

# Japan Diary

## And the Livin' Is Easy?

Tokyo commuters welcome the onset of summer in early July only because it spells the end of the rainy season, when steamy trains with windows shut against the drizzle force passengers to gulp for air as they try to keep from wilting. Certainly many places get hotter than the 30 degrees-plus Celsius of the average Tokyo summer day, but the heat here grows oppressive with the rigors of living in close quarters with 11 million other people.

Habit probably dulls the senses of regular commuters who surrender themselves to the daily crush of traffic. As a crammed train pulls into the station and opens its doors, briefcase-toting men hurl themselves into the doorways. The scene brings to mind the fine print that appears on cracker boxes: "This box has been packed as full as possible by modern methods, but it may not appear full as the contents settle in transit."

It is true. During the swaying between stations, somehow elbows and shoulders jostle into available spaces, and when the doors open at the next station, a few more bodies manage to squeeze in. During summer, office workers probably spend the better part of the morning recovering from the sweaty ordeal of commuting.

## Play ball!

When the passersby cluster around electric shops and workers linger over lunch in the dining hall, it signals the broadcasting of the annual All-Japan High School Baseball Championship.

For two weeks at the beginning of August, eyes are riveted to television sets while 49 teams representing all sectors of the country compete for the national championship. Although Japanese people are avid baseball fans, the tournament represents more than a mere show of athletic ability. There is both an Olympian aura of the purity of sport and youth and a sense of identification with young unknowns doing their best before a national audience. The winning team becomes instant heroes, and their televised victory and elation reinforces the belief that perseverance pays off.

The popular media's frenzy over high school baseball is offset by another deep passion focusing on two early-August rituals—the August 6 and 9 anniversaries of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki—when people reflect anew on the folly of war and the dangers of nuclear proliferation run wild. For many Japanese, this is an intensely personal conviction, yet one which finds surprisingly little political expression. Strangely enough, Japan, the only nation to have suffered nuclear attacks, has yet to emerge as a leader in the international antinuclear movement.

Ceremonies mark the dropping of the Bomb, newspapers editorialize, and musicians stage concerts to promote peace, yet the activities seem disconnected with daily life. Despite the proliferation of anti-nuclear literature in Japan, the government has in recent years been acceding to U.S. pressure to boost its defense spending and the Prime Minister hints at rewriting Japan's antiwar constitution which forbids the maintenance of a military. Next year, for the first time in recent years, military spending is likely to exceed 1% of the GNP, a ceiling imposed by previous governments.



As summer gets into full swing and swelter, beer gardens sprout on the rooftops of department stores and hotels. They tend to be short on the garden aspect—astroturf spread out across the concrete is about the only green you are likely to see—but they never have too little of what has become Japan's favorite drink. Last year, beer accounted for 66.4% of the 7.4 million kiloliters of alcoholic beverages sold in Japan. Averaged out, that means each adult drank nearly 60 liters of beer. By contrast, *sake* accounted for less than one-fifth of the alcohol sold.

## Out of the city

Summer begins drawing to a close in mid-August with the *Obon* holidays, a Buddhist festival honoring the dead. Company workers and their families stage a mass exodus to the countryside for extended-family gatherings and a respite from the daily grind (this ultimate test of the nation's transport system occurs twice

a year—at *Obon* and at New Year's). Even those whose family ties have worn thin seek to escape, and flee to resort areas along beaches and in the mountains.

Most Japanese city dwellers are only a generation or so from their country roots. Although the trend is changing, many return periodically to renew relations. They traditionally observe *Obon* by visiting their ancestors' graves. Those who choose to remain in the deserted cities celebrate by enjoying Tokyo unburdened of its population. Commuters luxuriate in finding a seat on the train. A heavenly hush falls upon apartment houses as the high-pitched clamor of rowdy children is removed to distant prefectures where it can awaken grandmothers rather than innocent neighbors.

Jobs, school, and culture draw younger people to the cities. Few would choose to return to their rural homes. Tokyo offers an existence unfettered by family members who know all one's business and by neighbors who keep trying to find out.

All the same, a strictly urban life would be too lonely. "How sad that you have nowhere to go home to," said a 39-year-old company worker to a friend whose family lives in the heart of Tokyo. "It's not the scenery, nor the place, nor the food, nor even the people—a home outside the city, even if it's in another city, is essential just so that you know you can always go home to it."

Why everyone chooses to go home all at once, enduring half-day or even longer train rides standing amid travel bags and crying children, baffles more individualistic Westerners. These days many companies permit workers to choose vacations freely rather than taking mandated holidays. But the point of summer vacation is not so much to get away from it all as to go back to it all.

## Back to school

Summer may creep in slowly, but for children it ends in a flurry. Vacation is sandwiched between the first and second trimesters of the school year, which runs from April through March. To make sure pupils make the most of their vacation—or perhaps worry their way through it—teachers assign homework due when school reconvenes in September. Essays on "What I did over summer vacation" and daily diaries are hastily thrown together in the last days of August, often with the help of a counselor at the local department store where you can get everything from last month's weather reports (essential for any self-respecting diary) and even a seashell or live insect to substantiate that *Obon* trip to the countryside.

(Sharon Noguchi)