

# Out in the Sticks

Why more foreign journalists might consider living in the Japanese countryside

By David MCNEILL



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## 50 miles from Tokyo

SEVERAL times a year, I get a late-night call from a foreign newspaper asking me to perform some impossible task. “David, would you mind popping out and trying to get in to see the Spiderman premier?” was one recent example. Well, I can’t do that because I live 50 miles from the cinema, I said, a reply that was followed by a stunned silence at the other end of the line. “50 miles...?”

Yes, sometimes I like to boast that I hold the record for living further to the west than any other correspondent. To get to our rustic retreat, you have to take the Keio express train from Shinjuku all the way to the end of the line in Hashimoto, where another 10-km journey into the mountains awaits. As I write, I can see Mt. Takao from my window.

It is, of course, way too remote for a person who makes a living writing about Japan for foreign publications. Correspondents should be in the center of the business, economic and cultural universe, and in Japan, that’s Tokyo. Most of my colleagues live within shouting distance of the Yamanote Line. A British newspaper editor once told me I needed to be there too or I couldn’t do my job.

I did briefly entertain the thought of moving to the city when I started writing for the *Independent* in 2003, but then I interviewed earthquake scientist Kushida Yoshio in nearby Yamanashi Prefecture. A Tokyo native himself, he thought living in the city was crazy. “It’s only a matter of time before something terrible happens there,” he warned. That ended my thoughts of moving.

## Tokyo’s sociological miracle

There is another less cowardly reason for staying in the sticks, however. I get to experience one of the sociological miracles of the modern world: the hell-

ish Tokyo commute home. Let me tell about a fight I once saw to illustrate what I mean.

Riding home on the Keio Line one night I saw a middle-aged man squeezing into a seat six inches too narrow for his ample rear, prompting muttered complaints from the next passenger. The mutters got louder, the magic trigger word *baka* (idiot) was uttered and the entire carriage got to hear a sort of impromptu *dotabata* sketch.

“There’s room on these seats for seven people,” said Mr. Large. “Seven normal-sized people,” retorted Mr. Little. “Are you saying I’m not normal?” So it went for 45 minutes until Tama-sakai station when the two briefly traded punches as one tried to get off the train. The conductor came running up and admonished the men who both bowed and apologized. The train pulled into Hashimoto precisely one minute late.

Now, I’ve heard incidents like this cited as evidence that the legendary restraint and consideration for others of the average Tokyoite is dying. Since these qualities are the lubricants that stop this teaming metropolis from seizing up, the concern is understandable. But in the six years I’ve been here and the thousands of hours I’ve spent on trains, that is the only fight I’ve ever seen.

More than 30 million people fight for space in the Tokyo region and 20 million have to get to work or school every day. Forced out of the city by extortionate rents, the commute for most gets longer by the year – about two hours a day on the train.

Herded into carriages sometimes filled to more than 200% capacity, squeezed through some of the world’s largest stations and popped out ready for another day’s grind in corporate bunkers, the stoic determination with which Tokyoites greet this daily ordeal and

keep the city humming is remarkable. In my native Ireland, there would be riots.

In the summer months, life gets even tougher. A blanket of thick, oppressive heat drops on the city and makes itself at home for two months; suits become damp with sweat and at night the smell of stale booze wafts through the packed carriages. And there is no letting off steam in Spain for two weeks either. A typical Japanese vacation lasts three or four days. Trips abroad are the preserve of the young, the old or the rich, and the vast layer of people in the middle has to make do with a couple of days at a resort.

## Post Office Privatization

Living in the countryside pays other dividends. For a start, I don’t have the luxury here of speaking English. My poor neighbors have to endure my Japanese syntax spaghetti or we don’t communicate at all. And I get to experience Japan without constantly viewing it through the sometimes distorting prism of its largest city.

So even as we’re told that the economy has left behind the bad old days of the lost decade, it is clear from this end of the Tokyo area network that the recovery is a mixed bag. Shuttered shops, struggling local governments, rising taxes and whole neighborhoods populated almost entirely by pensioners: things look a lot different here from the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan office on the 20th floor of the Yurakucho Denki Building.

I also like to think that living here allows me to see the true impact of schemes cooked up in Kasumigaseki, the government office area. Last year I bicycled over to nearby Hanbara to research a story on post office privatization. Japanese towns don’t get much more

Photo: David McNeill

one-horse than this – a hamlet of 350 households, a shrine, a noodle restaurant and a couple of businesses surrounded by mountainous pine forests.

The vital importance of the local post-office was obvious. For over half a century, as Japan has grown into the world's second-richest economy, branches like Hanbara have been accepting deposits big and small from housewives, pensioners and schoolchildren. Today they sit on the largest single pool of capital in the world – \$3 trillion dollars, larger than Britain's entire GDP.

The money is owned by the 85% of Japanese households that hold a post-office account and has been used throughout the postwar period to build roads, dams and bridges. For better or worse, this was one of the bedrocks of Japan's economic miracle, a core element of the country's 'welfare capitalism' with roots so deep that one politician called it part of the country's 'DNA.'

### ■ Time Stood Still

Inside the post-office, time seemed to have stood still. Customers and staff treated each other with an old-world courtesy, bowing deeply under a grim B&W portrait of Maejima Hisoka, who founded Japan Post in 1871. The branches pay virtually zero interest on deposits and the staff has a job for life. The postmaster inherited his post from his father, as did many others in Japan's 24,700 post-offices.

In return, the staff performed tasks unthinkable in other parts of the world, hand-delivering pensions to bedridden customers, providing small loans and constantly feeling the pulse of the local community. The post-offices also provided construction firms, dentists and other small businesses with non-collateral loans.

Reformers believed that the post-office DNA had been deformed by inefficiencies and corruption and needed a dose of US-style neo-liberalism to knock it back into shape. One called the vast pool of money "a cancer" eating away at Japan's economic vitality. But I could understand the fear of the staff who were quietly but firmly against privatization. "It may work elsewhere, but here it will destroy a culture of mutual help built up over years," said the postmaster. "They may close us down if we don't make a profit. That will cause terrible problems to the people around here who cannot travel."

Even without taking sides, I remember thinking as I stood on Hanbara's quiet central street that my six-mile cycle had



Hanbara Post Office on the main street of Hanbara Village in Kanagawa Prefecture

given me a privileged local insight into a core element of Japan's cultural and economic infrastructure. Every once in a while, when the temptation to move to the city strikes again, I'll remind myself that there are times when it is better to be out in the sticks, despite that hellish train ride.

Speaking of trains, for years I've been in awe of the ability of Tokyoites to fall in a deep snooze on the journey to work, without falling over, dribbling or missing their stop. But lo and behold, I've recently started to doze off myself on the one-hour commute to Ichigaya. Last month I awoke to find my head almost sitting in the lap of a horrified middle-aged woman. Dribble, thankfully absent.

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