



The Glorious Land of the Rising Sun

-By Aruna Rathod

A snow festival in Toyama was the first temptation to go to Japan. I added Tokyo to the destination, making it a 10-day trip. On the last day, I realised that 10 days are just not enough to absorb this culturally-rich, yet supremely advanced nation with its 47 prefectures (administrative areas). Precision is the word that comes to mind right when one thinks of Japan, and so it was, right from my ANA (All Nippon Airways) flight that left on time, serving crisp rice crackers

as a welcome snack and amazing Japanese dinner (my choice of meal) to every single experience in Japan.

Once you land in Tokyo, the Narita Express is a great way to reach the city centre. It takes about an hour to reach the heart of Tokyo. Before travelling to Japan, it is best to buy a Japan Rail Pass in India and choose the number of days you would like it for, depending on your stay.

Tokyo Calling

Tokyo is a dense city and it takes some time to get used to the streets and getting around. A few of the must-see attractions in Tokyo could take a few days. I couldn't figure out the density of the city till I went to the viewing gallery of the Metropolitan Government Building at Shinjuku. It has two observation decks that offer a unique view of the city – from the North and South. I was lucky to have a volunteer guide to help me out by identifying each tower, the most famous being the Park Hyatt Hotel where *Lost in Translation* was shot and the others being a brilliant building called the Mode Gakuen Cocoon Tower, which is a 50-storey educational facility. The dense foliage of the Meiji shrine was visible below, a green lung of the city, where trees were flown in and planted from all parts of Japan as a mark of respect to the Emperor Meiji.

My guide also pointed out Mount Fuji in the distance, which is visible from a particular spot on the deck. Once I absorbed the sheer density of the city from atop, I browsed through the store merchandise, where each part of Japan is represented with crafts from the region, and you could just relax here with a coffee too.

As I stepped down and out of the building, the buildings towered above me and it was a pleasant walk to the Shinjuku station, one of the busiest stations in the world.

Box – Views From The Top

The Tokyo Skytree, Japan's tallest tower, opened in 2012 and has the two highest observation decks in Japan, offering views over much of the Kantō region. Tokyo Tower is 13 meters taller than the Eiffel Tower, has two observation decks and overlooks the Zōjō-ji Temple. Mori Tower is at the centre of the glamorous Roppongi Hills district. The 52nd floor houses the Tokyo City View observation deck and the Mori Art Museum. Bunkyo

Civic Centre on the 25th floor offers great views of the amazing buildings in Tokyo. Sunshine 60 in the Ikebukuro District also has an observation deck on its top.

A great way to combine the views and experience is to have a meal at the top. Choose from The Park Hyatt (of Lost in Translation fame); Ritz Carlton at Roppongi; Mandarin Oriental, Park Hotel Tokyo and Shangri-La to savour the landscape of Tokyo.

Bullet Trains (Shinkansen) - An Experience of a Lifetime

Half of the fun in Japan is travelling across several hundred kilometres within minutes by the Bullet trains. They glide into the station silently and glide out majestically. Watching them is a pleasure. With names like Nozomi, Hikari, Kodama, Mizuho and Sakura – it's easy to navigate Japan with these magnificent trains. Each station is equipped with information counters and most people speak good English. So you can never be lost!





Hiroshima – A Touching Memory

Almost every one of us knows about Hiroshima and the atomic bomb that wreaked havoc on the city on August 6, 1945. It's a touching moment to visit the site and also a wonder how the city has emerged from the ashes. Except for the one building – the Atomic bomb dome, the rest of the area that was bombed has been restored and now the Peace Memorial Park stands there close to the Peace Memorial museum, which is full of painful history.

A Touch Of Royalty

When in Tokyo, a visit to the Imperial Hotel is a must. Built in the late 1880s, by the Japanese aristocracy, it catered to western guests. Located near the Imperial Palace grounds, the view of the cherry blossoms during spring at the Hibiya Park is a huge draw. Architectural legend Frank Lloyd Wright designed two of the structures and his inimitable style is present throughout the hotel and best displayed in the Frank Lloyd Wright suite.

To its credit are visits by world dignitaries, Hollywood stars and industrialists from all over the world. One of the best views is from the Imperial Lounge Aqua – especially in spring season, overlooking the tree topped lush Hibiya Park. Relax in this exquisitely furnished cocktail lounge done up in various woods and savour your drink in Tokyo.

When in Tokyo, visit the vast Empress gardens, the Meiji Shrine and check out the Shibuya crossing – one of the busiest intersections in the world.

Miyajima Island – Shrine

Just about 20 minutes by local train, and then 15 minutes by ferry, the Miyajima Island is a must visit when in Japan. Once you are in the ferry, within 10 minutes you can see the Torii gate with the shrine behind it, which is a UNESCO world heritage site. During high tide, it seems as if the gate is floating while during low tide you can wade through and walk up to the gate.

After visiting the Torii gate, I walked through the Omotesando Shopping Street, full of bright and beautiful souvenirs. At a right turn, I spotted the tall vermilion pagoda on the hill called Gojun-to. Walking up some steep stone steps, I reached the bright vermilion pagoda, restored in 1533, and the glossy lacquer added in 1945, which is part of the Toyokuni Shrine. Visitors are not allowed to enter, but the structure is fascinating and the view is breathtaking. Famous for oysters, there are plenty of restaurants to eat this delicacy, but I settled for a bottle of oyster sauce.



Toyama

About three hours away from Tokyo, by the Shinkansen, Toyama is a great destination situated next to the Sea of Japan. A snow festival is held in the end of January every year, and it involves local families and tourists in events like snow hiking, cooking, snow sculptures and activities in snow. Toyama means 'rich with mountains' and the city is famous for sashimi and sushi, pure mineral water and some amazing temples.



Dinner with Chef Miura in Toyama

Shinichi Miura, former Japanese chef at the Japanese embassy runs the Yatohachi Inn in Toyama, which is famous for its Gomado Springs. Chef Miura served me the most authentic Japanese meal in



the tatami room – dining area with a low broad table and low chairs without legs called zaisu. His wife Kiomi, dressed in a traditional kimono, was a gracious hostess.

My meal began with a large lacquer red plate (the red side is used in winter and black during summers) with five bowls of various sizes on it – one was a tangerine, scooped out of its fruit and stuffed with cheese, oysters and mushroom; another bowl had paper thin slices of lotus stem cooked in a sugary syrup; another a vegetable coated with batter and fried and a large bowl of tofu, coated and



fried. This was just the first course! The second dish was a sizeable piece of fish cooked in a sauce and topped with radish and carrot that was sliced extremely thin. Next came the soba noodles (made from buckwheat) with sauce served in a ceramic container with a cover. Next came a beautiful pink plate with fish topped with beaten egg; then fish again followed by shrimp tempura. Then came hot piping Miso soup and rice!

Japan, I concluded, is a feast for the senses – in every way possible.