

CANADIAN POSTS ABROAD

Highlighting Tokyo, Japan

by Oonagh MacDowall

(Oonagh and Joe MacDowall and two of their four children returned from Tokyo in August 1983.)

On arrival in Tokyo one is struck by the constant activity and incredible contrasts: kimonos and computers; transistors and the tea ceremony. This city of eight hundred and twenty-seven square miles and eleven million people does not act or feel like any other city in the world. It is a bewildering jumble of modern, western and Japanese style buildings and narrow lanes co-existing with modern elevated expressways.

Outwardly, not a beautiful city, many of the buildings are rather drab looking and gray. There are a suprisingly large number of very tiny single family homes, for such a densely populated city, and the apartment buildings, with their colorful bedding and washing hanging out on the balconies to air, are not very high; though with modern technology there are now many skyscrapers in the city centre, defying the earthquake-prone terrain. The face of Tokyo is constantly changing. There is always some kind of construction in progress. Buildings come down and go up at a remarkable pace. The streets are filled with trucks, buses, taxis, cars, motorcycles and bicycles, seemingly narrowly defying death. Never-ending crowds flow along the sidewalks, including little grannies in kimonos rubbing elbows with women exquisitely dressed in the latest Parisian fashions.

After a while you gradually become aware of much beauty emerging from what was your initial impression of drabness. From the lovely flower arrangements (Ikebana) to the beautifully arranged and colorful Japanese food. In fact, a Japanese will find it as difficult to eat something that is not attractive-

ly arranged as we would to eat something that did not smell good.

Despite the high density of population the city is remarkably clean and healthy and there is no need for any special injections or health precautions. The crime rate is very low and it's safe to walk in the streets after dark.

The Japanese people are great lovers of nature and art. In fact, their Shinto religion is based on the worship of nature and things beautiful, with thousands of Shinto shrines testifying to this. The Meiji shrine, a Shinto complex set in a cypress forest, is one of the places of tranquility and beauty, where you can enjoy a respite from the city's pace, hardly aware that all around you the busy metropolis hums.

Over half of the major corporations of Japan have headquarters here. It's the seat of government and there are about two hundred colleges and universities in the city. It also has a large port and many industries. With urban sprawl joining other cities such as Yokohama, the whole megalopolis increases to about 24 million people.

There are very many large fashionable department stores, cheek by jowl with small shops selling utensils for the tea ceremony or samurai swords, and shops packed with the latest electronic gadgets. There is a great variety of fresh fish and vegetables of excellent quality on sale in the many small stores, as well as larger supermarkets, some specializing in western foods. Imported goods, however, are expensive. In fact one of the things you really never get used to is the high cost of everything.

You are never at a loss for something to do, from attending the many colorful outdoor festivals, derived from Japanese ancient history and religions to visiting one of the numerous art shows. There are restaurants of every kind, ranging in price from reasonable to astronomic, including ones serving superb French cuisine, whose chefs were trained in Paris. There are literally thousands of coffee shops and bars, night-clubs and cabarets catering to all tastes.

The weather varies from region to region. It rains quite a lot throughout the year particularly in June and July, and September and October is the typhoon season. Spring and early winter are the loveliest seasons. Earthquakes, which are quite frequent, rarely do much damage these days due to modern building techniques and you soon become used to them, though the first you experience is quite unnerving.



At the Tea-Stall

The Embassy is one of Canada's largest and has one of the most beautiful residences in Tokyo. The accommodation for staff is excellent with modern Western-style houses and apartments.

Education facilities are good with a number of excellent private schools catering to English and French speaking students. There is also a campus for foreign students at Sophia University and the International Christian University.

In order to get around, shop and really enjoy all that Japan has to offer, it is advisable to have at least a little knowledge of spoken Japanese. The Embassy offers Japanese language lessons, which we found pleasant and rewarding. Once you have "survival Japanese" life becomes a whole lot easier.

Although an exciting place to live, Tokyo, to the Westerner, can be quite stressful. The feeling of being a minority amongst such vast crowds, the language barrier, the clutter and noise, the high cost of living, the Japanese 6 day work week, coupled with the fact that in Japan it's very much a "man's world", often puts quite a strain on family life.

Japan has an ancient history reaching back into the mists of time. There are so many fascinating reminders of this wherever you go, with something new to surprise you every day. From the metropolitan bustle of busy Tokyo to the serenity of classical Kyoto, from the northern frontier land of snowy Hokkaido to distinctly colorful Kyushu and Okinawa in the southwest; Japan is a country of striking contrasts and contradictions — geisha and baseball, the kabuki theater and oil refineries, skyscrapers of steel and glass, landscaped gardens of sand and rock — the fascinating blend of the ancient and contemporary.



The water-way in Suigo