

INTERESTING TIMES IN JAPAN

by David Skillan

Had an interesting week in Japan in the summer of 2008, just as the G8 summit was starting. We made a brief visit to see my mother-in-law, who is 93 and in poor health. (My father-in-law, a former engineer and a wonderful man who, unusually for a Japanese person, danced the quickstep, foxtrot, and tango 50 years ago, died at 66.) My wife Yuriko goes back once or twice a year, but I go only occasionally.

Yuriko is one of five sisters. The youngest works as senior secretary to the Deputy Minister of Finance, so we got a personal tour of Japan's Diet (parliament) building. Because Japan remains a formal society, I had to wear a jacket and tie, despite the very hot weather.

For some reason, all of my wife's sisters think I am the cat's whiskers and make a fuss of me. Don't know why. Not that I have done anything special, except marry the prettiest of the Tsunashima girls. It's probably because I'm the only *gaijin* (foreigner) in the family. The Japanese like much about the West, including friendly people from faraway places. That said, it was interesting, on arrival at Narita Airport, to be fingerprinted and photographed under a new system that's designed to help prevent terrorism.

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This was a nostalgic trip for me. Sadly, the old family home in Kamata, Tokyo, a typical traditional Japanese all-wood house with a blue-tiled roof, sliding windows and doors, and tatami matting, now sits rundown and empty, awaiting demolition. The goldfish pond I so enjoyed has been filled in. It was in that tiny oasis of tranquility, in the heart of Japan's capital, that our daughter Julie was born in the summer of 1974 and spent the first six months of her life, while I pondered my future and got to know the extended family. Later, I took tour groups there to sip green tea and eat cake and rice crackers. Everyone loved it. Next door, my wife's family has now built a modern, two-storey concrete house with all the latest conveniences. It doesn't have as much charm as the old place, but times and circumstances change.

It was nice to discover that the use of cell phones is prohibited in public places and when driving—I wish that were so at home—and amusing to see just about everyone on the crowded trains and buses staring down at their phones, text messaging. There are few Internet cafés, but I came across the Yahoo Cafe on the seventh floor of the five-star Asukusa Prince Hotel, where for ¥500 (about \$5) you get a cool drink, tea, or coffee plus two hours of Internet use—a good deal.

I enjoyed lots of delicious homemade meals (in Canada we eat all kinds of food, but Japanese meals only once or twice a week) and a few Kirin and Asahi beers. Oh, and a superb sushi meal in a famous restaurant, courtesy of sister-in-law Nanako's Member of Parliament boss, Mr. Otohiko Endo, whom I had the pleasure of first meeting when showing him around Vancouver back in 1993. Despite his prestigious and well-paid position, he twice told me how much he envied me! I also learned that, according to the "new" Japanese way of thinking, if I were to follow a strict diet and lifestyle, my "age" would be a mere 46. And I thought I was 45!

I first went to Japan in 1966, when I was 27. ("A golden age," one of my students told me at the time.) As usual I was broke, so I found a job teaching English at the English Language Centre in the lively area of Iidabashi. This was easier said than done,



because most foreign jobs were prearranged. I also worked as an extra in the busy Japanese movie industry, but found it terribly boring to hang around waiting for hours on end between takes.

I found a tiny, six-tatami *aparto*, where for six months I slept on a futon on the floor and commuted the short distance by train. Most of my students came in the evenings, after working all day as teachers, doctors, and businessmen and women, although I gave a few private English lessons in my *aparto* during the day.

Conversation schools were then becoming popular, as more Japanese wanted to learn English for both social and business purposes. After the war a number of American servicemen had married Japanese women, and those who'd stayed had earned their livings teaching English. The English conversation schools really came into their own after the 1962 Tokyo Olympics, when a large number of tourists found that they loved the country and needed jobs in order to stay. English conversation schools have since sprung up all over the country, staffed by Australians, New Zealanders, Brits, Americans, Canadians, and others. The owner of the English Language Centre, which had three Tokyo branches when I taught there, was André Roy of Montreal.

I liked much about Japan and its people, including the fancy coffee shops where one could spend hours over a single cup of coffee or tea, listening to classical music or jazz, catching up with friends, and chatting up pretty girls. I also used to (and still do) enjoy strolling the streets of Tokyo—the safest big city in the world—especially the entertainment districts of Roppongi, Shinjuku, Ginza, and Shibuya, with their bars, restaurants, nightclubs, and *pachinko* parlors. I loved seeing the latest fashions and trends in the supermarkets and gadget shops, too. Japan is not nearly as expensive as one is led to believe, as long as—like anywhere—you familiarize yourself with the local environment and know where you're going.

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Soon after entering the travel industry in 1970, I went back to Japan several times, taking British groups to Osaka's Expo '70. I continued to lead British groups to Japan throughout the early 1970s, and escorted several Canadian tours after I moved to Canada in the mid-1970s.

It was in the spring of 1971 that I met Yuriko on a flight from Hong Kong to Bangkok. She was a flight attendant out of Hong Kong for Cathay Pacific, and I was based in Thailand as the Far East area manager for an international travel company. Our courting was romantic, but all too brief and intermittent. When time permitted, we explored the back alleys of the then British Crown Colony, taking ferry and junk rides to surrounding islands. After two years of seeing each other only occasionally, due to frequent travel for both of us, and after numerous love letters and expensive long-distance phone calls, Yuriko gave up flying and we were married in Bangkok. Sixteen months later, Julie was born in Tokyo, and two years after that, Jane was born in Vancouver. Incidentally, the reason you don't normally hear much about Yuriko is that she has her own busy career and many interests. She prefers to stay in one place, rather than gallivant around the globe like her peripatetic husband!

I enjoyed living in Japan and my frequent visits back. I can clearly remember some of the hotels I've stayed in—the New Otani, Asakusa Tokyu, Keio Plaza, Tokyo Prince, Ginza Tokyu, and Dai-ichi—and some of the tour companies I've worked with, including Nippon Express and Fujita Travel. I still can't believe that 40 years ago I mastered the complicated railway system and maze of tunnels that still intimidate experienced travellers. But I never learned much of the language, except for *ku-da-sai* ("please"), *arigato* ("thank you"), *sayonara* ("goodbye"), and how to ask such questions as "Where is the nearest loo?" There was no real need. Almost everyone I met wanted to



practise their English on me! But my daughters, who have both English and Japanese first names (Julie Taeko and Jane Mieko), speak it pretty well.

It was some time after living in Japan that I developed a taste for sushi and sashimi. I didn't like it at first. But taste buds change, and for years I have enjoyed it, and most Japanese food, for that matter, plus all the trappings and side dishes that come with it—not to mention every other kind of exotic food. When I first arrived in Vancouver, in 1975, there were only about three Japanese restaurants here; now there must be at least a few hundred. I've noticed that children and young people take to sushi like ducks to water, whereas older people need time to acquire the taste. Many of the Japanese restaurants in Vancouver are run by Chinese and Korean people, but in my opinion the best and most authentic are Japanese owned and operated.

I'm often asked whether I know of good Japanese restaurants, and there are many. One I sometimes drop into is called Sushi Hachi. Located on the north side of West 41st Avenue, a block west of Arbutus, it's small and basic, with pictures of Japanese dishes and a huge red octopus on one wall. The daily two-course lunch special comes with miso soup. Last time I was there, I had tempura and chicken curry and rice for just \$6.95. What it lacks in atmosphere, it makes up for in the food, which is always fresh and tasty. A few doors along, on the opposite side of the street, is the popular family-run Irashai Sushi. (*Irashai* means welcome.) Another good one for dinner, also small and simple, is Shiro's on Cambie at West 15th Avenue. Then there's the larger, grander Shabusen, located both on Granville at West 14th Avenue and on Burrard near Georgia. All are reasonably priced. Then, of course, there's Tojo's, one of the most expensive Japanese restaurants in town, which attracts movie stars and the well-heeled.



Yuriko and I lead regular tours to Japan. For details, please visit www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html.