

Tokyo Past and Present

August 16, 2004

Hello to all,

We're going to be pulling out of Tokyo in a few hours and heading out to explore the countryside and smaller towns of Japan.

Before we leave, I wanted to share some contrasts and similarities I've noticed between the Tokyo of today and the Tokyo I witnessed 20 years ago when I was here for 15 days on a business trip.

Contrasts:

- No smoking. Vast areas of public space, such as all of Ginza, including the streets and parks, are no-smoking. Every office is no smoking. When I was here 20 years ago, the first three feet (about one meter) down from the ceiling in every public and private space was pea-soup thick cigarette smoke.
- Bigger people. The older generation reflects the average height of my previous visit, a maximum of about eye height on me. The younger generations are my height (5' 10", about two meters) and taller.
- Very few noodle delivery scooters. They have a "bar buoy" gimbal mounted tray on the back that swivels through turns to allow a perfect delivery of hot noodle dishes. They were ubiquitous when I was here before, and I've only seen three so far on this visit.
- Fewer two stroke motorcycles. These stood out in the 80's because pollution regulations had removed all two stroke motorcycles from the streets of the U.S. They were the majority of small bikes in my first visit and a very small minority today.
- Less mass-conformist behavior. I saw four people cross the street against the light the other day, which would have drawn a mass societal cardiac arrest 20 years ago.
- Less wiping by taxi drivers. The doilies on the headrests and white gloves are still there, but there is less compulsive wiping down of the interiors at every stop light than there used to be.
- Less obscurity (at least in Tokyo). Almost all road signs here include the Roman (English) name of the street and highway.
- More big bikes. An amazing number of over 400cc bikes, even in the delivery service fleets. Considering the cost of licensing (over \$1,200 USD), registration and operation, this is striking.
- Passing of architectural history. In my last visit, there was still physical evidence of the late forties and fifties in architecture and furnishings. These have all been replaced by modern construction, furnishings and technology.
- Less of an overt expression of national superiority. My last visit was during the time when Japan, Inc. dominated the world. Particularly in the U.S., the Japanese were revered as the be-all / end-all of business management theory and practice. By implementing the principles of quality control of an American, Dr. W. E. Deming, the Japanese revolutionized manufacturing. During that time, the entire Japanese nation was awash in well-earned and deserved pride in their accomplishments. The subsequent bursting of the Japanese real estate bubble economy and a more than decade-long recession and accompanying economic stagnation have removed that overt aspect of the national character.
- No elevator girls. Every department store, hotel and office building used to have uniform clad, white-glove-wearing young women stationed at every elevator bank. They would hold open the doors, press the buttons and greet passengers. We haven't seen a single one in this visit.
- Celebration/acceptance of non-conformity of the young. In today's Japan, wildly avante garde youths are publicized in mainstream media and profiled in leading newspapers. Aside from the occasional Japanese elder proclaiming they represent "the end of Japan," there is nary a negative opinion expressed of them. This would have been inconceivable in the Japan I experienced 20 years ago.

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Still the same:

- Order. Tokyo remains a city that reflects the national character. It is very orderly, organized and tidy.
- Politeness. The people remain perhaps the world's best example of social politeness.
- Helpful, friendly. The politeness of the people is surpassed only by their helpful and friendly nature.
- Cleanliness. The city remains by far the cleanest large urban area we've visited anywhere in the world. It compares favorably with the relatively small urban areas of Northern Europe.
- Safety. Crime is virtually unknown. Syria is the only place we've been with a comparable record. Although there is some vehicle theft in the southern portions of the city feeding the stolen vehicle market in China, petty theft is extremely rare. As an example, things are very rarely lost here. If you leave a purse or umbrella on a train or in a public space, you need only check with the local lost and found bureau, it will almost always be turned in there.
- Soft edges. The little things of the society that are assumed here that don't exist elsewhere remain for me the best example of what sets this society apart. For example, the subway trains all have beautiful, soft upholstered seats, which wouldn't last 20 seconds before being slashed by vandals in most American cities. Yesterday I noticed a public wash basin in a subway station with a cleaning brush hanging from the faucet. That brush, or anything else left unsecured, would be stolen within hours in most major cities. There are countless small examples of these aspects of life here that the average Japanese simply takes for granted, and only stand out to those of us who don't enjoy them in our own societies.
- Incredible food. A couple of days ago one of our local friends took us out to an eel restaurant in his neighborhood. I had fresh, raw baby squid; fried eel vertebrae; broiled fugu (this is the famous blowfish that if not perfectly prepared will kill you); rare mushrooms (cost about \$100 USD for 12 slices); halibut sashimi (raw halibut); giant snail; and of course, broiled eel. Couple the availability of such exotica with yesterday's lunch at an unpretentious sushi bar, where I gorged myself on some of the best sushi of my life, and you have a country of unparalleled culinary delights.

Can't tell because I've changed so much in the meantime:

- Fewer Japan market only bikes, cars and trucks. In my previous visit, it seemed 7 out of 10 vehicles, regardless of type, was a model produced only for the home market. Today, the streets are dominated by models sold around the world. (This observation is suspect, as I've seen a lot more of the world since then - 31 countries - and have noticed the current products in other countries. It is likely that there were just as many sold outside Japan in the 80's, I just wasn't around those other places to see them. The observation would hold true for the U.S. market. I do see many more models that are sold in both the U.S. and Japan than in my first visit.)
- Less exotic. I'd only been to Canada and Mexico prior to my first visit. I was extremely disassociated by the density of the environment and the pervasive differences to my own culture when I was here 20 years ago. Everything seemed so far removed from my day-to-day life, it was hard to imagine that Japan existed on the same planet. Today, I just don't find it that exotic. Chalk it up to me becoming just another jaded world traveler or the effects of the shrinking planet, but Tokyo seems pretty comforting to me now. It would not be a stretch to spend a few years here.

Be well,
Doug

PS – Some photos of our trip so far are included below. You can follow our travels at: www.hackneys.com/travel



Steph shooting our sushi picnic. Ginza, Tokyo, Japan.



Child's backpack for sale. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Umbrella shop sign. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Fortunes tied to wires. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Pouring cleansing holy water prior to entering temple. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Father, daughter and Buddha. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Temple paper lantern. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Shinto priest. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Temple entrance gate, rickshaw guide and customers. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Couple dressed in traditional clothes. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Why some societies don't like America. While foreign policies and administrations come and go, the universal penetrating oil of American popular culture remains constant. Like it or not, the products of Hollywood define what America is and means for the other nations and cultures of the world. It's no wonder that most other peoples of the world are convinced our society is decadent, we all carry machine guns and that every American female is ready for sex anytime, anywhere. Angry that other people don't understand us and some are ready to resort to violence to protect their children from our corrupting influence? Thank your friends in Hollywood and reconsider your position on celebrity worship. Asakusa, Tokyo, Japan.



Crossing the street at the world's busiest pedestrian intersection. Shabuya, Tokyo, Japan.

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Global brand names. Shabuya, Tokyo, Japan.



The vehicle under the cover is a tiny car. For those unable or unwilling to ride a scooter, it makes for good transportation in the ultra-dense urban environment. Shabuya, Tokyo, Japan.



Teenage girls posing in costume. They are part of a cultural phenomenon that constantly morphs the definition of the leading edge of youth fashion and trends in Tokyo. Most are older-teen schoolgirls from the far reaches of the metro area that commute to this plaza by train for their few hours in the spotlight on weekends. Shabuya, Tokyo, Japan.



What not to wear while riding a motorcycle. Ginza, Tokyo, Japan.



Subway entrance. Ginza, Tokyo, Japan.



Kabuki performance posters. National Kabuki Theater. Ginza, Tokyo, Japan.