

Impressions from Japan

By *María Teresa Avila*

Since I was a little girl, I always loved geography and was curious to know where every country in the world was located. I now remember telling my parents that when I grew up, I would like to travel around the world and visit distant places I had only read about or seen in postcards, books, or movies. It was a kind of dream, almost an obsession. My parents noticed my enthusiastic interest in the world and, at the end of my school year, they gave me a present – a world globe. It was a lighted globe; many in my house saw it as a table lamp but for me it was a marvelous way of transporting myself to the world of fantasy. I used to spend a lot of time looking at the globe. It impressed me so much to see the Pacific Ocean covering almost the complete face of the earth. It was so difficult to imagine such an immense volume of water, separating the American continent from Eurasian continent. That was when I learned where Japan was located. Of course, it looked so far away from my hometown Monterrey, Mexico, which is considered to be a desert region.

Time passed quickly. I grew up and met Marcelo, my husband, then an Ecuadorian boy who came to Monterrey to get his college degree in Economics at the Technological Institute. He told me a lot about his beautiful and unique country in South America while we were falling in love. My family, very traditional, did not like the idea of their eldest daughter eventually going to live in a foreign country. Notwithstanding, we happily married and my wishes became true. Very soon, we started to travel due to his work, mainly to the United States and Latin America. But still Japan was a remote destination, almost impossible to think about. At the same time, for me Japan was a mysterious and ancient country far away. Even so, we were

both very much attracted to Japan. Why? I cannot exactly explain the reasons, but well known and positive attributes of the Japanese people had to do with this attraction. Honesty, simplicity, frugality, harmony and elegance, among many others, captured not only my curiosity, but also increased my desire to become acquainted with the Japanese culture and its people, beyond the scenic beauty of Japan.

In the early years of our married life, we lived in Washington, D.C. and Peru. By then, God blessed us with three lovable daughters. At that time, we decided to go back and live in Ecuador, partly because we wanted our daughters to develop their patriotism in our country. Marcelo also decided to get involved in politics and contribute with his professional knowledge to the solution of the country's problems. He was deeply committed for several years to active work in politics. Finally, his party won the elections and he expected to be appointed to a ministerial post.

However, the President offered him the post of Ambassador to Japan. I could not believe it. I should admit I was shocked. I had always dreamed about visiting Japan, but it never entered my mind to live there. The final decision was apparently simple – if I was so interested in Japan, why not live there. At that time, however, I could not find any clear explanation for the decision. First, Japan is distant from our country. But I knew that was not the real reason I was overwhelmed. It was rather a fear of being immersed in a very different society, culture, language, customs and traditions. Additionally, statistics showed how expen-

sive the cost of living in Japan was. All in all, undoubtedly it was a difficult decision.

Two of our daughters, still single at that time were supposed to come with us. Initially they did not want to come with us for several reasons. After some deliberation we all decided to take a challenge. It was one of the best decisions we ever made.

From that time on, the most fascinating adventure for my entire family started. Just after arriving to Japan, things were not easy. The most difficult barrier was and still is the language. Not many Japanese speak English and still less Spanish. At the same time, it is amazing to see that Japanese people never feel uncomfortable although we cannot speak Japanese. Rather the opposite, they try by all means to help us. Undoubtedly, however, lack of communication is still the major barrier for a foreigner.

Our next big difficulty concerns driving and moving around. We could not move or transport things by ourselves. Driving on the left, very irregular narrow streets, maps and signs in Japanese language, and a freeway system very congested and initially very difficult to understand made all of us very nervous.

Photo : *María Teresa Avila*



The author (right) and Ambassador Marcelo Avila

It took us about six months to really get acquainted with so many details and start to drive.

Shopping was also troublesome for us. Prices were very high according to international comparisons and no discount stores were available at that time. We could not understand why prices of Japanese goods were substantially higher than the prices of the same goods outside Japan. Gradually, we got used to paying such prices.

Limited space for living was also a difficult matter to get used to. We left our very spacious house in Ecuador and had to adjust to a rather small apartment where we had to entertain our guests and live our daily life with two of our daughters. Time passed and little by little we became used to these limitations.

At the same time, we gradually found out the real reasons why Japan attracted us so much. This is a fascinating and endless process of searching for and developing the unique features of the Japanese character, which can be found in the Japanese as individuals, as a group or even as a society.

The sense of duty is a virtue that makes every Japanese so reliable. And this very basic principle has produced in me an enormous admiration, as well as a comfortable feeling every time I have to order any kind of services or simply if I have to deal with Japanese people. Japanese have a great sense of responsibility, particularly about work and duties.

Very much related to this singularity is the way they are so disciplined and punctual; reserved, apparently introverted and much self-controlled. They show so much respect for other people in a way that you develop a feeling of confidence and security even if they are entirely unknown; something that is almost impossible in other societies.

Japanese love nature, flowers, gardens, birds and animals, mountains and rivers. They are very keen on seasons and their changes, and that is reflected in many aspects of their daily life. That is something I really like because there is no monotony and people are always

Photo : Maria Teresa Avila



Rice Harvesting Festival in Kohoku-cho, Shiga Prefecture

looking forward to the coming days.

It seems to me that Japanese are very well prepared to enjoy every pleasurable act. In fact, eating, sleeping and taking the bath are good examples. These actions might be simply a routine for others, but in Japan they are very meaningful occasions of enjoying their essence. In the case of food, appearance is very important as well as the flavor. For sleeping, there might be no restrictions in terms of time of the day or place to sleep. Taking the bath is almost a ritual, and it is the very best if you are in an "onsen" (hot spring).

Japanese are also very sensitive to music and art. Tokyo is a great capital of the world for art. Concerts, exhibitions, musical events of every nature are scheduled the year round. There are many competitions for every manifestation of art and for every kind of people, particularly for children. Tokyo is a fascinating living city.

Japanese are elegant and discrete in their dressing. They are delicate and very knowledgeable about materials, fashion and design.

Japanese kindness to foreigners is beyond comparison. No other people attempts to be as nice to others as the Japanese. They always avoid situations in which foreigners might feel uncomfortable; they are particularly splendid with diplomats.

As a society, we admire how this nation has become a global power on the basis of the hardworking efforts of

its people. Japan is a country with very old traditions but even so they have the most advanced technology in almost every manifestation of life. At the same time they are quite tolerant with others' beliefs. Basically, society is very honest and corruption is strictly banned and rejected severely. Japan has worked arduously to get a very well organized society where security is fundamental.

I could continue describing more reasons why Japan gradually gets under our skin. Then, almost eight years have passed since we first arrived in Japan, and it was time to go back home. For a long time we experienced those "Tokyo blues," melancholic feelings, when you don't have any more those blessings that are left behind and there are now only in your memory. We missed Japan a lot and our Japanese friends. Nevertheless, they made us feel that they remained close to us in spite of the distance. Few of them came to Ecuador to visit us.

About five years later after we returned to Ecuador, my husband was appointed again Ambassador of Ecuador to Japan. At this time we were really happy and felt very privileged to have such a unique circumstance. Coming back to Japan, certainly our eyes were open to differences between the reality and what was in our memories. We recognized some changes, apparently superficial, especially among youngsters – the way they dress, their dyed hair and their appearance in general, and also the way they behave in public. It seems that they express and communicate more freely compared with before. Maybe the changes are not so trivial.

Certainly, the economic stagnation has produced some noticeable changes but I would positively say that Japanese culture and its values are intact. We feel blessed to have returned. **JJTI**

María Teresa Avila is the wife of the Ecuador's Ambassador to Japan.