

There's Nowhere Quite Like Japan

By Barbara Uribe, wife of the Mexican Ambassador to Japan

Among the first things that new diplomats are told by their colleagues is that nowhere in the world are we treated better than in Japan. Having lived here for almost three years, I can only reaffirm the validity of that statement. Being posted in Japan is truly a treat. It is also an adventure, and a challenge.

Among the delights of Japan for foreigners is a sense of physical security. There are few places in the modern world where one feels as safe as in Japan. Japan is also a country that continues to use cash more than credit cards. This means that most people can and do carry substantial amounts of cash, without fear of negative consequences. I must admit that, having been born and raised in the United States where the use of credit cards is the norm, I rarely carry much cash myself. Yet there are always exceptions—which leads me to one of my favorite stories about Japan.

Every year, the Japanese-Latin American Women's Association holds a large bazaar. Among our duties is the sale of raffle tickets. As chance would have it, I was paid a substantial amount for tickets just as my husband and I were leaving for the Tokyo racetrack to see the running of the Argentine Cup.

After accompanying our Argentine colleagues in the winner's circle, I opened my purse to take out my camera and discovered, to my dismay, that my change purse was missing. It contained all of the lottery ticket money and no other identification. I realized that it must have dropped out at some point during the afternoon. Since we had been given the grand tour of the racetrack and the racing museum, the likelihood of our finding it was minuscule. A very observant member of the Japan Racing Association must have noticed my chagrin and asked me if anything was wrong. I explained the

situation, as well as my resignation to accept the consequences of my carelessness. He asked what the change purse looked like and then disappeared. Five minutes later, he reappeared with the missing object. I now had the change purse, but I hesitated to open it. The chances of anyone turning in a purse full of cash with no identification at—of all places—a racetrack, was beyond my wildest imagination. I opened the change purse and there, untouched, was all of the cash. Only in Japan, I thought, ONLY IN JAPAN!

What is also extraordinary about this story is that when I tell it to my Japanese friends, they register little or

helpful. Stand on any street corner in Japan and look lost and confused. I haven't actually done this with a stop-watch, but my bet is that within a minute someone will approach and try to help. On more than one occasion I have been personally escorted to an impossible-to-locate Japanese address or to the train platform that I was looking for.

Just a few days ago, our daughter and her husband who were visiting us from New York, returned to Tokyo singing the praises of the staff of the hotel where they had stayed in Hakuba. Hakuba is a village that is the site of the upcoming Nagano Olympics.

Apparently an off-duty employee had volunteered to take them to the best ski slopes and another even accompanied them to the train station to help them purchase their railroad tickets back to Tokyo. These "above and beyond the call of duty" acts of kindness made an indelible impression on them, and they can hardly wait to return to Japan.

As the wife of an ambassador, you receive a large number of visitors from your home country. Although we all tend to recommend the obvious tourist sites in and around Tokyo (Meiji Shrine,

Asakusa, Nikko, etc.) I enjoy taking guests to the basement floors of the large department stores in Ginza and letting them see the spectacular array of ultra-fresh, superbly presented food that is available for take-out. Each piece of sushi, each "o-bento" (lunch-box), each cake, each piece of fruit is a work of art. If you've never been there, it's difficult to fathom why I'm so enthusiastic about the experience, but I have yet to meet anyone who hasn't been totally enthralled. It's a gastronomic wonderland with prices ranging from the very reasonable to the very upscale. But, for me, it's not to be missed.

no surprise. My foreign friends share my amazement, but to the Japanese, these acts of honesty are par for the course. They mention that they would have felt enormous shame if the purse and its contents had not been turned in to the racetrack security office. I was able to track down my "Good Samaritan," who had been requested to leave his name at the security office when he turned in the purse. I wrote him a letter and sent him a small gift, but nothing can properly compensate him for this wonderful memory of Japan that I will take with me.

Which brings me to another treat for foreigners, the Japanese desire to be



Food displayed in major department stores in Ginza has a definite upper class air about it



Fish auction ("seri"): unique, traditional style of business conducted at Tsukiji fish market

I'll quickly mention three more not-to-be-missed experiences. If you're an early riser, or even if you're not, go to the Tsukiji fish market at 5 or 6 a.m. in the morning for the largest fish auction in the world. The excitement rivals that on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade. And if you're in Japan at one of the six times a year that the sumo tournaments are held, go there, too. If you can't get or can't afford tickets, it's televised in the afternoons and well worth watching. And finally, stay for at least one night in your life at a Japanese *ryokan* (inn). It's a never-to-be-forgotten experience, even if you return to your Western-style hotel and bed the next day.

Japan, in many ways, is an easy posting. The water is potable, the electricity doesn't fail, and the trains run on time. Yet Japan is unique and presents certain difficulties. The obvious one is the language barrier that most foreigners face. Japanese school children require many more years of study than their Western counterparts to master their complex written language. For a foreigner, learning to read Japanese is

a daunting task; but the inability to read presents many other problems. Just what is in that tube? Toothpaste, spot remover, face cream? The possibilities are almost endless. One of the major misconceptions I had about Japan before coming was that more Japanese spoke English. When in doubt, find a young person and/or write down your request. It often works wonders.

Another difficulty is understanding that Japanese and Westerners often approach situations from totally different mind sets. For example, soon after our arrival in Japan, we recognized the need to re-wallpaper a room at the embassy. Over the years, different ambassadors had hung different paintings in the room, and the existing wallpaper had the shadows and holes to prove it. In spite of the expense (the yen was at its historic high at that time), we decided that the work needed to be done. We chose a new wallpaper and the project was begun. The skillful and perfectionist workmen began their assigned task. I admit that it took longer to finish than I had anticipated, but, upon completion, I understood why. They had meticulously replaced

each nail hole in its exact location. I had expected a clean slate; they had respected the old and had attempted to make my job of rehanging paintings that much easier for me.

Another challenge is the multitude of customs that vary from country to country. In the U.S., if one is invited to dinner, one is expected to arrive on time, or perhaps five to 10 minutes late. In Mexico, and most of Latin America, one wouldn't think of arriving until at least a half an hour after the stipulated time. In Japan, on the other hand, guests often arrive quite early as a sign of respect. I learned this the hard way at our very first dinner party. I had gone to the kitchen in a dressing gown to check on the food when I heard voices coming from the living room. I should explain that there is no way to our private living quarters from the kitchen without going through the living room. The only available route was out the kitchen door, into the garden, over a large cyclone fence and on to the terrace by our bedroom door. I should also mention that it was, of course, raining. The cook was kind enough to help me scale the fence, but I did get my leg and robe caught on the barbed spike at the top. After a quick shower to remove mud and blood and a few minutes with the hair dryer, I dressed in a long skirt and appeared in the living room trying to look as composed as possible under the circumstances. So much for the theory that our lives are glamorous....

And on to a final point that I would like to make. Many books written about Japan state that it's almost impossible for a Westerner to make a deep friendship with a Japanese person. Japanese are Japanese, foreigners are foreigners, and cultural differences are too difficult to reconcile. I beg to disagree. Whenever we are asked how long we will be posted in Japan, we always answer "If it was up to us, as long as possible." The day will inevitably come when we're transferred, but I know that the phone calls, faxes, and e-mail will continue to fly to a few very special Japanese friends. And I know where we'll choose to spend our vacations. ■