, we decided to stop and look around at various subway stations. We came across Asakusa Shrine with a beautiful pagoda (left). From a distance at dinner we saw Tokyo Tower (right). Little did we know it was an hour to walk there!
From Tokyo we traveled to Fuji City, where we learned that a bus could take us to a set of waterfalls that flow down from Mt. Fuji. I was amazed by the beautiful views of Shiraito Falls (top left and right) and Otodome Falls (bottom left and right).
While the waterfalls were beautiful, I never expected that the water would be so cold on my feet. Kim never expected to get burnt by a poisonous caterpillar or to run from spiders raining down from the railing.
When we went to Kyoto, I got to see Nijo Castle (left). It has beautiful gardens and ponds (right). I never thought I'd see the castle of a shogun, or tread on nightingale floors that sang like a bird when I walked on them. I never knew creaking floors were a good thing.
I had seen the Golden Pavilion in books and magazines, but I never thought I'd go to Kyoto and take a picture of the most famous view of it (left). Nor did I think that I would get to see it up close (right).
I'd seen the gate of Chionin before in a movie, but I never knew it was so massive in real life (left). The stairs behind it were also impressive, not to mention extremely steep (right).
I expected many of the temples and shrines to look alike, but they weren't the same at all. While Toji temple boasted of a tall pagoda (left), Kiyomizudera shone bright with red color (top right), and Ryozen Kannon's Buddha was the largest I had ever seen (bottom right).
Traveling to Hiroshima

While watching the news in Kyoto, I learned of some surprising news. A man in Hiroshima had defaced the Peace Monument. The monument's inscription said that Japan should never repeat their mistake of initiating war, but the man had chiseled it out and said that Japan shouldn't apologize for attacking other countries. I didn't expect that to happen right before traveling to Hiroshima, so I wasn't sure how an American presence would be received at that time. This was within days of the sixtieth anniversary of the bombing in Hiroshima, and tensions were high. Though no one said anything less than polite, it still felt as if they didn't think we should be there. It was a feeling I never expected to have.
I was surprised to see that this building still stood, the only remaining remnant of the atomic bombing in Hiroshima. While much of it was crumbling, some walls stand firm still bearing the marks of the people who died tragically within them.
I expected to see monuments in the Peace Memorial Park, but I didn’t know about memorials for Koreans drafted into the Japanese army (left), for students in the war (top right), or that I would see the crematorium site of so many lost to the bomb (bottom right).
I saw the memorial to children lost in the war (left), the Peace Memorial (top right), and I even rang the Peace Bell (bottom right).
While I was in Japan, I was able to experience several Japanese holidays and festivals. It was interesting to learn about the culture firsthand through the holidays. There are several traditions that people follow in Japan during those holidays and festivals that I observed during my stay.

Many American holidays came and went while I was in Japan as well and it was unnerving how many I forgot. As for the American holidays I did remember, not celebrating them proved to be somewhat disappointing. I have always loved Independence Day, and for the first time I wasn’t at a cookout and I didn’t see any American flags or fireworks. I never realized how much the holidays and festivals I celebrate are a part of my personal culture.
Golden Week

The first week I was in Japan was Golden Week, a week that contains four national holidays. I was aware of these, but I did not know that almost everything in the entire country shuts down for the week, including the bank. I was glad that I exchanged my money at the airport in Tokyo, otherwise I would have been without money for the whole week! Though I spent most of the week adjusting to my surroundings, on Children’s Day I went with classmates to Otaru where I saw several boys celebrating the holiday by fishing with their fathers.
The cherry blossom front came to Sapporo in May. I expected it to be a big event, but surprisingly it wasn't. While we did have a picnic at the university, it was a lot less of a festival than I expected.
Though the festival was different than I thought it would be, the university picnic was fun, and the holiday was spent making many new friends from all over the world.
Festivals in Odori Park

Most of the festivals that I went to were held in Odori Park in downtown Sapporo. There were always children everywhere playing on the slides and sometimes even climbing the trees. People were dressed in traditional Japanese clothing as well as Western clothing. Stores sold items related to whatever festival was being held. During these holidays and festivals, the streets were always more crowded, though that doesn't seem possible. The park was full of excitement. While I am used to such festivities in the United States, I didn't expect to have so much fun during festivals that I don't celebrate. And I didn't expect to miss all of the American holidays and festivals that no one celebrates in Japan.
Yosakoi is a dance festival celebrated all over Japan. I was surprised at how excited the entire city was about it. Hundreds of dance teams were involved in a competition and thousands of people were in Odori Park as spectators.
I was amazed at the vibrant colors of the costumes people wore to the dance festival. They also had special types of shoes designed to look like socks. Many girls wore outrageous hairstyles and makeup.
People of all ages entered teams into the competition, from young children, to college students, and older adults. I didn’t expect older people to be involved in a dance festival, but there were several elderly people participating.
While I have often heard that Japanese people are not "religious" and merely follow tradition, I observed otherwise. Many of the places I visited in Japan had several Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Existence of these places does not make the people religious, but I did see several who were not just sightseeing. One man that I met in Kyoto went to pray and talk to his dead wife each dawn and sunset. He told me he had been doing that for over thirty years!

Though I knew that these shrines and temples are a part of Japanese cultural history, I had no idea how much real influence its traditions have on people today.
While in Fuji City visiting a temple, the caretaker surprisingly let us take pictures on the inside of the temple. While the setting was very traditional, I couldn’t help but notice that there was a BMW parked on the grounds.
Many of the temples and shrines had beautiful land and aquascaping. Several had ornate statues as well.
While I knew that you were supposed to ring the bell to wake up the Shinto gods, I never thought I would actually see people do it.
I never thought that so many people would write on prayer cards if they were merely following tradition.
I was surprised by how much the country mixes the old and the new. Temples and shrines with gardens are interspersed throughout cities with skyscrapers and subways.
I was surprised to find that there is even a shrine on the roof of a mall in Tokyo, next to the Fuji television station.
Most people do not associate Christianity with Japan, but to my surprise, I found a fairly large and active church in Sapporo. The services were completely bilingual in Japanese and English, and many of the people in the church spoke at least a little English.
I made friends with many people there, and soon discovered that several of them had been disowned by their families for being Christians. Because of this, much of the church body considers the church their family, which is why they eat lunch together each week after services.
So many surprises...

Though many things surprised me about Japan, I enjoyed my experiences there very much. I learned a lot living in Sapporo and traveling the country, and I wouldn't trade those experiences for the world. Those experiences and this book would not have been possible without the following people:

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