

# Saying It in Japanese

By Lynn Hannachi

There is a rather wonderful sentence in my Japanese language textbook. I like its sound and its structure, and, of course, am happy just to be able to pronounce it. Translated into English, it reads: "Is there a post office in the vicinity?" Once I had learned it, I couldn't wait to use it, but, unfortunately, the opportunity never arose. I KNOW the location of the post office in my neighborhood. Then, on one of our weekend excursions last February to view the plum blossoms, an unexpected chance: my husband and I realized almost simultaneously that we could inquire whether there was a TEMPLE in the neighborhood. We almost pounced on the nearest passerby, probably scaring him/her a little, in our eagerness to get a bit of language practice.

When my husband was appointed Tunisia's ambassador to Japan four years ago, it is fair to say, I think, that the biggest misconception I brought with me was that I would be able to learn the language of the country. I had already learned Arabic as an adult,

Photo : Lynn Hannachi



Mrs. Hannachi on the bank of the Kiso River



Ambassador Hannachi admires the Wisteria at Hamarikyu Garden

Photo : Lynn Hannachi

Tunisia being my adopted country, so it seemed reasonable to assume that I could acquire at least a working knowledge of Japanese, but it was not to be. It really IS a difficult language, as I had been warned, and life as a diplomat includes too many time constraints to allow one to engage in serious language study. But one can still find joy in the place names, which strike the ear as wonderfully musical: Omote Sando (my favorite), Sotobori-dori (a close second), Hamarikyu, and the list goes on. And then there are the exquisitely modulated voices, men's and women's sounding different, of those who do have the good fortune to speak the language.

We moved just a year ago to a new residence and embassy which are in the Kudan-Minami area, which puts us close to the Imperial Palace and the parks and gardens surrounding it. Walking has become a favorite activity, whether in Kitanomaru, or, even better when the weather is good, the five-kilometer sidewalk that is surrounded by Uchibori-dori, and which in turn surrounds the Palace. If, that is, this per-

son of a certain age, as the French so delicately put it, has the courage to confront the hundreds of joggers, all of whom seem to be in perfect physical condition, with no visible traces of excess fat, who are circling the Palace in the opposite direction. There is a stone flower, each one different from the others, laid in this sidewalk every 100 meters, for a total of 50 (which is why I know the distance around the palace is five kilometers.) What a delightful discovery it was to find this lovely attention to detail, something I now know characterizes life in Tokyo.

On weekends, when my husband generally has some free time, we like to range a bit further, and take advantage of the strong seasonal, cyclical sense of the passing of time that we have learned is part of the Japanese way of looking at the world, represented in one way by various gardens that are devoted to a particular flower or blossom. So we have viewed the plum blossoms in Atami and Akiruno-shi (February), the wisteria in Hamarikyu (May), the irises in the Meiji-jingu Garden (June), the hydrangeas in the Hakusan Jinja



(late June), and learned to be appropriately melancholy at the rapid passing of the cherry blossoms.

Perhaps our favorite trip was taken last fall to the Kiso River Valley, home of the historic post stations which continued in operation until just after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and site of Shimazaki Toson's great *Before the Dawn*, an epic novel which documents the events in the lives of one family during that remarkable period in Japan's history which was the transition of power from the Tokugawa Shogunate to the Emperor Meiji. I'm happy that the novel was translated into English, thus making it accessible, but sorry to miss the nuances which can be gotten only by reading the original Japanese.

We had sparkling autumn weather and miraculously uncrowded highways as we drove through the mountains and valleys of the Kiso River area, moving in almost pilgrim-like fashion from one post station to the next, from Magome (the entire town has been preserved as a kind of memorial to Toson) to Tsumago and then finally to Kiso Fukushima. It was fun eating the local fish while trying to imagine what life must have been like for people who once upon a time prepared for setting out on long treks by having a new pair of straw sandals made. I suspect that very few foreigners know about this beautiful region of central Honshu, and am rather proud of our discovery of it.

In Kiso Fukushima we naturally vis-

ited the local temple, where an extremely kind priest, whose English was much better than our Japanese, showed us various points of interest on the premises. He even allowed my husband, at his request, to ring the bell. It wasn't until later that we learned, while visiting the Eihei-ji Temple in Fukui Prefecture, that bells in Buddhist temples are ONLY rung at certain specifically defined times of the day. So we were grateful to the thoughtful priest who allowed us this moment of indulgence, and only hope we didn't embarrass him.

One of my favorite activities in Tokyo is riding the subway, although it should be said that I do make a point of avoiding rush hour. I like the precision, the redundancy of information about train arrival and departure times, the different styles of the various lines, the station names written in three ways, *Kanji* (the Chinese characters) *Hiragana* (the Japanese system of writing syllables), and *Roma-ji* (the Latin alphabet for those of us who need it). My daughter, who was in Tokyo with us for two years, finishing her secondary school education at one of the international schools here, used to threaten me: "Mom, I'm not going to ride with you on the subway anymore if you keep going on and on about how terrific it is." So I would just smile instead.

I knew before I came to Japan, without really knowing why I knew, that I could expect to find a courteous, helpful people, with a highly-developed sense of civic-mindedness. What I didn't really expect is that it would be so easy to make friends. We laugh together, and share stories and theories and confidences in just the way I would

Photo : Lynn Hannachi



Ambassador and Mrs. Hannachi with a friend in a Tokyo restaurant

do with friends in Tunisia. If I happen to encounter a question of culturally appropriate behavior in a social or diplomatic situation, I consult a Japanese friend rather than a book. I continue to be grateful for the number of strong friendships that have been established, and fully intend to maintain them when the time comes for us to leave Tokyo. These experiences lead one to the inevitable conclusion that while cultural and language differences make us all more interesting as a human population, the basic core of needs, emotions, values and beliefs is the same. The longer one stays, the more the surface differences in culture seem to be unimportant when it comes to human contact.

But the cultural distinctiveness of Japan is something that I, along with our friends in the diplomatic community, continue to cherish. Whether it be the elegance of the *Noh* play or the tea ceremony, the graceful *kimonos* which one still occasionally sees in the streets, or maybe just a certain way of greeting customers in a popular restaurant, these aspects of life in Tokyo continue to be a source of delight. One also notices the apparently effortless juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern in today's Japan, very striking for someone from Tunisia, which is going through its own period of rapid transformations while trying to maintain an authentic national identity. Just as I have learned so much from my personal experiences in this endlessly fascinating country, so may Tunisia have something to learn from Japan! **JTI**

*Lynn Hannachi is the wife of the Tunisian Ambassador to Japan.*



Mrs. Hannachi and two friends during an Ikebana demonstration at the residence

Photo : Lynn Hannachi