

# Japan – A Country that Never Ceases to Amaze

By Rafia Hussain

When my husband and I first arrived here in Japan, we knew it was going to be no ordinary posting for us. My husband had never served in Asia. I had never been to Japan. As they say, distance lends enchantment to the view, so we were already in love with Japan, even before we came. Never had I heard so much about a land and its people, and known so little about it. And three and a half years later, I am still mystified by Japan. In these lines I would like to take you along on my own personal voyage into this mystery.

I would begin by sharing with you my strongest impression about Japan. People say Japan is different, indeed unique. But this still does not tell the whole story. I have lived in many countries, and each one was different in some way. I am sure our customs and traditions in Pakistan would seem as different to a Japanese as the Japanese culture and way of life would be to a Pakistani. Let me tell you where Japan is really unique. Its culture, aesthetic values, and arts and crafts are of course among the most refined and exquisite in the world. They stand out. But what is compellingly attractive is the Japanese people's strong commitment to their own culture. Indeed, it is their commitment to its uniqueness that is unique.

Let me see, what else has left a marked impression on me here in Japan? As they say, life comes in packages, and I believe countries are no different. But rarely have I seen a place where the package has only good things. In addition to their own rich cultural heritage the Japanese have adopted good things from all over the world. Japan is at once old and new,



Mrs. Hussain wearing a kimono

Eastern and Western, conservative and modern. It is one country but has many worlds. No wonder one can spend a lifetime exploring this place, and still have many mysteries to solve.

What has also struck me about Japan and its people is the absence of an organized religion. Yet the society has such a strong system of moral values. It is such a humanistic, compassionate and benevolent society. I have often wondered where this value system comes from. And it appears to me that it comes from no one place. Whether it is home, school, work place, playground or any other place of recreation, it is there. And you not only bring to it but also take from it what is good in human behavior. It is the pupil and the teacher at the same time.

What strikes a foreigner most about

the personal behavior of a Japanese is his sense of decency, interest in knowing more about foreign cultures, and great sensitivity for the less fortunate or disadvantaged all over the world. There is an eagerness to reach out to them, to share with them their grief and render help where possible.

I have also been impressed about such aspects of the Japanese culture that make for peace and conciliation. When the Japanese speak, there is never a sense of confrontation or disharmony in their tone. They always feel there are many sides to an issue. So there is an attempt to be fair, just and impartial when approaching any contentious issue. This helps them defuse emotions and tensions and avoid taking radical or extreme positions. That is perhaps why this society is so peaceful and very largely crime-free.

I often wonder why aesthetics is so pervasive in Japanese society. I do not know the answer, although I am sure there is one. I have tried to ponder over the effects of aesthetics. To my mind, whether it is the act of communication, or culinary art or the performing arts, the eye for beauty or a sense of proportion or harmonious relationship has a calming effect. What is pleasing to the eye is pleasing to the heart. I think this contributes to an amicable, cordial, peaceful and gentle atmosphere in human relationships.

I, therefore, do not have to emphasize that, among many things, I love Japanese cuisine. I like *sushi*, *sashimi*, *tempura*, *yakiniku*, *shabushabu*, *soba*, *tofu*, *sukiyaki* and many other things, and the way they are presented. Coming to the Japanese art, one is

impressed by its forms, variety and high quality. I like *Kabuki* and *Noh* and consider them to be very highly developed forms of art. *Kabuki* really amuses me, especially when the same actor performs various roles and changes costumes. The tea ceremony is another art form which has mystified me. Similarly, flower arrangement *Ikebana*, ceramics and calligraphy are very highly developed. These art forms include both abstract aspects of culture and the non-abstract.

I like Japanese *kimono* and am impressed by the wide range of exquisite designs, colors and fabrics used in making it. Although Japanese people wear *kimono* only on formal occasions, and not too often, it shows their deep commitment to a time-honored tradition. I am glad that I too paid homage to this tradition by wearing *kimono* on a few occasions in Japan.

For a diplomat's wife going to a foreign country, there are often misperceptions or apprehensions, which sometimes turn out to be true, and often untrue. I must say I had no apprehensions before coming here, but there were a few misperceptions which have



Ambassador and Mrs. Hussain having a meal with a host family

turned out to be unfounded. I had thought the Japanese people are all work, and no enjoyment – an impression that has been unfounded. The Japanese enjoy life, as much as, or even more than, any other people in the world. My husband and I were fortunate to have experienced a homestay with three Japanese families. I closely observed their daily routines which covered a wide spectrum of professional, recreational, social and personal activities. They loved a well-balanced life. I also noticed that once we opened up to each other, we became good friends.

Were there any surprises for me here in Japan? Yes, I did not know this aspect of Japan, but it was something which I loved in my own life. My husband and I are both very fond of mountains. Pakistan, as you know, has some of the highest mountains in the world, five of our peaks being more than 8,000 meters high. My husband and I both love hiking. And we found that the Japanese people like mountains and hiking even more than us, indeed more than any other people in the world. This discovery has made me feel very much at home. I have traveled the length and breadth of Japan with my husband, and cherished its natural

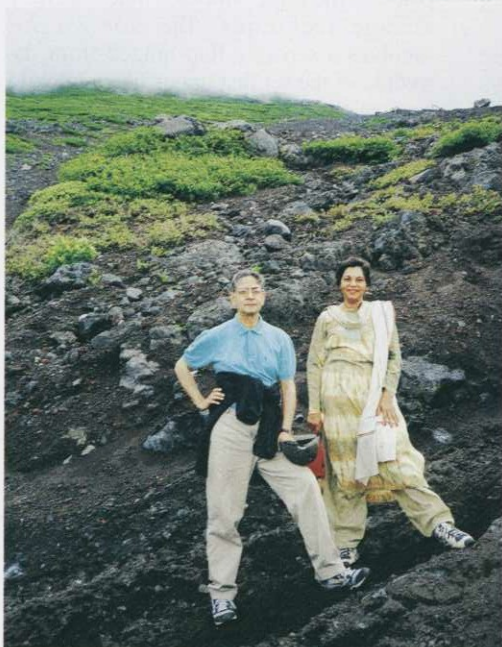
beauty, especially its mountains. I have hiked in many places, such as Yamagata, Urabandai, Toyama, Takayama and Takao, to name a few. There is not a place, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, which I visited and did not find it attractive for some reason or the other. I have also walked a lot in Tokyo, more than anybody can imagine. Together with my husband and I, by walking different routes, we have practically mapped out almost the whole of Tokyo. I have not tried the Yamanote line, one of the busiest lines in Tokyo, but I intend doing that as well one day.

Before closing the article, I may say that Japan fascinates a foreigner not only for what it is, but also for what it can be to each one of us. The land, people and its culture offer infinite possibilities to a foreigner to create his or her own image of Japan, because it never ceases to arouse one's sense of awe, amazement and wonder. In the end, it is not only what you see that is fascinating but also what you cannot see. In my view, that is the biggest beauty of Japan. When I leave Japan I will be leaving part of my heart behind, which will always beckon me to return to this fascinating land.

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Photo : Rafia Hussain



Ambassador and Mrs. Hussain climbing Mt. Fuji