

“Happiness Brings Happiness” Life in a Tokyo *Kominka*

By Jillian YORKE



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I've often felt that longer you live in a country, the less you know about it – or rather, the more you realize how much more there still is to learn and how little you really know. My three years of living in a small cottage on the grounds of a 150-year-old traditional Japanese house (*kominka*) have given me a different, deeper view of Japanese culture than I ever experienced during my previous 29 years of living here.

Moving In

“It would be great if someone could live there,” mused my friend Masatoshi Mutoh. We looked at each other and simultaneously said, “How about you?” and “How about me?” He'd just taken me to see the *kominka* in western Tokyo that had belonged to his uncle Shigeo Sakurai, and has been managed by a family trust since Mr. Sakurai's death a few years earlier.

I was instantly captivated by the grounds – wild, spacious, and full of huge trees! Apart from the dignified main house (*omoya*), there was an impressive old stone lantern, a bamboo grove, a *kura* or traditional-style storehouse, a pet dog, an Inari shrine, and a *hanare* or small cottage – my possible future home.

In spite of the uninspiring appearance of the cottage itself – cold, dark, dilapidated, and with no utilities – I immediately felt a powerful spiritual resonance with the property and was thrilled to have come across such an amazing find in busy, cramped Tokyo.

Several months later, on March 26, 2007, I moved in. The young employees of the moving company couldn't understand why anyone would want to live in an inconvenient old house with no mod cons, and seemed eager to get away as soon as possible. Indeed, there are some drawbacks. Although it's pleasant in summer, my place is freezing cold in winter, and I share it with numerous insects and sometimes quite invasive and noisy mice. But I feel privileged to be living here.

My first meal at my new home, known as “*Wa no le Sakurai*” (“Sakurai House of Peace”), was some roasted sweet potatoes that my landlady had just cooked on an open fire and kindly shared with me. Looking back, this set the tone of things to come. My life here has been blessed by an ongoing close interaction with nature.

Mr. Mutoh and his relatives had long been considering the possi-

bilities of what to do with the property, including knocking down all the buildings and constructing an apartment building in their place, which would have made economic sense and, unfortunately, has been the fate of many an old building in Tokyo.

Happily, that didn't happen and my moving in was one factor that helped save this special old home from destruction. At the same time, this “House of Peace” was a “life-saver” that helped me through a difficult personal time in my own life. Having this beautiful, tree-ringed, bird-blessed home as my base has been a profound source of support and comfort.

Reconnecting with Japanese Culture

When I moved in, my cottage was joined to the main house by a corridor. I enjoyed having this physical connection between the two buildings, and would often explore the *omoya* and its contents, as well as the expansive, tangled grounds and the various outbuildings. Every day was an adventure.

The property's abundant trees (some of which are *hozon jumoku* or officially protected trees) include plum, walnut, *keyaki* (zelkova), *mikan* (mandarin), persimmon, *yuzu* (a type of citrus), *sugi* (Japanese cedar), *kuwa* (mulberry), maple and an enormous, sheltering ginkgo by my door that feels like my personal guardian spirit or *omamori*. The chance to experience the joys of nature through the seasonal changes in these trees, as well as tasting their fruits, has been inspiring and instructive to me.

I came across some fascinating books and documents in the main house, which illuminated the history of the area. In addition, I'm frequently mistaken for a resident caretaker, so I've shown around numerous people who wanted to see around or wandered in off the street; the most recent sang some songs for me accompanied by his ukulele. Some have known this place for a long time or were old friends of Mr. Sakurai; they say his truly “free-ranging” chickens were so delicious that people came from miles around to buy them. According to neighbors, raccoons (*araiguma*), palm civet cats (*hauku-bishin*), and snakes were often seen around the property not long ago.

Living here has enabled me to reconnect with Japan's cultural roots. For example, I've re-papered all the *shoji* (paper doors), regularly hang out the *futon* (Japanese-style bedding) to dry on the roof, and often roast food outdoors on an old *shichirin* (traditional small cooking stove) I found here. Another new experience was lighting a long-burning Wajima candle inside the massive stone lantern in the grounds – its softly flickering glow through the bamboo seemed

Photo: noge_farm/author



A stone lantern stands by the author's house, dubbed “*Wa no le Sakurai*,” next to the main house.

