

Urban Life of a Curious Gaijin

By Anna Brückner

At the news about my husband's appointment as Danish ambassador to Japan four years ago I asked myself: What do you actually know about Japan and the Japanese apart from Hiroshima, the earthquake in Kobe, the present economic crisis, the high standard of living, the long working hours, films by Kurosawa, exceptional Japanese design, the art of *bonsais*, kimonos, sushi etc. Just average knowledge, I'm afraid.

Working full time, my chance to catch up was very limited and when it came to study the language, it was even more hopeless. I remember how excited I was when I had learned to count all the way up to a hundred. My excitement lasted only until I realized that there were many other ways to count (of which I still only know very few). Well prepared or not – off we went to The Land of the Rising Sun, Tokyo, Daikanyama.

How lucky we are to have our embassy and residence in Daikanyama, one of the very charming parts of Tokyo. It is strange to think that in 1976, when Denmark built their new embassy, Daikanyama was mostly gardens and small fields, now 25 years later it has become the poshest, lively and well-designed area I can think of. When I tell Japanese that I live in Daikanyama they say: "Oooh, *so desuka*, you are a very lucky person!" There is however one sad thing to tell: Next to our home is a big beautiful piece of land – or rather there was a big beautiful piece of land with two old tea ceremony houses and lovely Japanese gardens. We have been told that the late Emperor Hirohito was extremely fond of this place and that he sometimes visited the teahouses. Unfortunately the land was purchased by a very rich foreigner, who wanted to build a 7000 square meter "pied-à-terre" for himself and his family to use

when they visited Japan a couple of times a year! The day we arrived at our new home, the tearing down, the leveling and the digging began. For more than a year we were surrounded by enormous cranes, the noise was unbearable and the smell of oil and petrol very unpleasant. One day, for some reason which is too grotesque to be told, the construction was put to an end. We treasure the silence and enjoy not having a big crane almost moving around in our bedroom, but we lament the fact that a beautiful piece of land has been transformed into a forest of rusty iron bars. One thing I miss, however, is the 8 o'clock morning exercise performed by the big construction crew – what a marvelous and sensible tradition – you would not find that anywhere else in the world!

For us *Gaijins* the art of knowing Tokyo is to realize that you will never really get to know the city, that's why this "Big Apple of Asia" is such a fascinating place to live. But I dare to assert that I know my way – and my ways – in Daikanyama. I am impressed by the multiplicity, harmony and originality of its modern buildings, mixed with small traditional Japanese houses.

During the week-end I love to walk around in the area. When I step out into the street, the average age of 25 years is raised by 100%! It's fun to watch all the young people hanging around or standing in long lines, waiting to browse in the many vintage shops. It is interesting to chat with some of the shopkeepers (although my Japanese is limited to around thirty words) and to watch people sweep the streets – where else in the world can



Photo: Anna Brückner

A young man and his dog riding a bicycle near Shibuya Station (even the dog has a mobile phone!)

you experience such a high hygienic standard – where else in the world would you find people bringing their own plastic bags for litter. It is fun to have children coming up to you and with a lot of giggling saying: "Hello!" while you are having a cup of coffee in one of the many street cafés. It is wonderful to visit the artistic flower shop across from the embassy picking out exotic plants arranged in the most artistic way – not so fun, however, when it comes to paying! It is a big inspiration to look at some of Miyake Issey's creations, in my opinion some of the most charming and inventive fashion objects in world design. Wherever I go I meet friendliness. Whenever I enter a shop or a restaurant I receive a service I have never experienced before in my life. It is a big joy to look at all the neat gardens surrounding the small private houses, where it seems that every tree has been treated with nail scissors. It is

a delight to pick up fresh fish in a newly opened supermarket next to Daikanyama Station and study the myriad of Japanese foods offered from the counter, while almost every employee in very loud voices welcome you with an "Irasshaimase," welcome to our shop.

But of course Tokyo is more than Daikanyama. Moving around in this fascinating jungle, mostly via railways or subways you are constantly amazed by the number of all these people. I have tried to avoid the Toyoko Line to Shibuya during rush hour – but that is easier said than done. In Tokyo it is really not a question of a normal rush hour, it seems to be rush hour most of the day. I have often wondered why so many people move around so much day and night – but I never really got an answer to that. I have observed that Japanese travelers walk very slowly, maybe they are not quite out of their little "train nap." That's why I try my best never to be in a hurry and never to try to push my way through the moving stream of passengers who get off the train. I have learned to relax when queuing to buy a ticket and the person in front of me wants to go to Asakusa and only uses ¥10 coins for a ¥230 ticket. I have learned from the serious commuters how to wake up just a few seconds before I reach my station. I have not yet learned to sleep while hanging by a strap, but I am sure some day I will know how to succeed even in that position.

I often go to the Tsukiji Fish Market with my Danish cook. We also take our guests from Denmark to see this extraordinary supply of fruits from the sea; I think it is one of the highlights of their visit to Tokyo. "Everything that has a pulse, you can have for lunch," a sentence invented by our *cook-san*. It tells you a lot about the traditional freshness of the Japanese meal, like sushi or sashimi and other more daring Japanese dishes, some of which demand quite a lot of courage to "attack." Once we were served a big beautiful fish – and suddenly we realized it was still alive, at that point we



Photo : Anna Brückner

The Danish Minister for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries choosing sushi

had to surrender...

Although Japan and especially Tokyo is about to be swamped by restaurants specializing in Western food, not to mention McDonald, Burger King etc., it is great to see how, like nowhere else in the world, the Japanese kitchen keeps its integrity and its tradition of using fresh seasonal raw materials. This fat-free diet that keeps the Japanese – in contrast to the Westerners – so slender and fit. Another great joy is the fact that small shops have still not been strangled by the big supermarkets. Maybe it is just a matter of time, like in my country, but I am happy to be able to enjoy them here and now.

Hardly a week-end goes by without a visit to some antique market, either in Tokyo or out of town. When I first started "my hunt" I really did not know what I was buying. Little by little I have learnt, especially from looking at and listening to the buyers and the sellers. With my Western eyes, untrained in Asian antiques, I made quite a few wrong decisions in the beginning – just take a look in our basement! At the markets I have experienced this very, very rare and pleasant thing: More than once, even after some heavy bargaining, the dealer gives you back some of the money you paid! The first time it happened to me I tried to explain to the dealer that there had been some kind of

mistake – but he shook his head and said quietly: "Ok, ok." If that is not being nice to a foreigner, I don't know what is!

From the very beginning, when I started to visit the antique markets, I fell in love with a kind of copper pot, "jukoboshi," which come in different sizes and colors and are covered by lids with different variations of perforations. Soon I had quite a collection looking very nice in the dining room. Much later did I learn that they are really not fit for a dining room since they were used for green tea litter during tea ceremonies. They now serve as ashtrays on the terrace – I wonder what all our Japanese guests must have been thinking these past years!

The market streets in Ueno – wonderful and special. Once I stumbled over the most fancy slippers I had ever seen, snake skin, beautifully manufactured and very expensive. I bought them right away. I liked them even more when I felt that everybody – with an expression I read as admiration or excitement – noticed my new treasures! The excited expression on people's faces, I later learned, was certainly not one of admiration... These slippers, called "setta" and worn by men, are said to be connected to the mafia!... It is one of the fun stories I can tell my friends and family in Denmark: That I, for a short while, was a "diplomatic mafioso" in Tokyo! Nevertheless, they are all very envious of my *yakuza settas*, which I, of course, brought to Denmark this summer. Furthermore, they want me to start an import business! I did not bring my pair of "snakes" back to Tokyo, but I look forward to, once more, next summer, walking down the main pedestrian street in Copenhagen wearing my smart "settas." The Year of the Snake is not far away – who knows, maybe then I can wear them, winding my way through the streets of Tokyo! **UTI**

Anna Brückner is the wife of the Danish Ambassador to Japan.