

Dear everyone,

I wanted to tell you about the celebrations of the 4th of July here in America. I wanted to tell you how David, my sushi-promoter friend, surprised me for my birthday with a party with about two-dozen people from 5 continents. But all this look so trifle now, after returning from Japan. The experience was so strong that the only word I can find in my vocabulary to describe it is "WOW!!". Since my jet leg is blooming, I'll spend this white night reminiscing.

I traveled to Japan for a conference in Sapporo, the main city in Hokkaido, Japan's north-most island. I had some pre-trip anxiety and even some thoughts of regret but already in the first day I understood that this trip is going to be one of the most fascinating and enjoyable trips that I have ever had.

Japan is different. Something else. It was notable already from the flights with the Japanese airline All Nippon Airways: all-female crews of flight attendants, an impeccable service with a constant smile that honestly means "it's our pleasure to serve you", the quiet and obedient passengers, the woman in kimono who made me pinch myself to verify that I'm not dreaming (later in the trip I saw that kimonos are still popular in Japan), and - above all - the deep slow ceremonial bow of the flight attendants to the passengers at the end of the flights. This traditional bow accompanies you throughout the stay in Japan - they all bow with courtesy to each other: it may be just one short nod or an infinite series of long bows as demonstrated yesterday by 4 business men in suits in Tokyo, but it will always be, as a token of respect to one's fellow.

Two cameras on the front and on the bottom of the aircraft had broadcasted the taking off and landing. Computerized graphic display and numerical data were provided during the flights. Only 15 minutes elapsed from the minute I said "sayonara" to the flight attendant on the airplane after landing until I stood outside the gates of Narita airport! 15 minutes for immigration, search in my things, claiming baggage and exchanging money! In my first hours in Japan I passed through three airports, one railway station and had a bus and a train ride; all this made me realize how the present in Japan is still a future even in the US. So when I unpacked my suitcase before my first night sleep in Japan, it was already clear that The Land of The Rising Sun is indeed different: its present combines both the past, with its old traditions, and the future, with its quiet, swift and efficient trains/buses/airports/service/people.

The greatest barrier in a visit to Japan, beside sushi and green tea of-course, is the language. I tried again and again to memorize some basic words and sentences but couldn't remember them the minute I raised my head from the booklet. Hence, I found myself lost several times, but I always got along somehow. For instance, after arriving in Sapporo late at night I was wandering in its streets with my luggage looking for Hotel Hokeuikan that was only a few blocks from the station. Sapporo is networked by horizontal and vertical streets, so finding an address shouldn't be difficult. However, rather than numbering the streets, they number the blocks. Hence, in every intersection where 4 blocks meet I saw 4 different signs. When I saw that through my rapidly blinking eyes (I almost fell asleep walking), the best that my brain could come up with was "what the hell...?". Naturally, I looked for the hotel in the wrong block and got completely lost. My conversation with the natives was simply ridiculous, especially since we kept bowing to each other as though that could help. I was saved by an old lady who understood me after a long time and took me to the hotel. She told something to the reception boy and they both laughed so much and were very amused, I wonder why. Then I was asked to decide which type of room I prefer, for the very same price: a western style room with 2 beds, sofa, 2 tables, bathroom, A/C and TV, or a "ryokan" - a Japanese style room with 1.5m high door, a

tatami (straw matting) on the floor with a mattress on it, thick and dense air and no A/C nor bathroom. That was really a tough decision. . .

The next morning I dressed up and strolled through downtown Sapporo to the beautiful hotel that hosted the morning sessions of the conference (now I understood the simple street layout of the city). The huge conference was well organized and hosted more than hundred people - mostly from Japan, some from Taiwan/Korea and such, and few from the west. I didn't find the lectures delivered by the Japanese scholars very interesting - they were quite technical in my opinion. But I heard few good talks from people from the US and met some interesting colleagues. My talk, that was the last in the first week, was a great success: many questions and discussions, followed by requests for my papers and compliments. It was much more than I expected since during and after many lectures there was a complete silence. After my lecture we went to a great Japanese dinner. The dinner was great not because of the food (which was sort of a Japanese omelet that you prepared on your own) but because of the wonderful and impressive place where we ate (the Sapporo beer factory) and the Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese/Hong Kongian very interesting and nice company that I had. It's funny to find how mathematics makes the world so much smaller: we share the same language, same problems that couldn't mean less to others, we all know the same people and we all visit the same places! Professor Pui Tak Kan, of whom I never heard before, told me that he missed my talk in Northwestern University last month and he is glad to have heard me "here in Sapporo . . ."

I spent in Sapporo, "Japan's naturally modern city", the first week of the conference. I learnt few basic words, which I will forget by the time you read this letter, I found out how charming, graceful and willing to help are most of the Japanese, how robotic-like they can be, what a great sense of esthetics they have, how developed is their agriculture and how wealthy is their country. Most of the above "observations" are not surprising, but being there provides so many convincing demonstrations:

Japanese always "enjoyed" the image of being obedient robots. But still, when I took the elevator ride up the Sapporo TV tower, I was left with my mouth open wide when the elevator-girl, dressed like a doll, began her mechanical speech in a monotonic voice and expression-less face, just like a programmed robot, while looking at her feet as though she feared the eye-contact with the people.

We all know how Japan is loaded with money, even if lately their economic situation has somewhat deteriorated. It shows in their futuristic transportation facilities, in the clean streets (clean of dirt and homelesses), the generous research budgets in the universities and, actually, everywhere. One of the best places to observe the overwhelming wealth of this country is in Ginza, the most expensive business district in Tokyo. In my visit to Mitsukoshi department store I felt like Alice in Wonderland: I got dizzy from the vast and prestigious supply and the multi-zeroed prices. Standing in front of a row of 15 suits I did some arithmetics and found that it is more expensive than a fully equipped sedan in America!

That brings me to Tokyo where I spent my last three days. Tokyo looks like the future Los Angeles is depicted in "Blade Runner": dazzling, happening, huge, cosmo-politan, super sophisticated and intoxicating. It's hard to grasp it and to absorb everything: huge video screens show video-clips, sumo reports, commercials etc., loud speakers keep washing your brain (always with a female voice) with God-knows-what, a punkist girl passes an old lady in a colorful kimono, youngsters in black leather dance violent Japanese break-dance not far from the peaceful Meiji-jinju shrine, absolutely French cafes (with French waiters in Parisian costumes) next to noodle vendors, bald monks in gray gowns pacing in the inspiring Ueno park, which is surrounded by the high-rises and smog of the busy city, Western youngsters push into your hands information sheets on what's happening tonight in the clubs of Roppongi (one of Tokyo's night areas), and and and. . .

By the way, regarding the controversial issue of sushi: I still treat that dish not like a treat, as many people do, but like the candles of Hanukah – to behold only (they do design it beautifully, I'll give them that). However, I kept eating in Japanese eateries, tried all sorts of things (some of them I wouldn't touch even with a long pole when they were alive) and learnt to use the chop-sticks! I didn't reach the level of the Japanese masters who can eat a complete bowl of noodles in minutes with those sticks (and are probably even capable of performing a medical surgery with them), but I did quite well for an inferior foreigner. So how's the food? OK, interesting but in the last day, when passing by a Kentucky Fried Chicken, I caved in... It's disgraceful, I know, but I was weak.

It's quite naive of me, trying to contain everything in these lines, so I'll give it (and you) a rest. Besides, there are some stories that need to be told orally like that time when, due to my failure to understand Japanese, I made a complete fool of myself and wanted to bury myself in the ground right there and then. . .

It's now time to return to the more familiar reality here in LA.

Sayonara,
Tamir