Memoirs of a Gaijin

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Memoirs of a
Gaijin

My three years in Japan, or How I learned to cope with meat on a stick, bridge the communication gap and ultimately go with the flow.

In Japan, you frequently hear the phrase “Shoganai,” meaning “It is inevitable.” Some would even call it the unofficial national motto. It’s a shrug of the shoulders, a nod to the forces of the universe, an understanding that sometimes our puny plans are no match for fate.

It must have been fate that led my husband and me to Japan. Because it certainly wasn’t planning.

Before we moved there in 2004, Japan to us was just a blob on a map, a mention in a history book, an amusing place that gave the world sushi and video games and crazy robots. But in a matter of weeks, Japan as an idea transformed into Japan as our home.

Our journey started with a routine e-mail sent around the office — the Washington, D.C., newsroom of Stars and Stripes, the newspaper for U.S. service members stationed overseas — sharing news of an opening for a copy editor in the Tokyo bureau. My finger hovered over the delete key, but something made me stop.

And think.

Instead of asking myself why I would want to move to Tokyo, I grappled with a greater question: “Why not?”

We had nothing tying us down — no kids, no pets, no house to sell. We were newly married, and a particular line from our wedding vows was still fresh in my mind: “I promise to do my part to ensure we never lose our spirit of adventure.”

So I applied for the job, which set everything into motion. And as our emotions careened between wild excitement and abject fear, there was a certain current flowing steadily underneath: Shoganai (though we didn’t yet know the word). It was inevitable.

It was September 2004, and we were about an hour from landing in Tokyo — approximately 15 hours into a 16-hour series of flights — when the captain came on the intercom and announced that he had some good news. There had been no further aftershocks from the earthquake that had hit Japan earlier in the day, and the volcano that had been spewing ash for the past several weeks seemed in no danger of erupting before we landed.

My husband, Geoffrey, and I looked at each other as if to say, “What have we done?” We landed safely, claimed the suitcases we would live out of for several months before the rest of our worldly possessions caught up with us, and climbed into a van that would take us downtown.

Despite my bone-deep exhaustion, I was glued to the window for the entire ride. I marveled at the cars around us. They were tiny by American standards, and in every color of the rainbow. The makes were familiar — Honda, Toyota, Nissan. But the model names, including “Cube,” “That’s,” “Cedric” and the giggle-inducing “Naked,” were not.

Trucks were incredibly compact and in some cases ornately decorated. I learned later that the most hard-core truck drivers made their rigs into “dekotora,” or decoration trucks. They were decked out in steel attachments and multi-colored lights, and painted with elaborate murals depicting such national icons as samurai or Mount Fuji. Seeing one in a rearview mirror felt like being followed by a casino on wheels.

Beyond the highway, much of which was built several stories above ground level, stood an endless sea of apartment buildings and office
towers, with train tracks looped among them like noodles. And on the sidewalks below were people. Everywhere.

We were dropped off at our hotel, where we found in the bathroom perhaps the greatest of all Japanese innovations: the heated toilet seat. A panel of buttons on the wall controlled the seat’s every function—and there were many, including heat, bidet (adjustable for manly or womanly needs), and a pleasant, recorded flushing sound to hide shameful noises.

We were beginning to think we might like this place.

Before long the natural disasters our pilot had been monitoring were just part of life. Earthquakes became minor annoyances, and volcanic dust was merely something to be swept off our balcony periodically. We got used to bowing, and being bowed to. We learned a little Japanese, but mostly we learned to be experts at charades. A little gesturing can go a long way when you’re trying to find the train station.

It can help when you want to identify food, too. Meat on a stick is standard fare at Japan’s cultural festivals, but it’s not always easy to identify. We stood before one vendor, trying to figure out whether the cubes on skewers were pork... or chicken... or beef. Or something else.

The vendor noticed our confusion. He spoke a Japanese word several times, at ever-increasing volume, but it was no help.

“Chicken!” I asked, hoping he’d recognize the word.

No dice.

So I stuck my hands in my armpits and started flapping while looking inquisitive.

It worked. The vendor erupted in a wonderful belly laugh, then shook his head, stuck out his tongue and pointed to it.

After a few more awkward seconds of confusion, Geoffrey figured it out.

“Oh! Tongue!”

Which wasn’t exactly what we were hoping for. But because the vendor had been so patient, and because he was so happy that we had finally communicated, and because he was holding two skewers of tongue in our faces, we bought our snacks and went in search of beer—another festival staple and a word we definitely knew—to wash it down.

Our progress at settling in was marked by small achievements: Taking the train someplace new without getting lost. Learning to feel comfortable slurping noodles in a restaurant (considered polite in Japan). Navigating crowded sidewalks without bumping into everybody.

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Tokyo’s famous crowds were daunting at first. I’d enter a train station only to find the platform full of people. I’d consider turning around and heading back home, but then, as a train pulled in and opened its doors, I’d be swept into the crowd and become one of seemingly thousands of people cramming onboard. Every now and then, white-gloved train workers would come by and shove as many people as possible into a car, until I was pinned so tightly against my neighbors that I could barely breathe.

Early on this was terrifying, and every bit as awkward as you might imagine. But after a while it became just a minor annoyance of rush-hour travel. I’d squeeze out of the train at my destination and be deposited into another station teeming with people preparing to walk out to jam-packed sidewalks. Somehow the crowds moved smoothly, like currents in the ocean, and I got used to going with the flow.

Then there were the big adjustments. Driving on the left side of the road, for one. Paying the equivalent of $9 for a beer without flinching. And probably the largest adjustment: navigating through life not being able to read, write, speak or understand.

I picked up some Japanese, of course, and even took a couple of basic classes. I have to admit, however, that I abandoned hope in the face of a language that has thousands of characters in its alphabet. Once I realized that most people in Tokyo spoke at least a little English, and that most barriers to communication could be bridged by gesturing, pantomiming or making sketches and pointing, I let my study of Japanese fall by the wayside.

As much as I regret not becoming fluent in the language of my home for three years, there were perks to illiteracy. I could sit (or stand, more likely) in a train car filled with people and get lost in a book or in the music on my iPod. Not being able to understand the yammering around me made it easy to tune things out.

Then there was the night I was pulled over while driving home from work. I wasn’t speeding (promise!) and I’d stopped for every red light. But I spotted red flashing lights in my rearview mirror and heard from the loudspeaker on the police car a polite (of course) request to stop.

I stopped and braced myself for hours of frustration. Although Japanese police don’t carry guns, they can kill with their love of lengthy forms and elaborate bureaucracy. When I rolled down the window, it was quickly evident that
the two officers who approached spoke no English, and that my limited Japanese wouldn’t be helpful.

So I took out my wallet, handed over my driver’s license and ID card and any other scrap of paper I guessed they might be interested in, then smiled and shrugged and tried to look contrite. The officers conferred, and there was much sucking of teeth — a classic sign of distress caused by a departure from The Way of Things. I turned off the car and settled in for a wait.

Within minutes the officers returned my documents, nodded and turned to leave. When they started their car and drove away, I knew I was off the hook. I still don’t know what, if anything, I did wrong, or whether I got away with anything. But I do know — or suspect, anyway — that my ignorance of the language made me too much of a hassle to deal with.

Of course, there was a downside to navigating life in Japan without being able to speak the language. Easy, routine tasks — going to the post office, getting a haircut, buying a movie ticket — became difficult. Trying a new restaurant meant first finding out if it had an English menu, or at least a menu with a lot of photos and a wait staff willing to interpret our pointing.

Opposite: Geoffrey and Stacy model the yukata, a summer kimono traditionally worn to festivals; a traditional Japanese meal includes everything from sushi to bowls of cooked food with eggs, tofu, noodles and daikon radish; a couple dressed for their wedding walks the grounds of Meiji Shrine. Below: Mount Fuji climbers set out at sunrise toward the summit, 12,388 feet above sea level.

In almost every potentially difficult situation, we were saved by the Japanese people’s famous congeniality. If we happened to peek into a restaurant that did not have an English menu, we rarely were allowed to slip away. Instead we were welcomed and seated, and the staff tried hard to make us comfortable and to discover what we liked. If we found ourselves wandering lost along the sidewalks, we were soon swamped with offers of help, sometimes in the form of a stranger guiding us all the way to our destination.

Japan’s reputation for politeness is no exaggeration. But it’s more than just chilly formality. The people possess a genuine warmth and a sincere desire to learn about other cultures and to show off the best of their own.

We made many Japanese friends. Some spoke perfect English and others spoke barely a word of it, but they never seemed to tire of helping us order pizza, mail packages or make restaurant reservations.

I think they enjoyed watching us discover their country. We were invited into homes, offered traditional food, taken to festivals and complimented lavishly on our Japanese vocabulary and pronunciation, no matter how pitiful it actually was. Our friends answered our endless questions and asked just as many about our lives and American culture.

Thanks to our Japanese friends, and to our own love of exploring, the weekends were never boring. If we weren’t seeing the sights (Mount Fuji, Meiji Shrine, the giant Buddha), we simply ventured out of our apartment and let adventure find us. We’d stroll through a park and chance upon a knot of pop bands battling it out, or a ring of pompadoured businessmen in black leather twisting away to rockabilly songs. Or we’d wander through downtown, admiring Tokyo’s funky street fashion, discovering beautiful temples in unlikely places and finding great bars that were crammed past capacity — with only eight people inside.

But Japan’s culture wasn’t the only one we were discovering. Stars and Stripes’ financial (but not editorial) relationship with the U.S. military meant we were assigned an apartment on an American Air Force base in western Tokyo. So we had to get used to showing IDs to armed guards every time we returned to the base, and to being surrounded by guns and uniforms.

We became experts at filling out forms in triplicate and grew accustomed to visiting multiple offices and receiving multiple answers whenever we needed to get anything done. In short, we had to learn the language of government bureaucracy, which made Japanese seem like a breeze.

But we had access to a military grocery store stocked with American goods at American prices, and there was a small food court with a Taco Bell — an object of intense envy for our expatriate friends who did not have military ties. Our apartment itself, a two-bedroom of a size and design you’d find anywhere in America, was palatial by Japanese standards, so we weren’t coming home to the legendary Japanese shoebox after our adventures.

In short, Japan was wonderful. But it wasn’t home. And, in what some call a downside to Japanese culture, it never would be for us as foreigners. So after three years, we decided to come back to the States.

Once again we sold our car, packed all our belongings and boarded a plane for 16 hours of air travel. This time we didn’t have earthquakes, volcanoes or a language barrier to worry about — only the daunting task of re-acclimating to our homeland, and coming to terms with the realization that at least part of our hearts will always be 7,000 miles away.

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The author graduated from Furman in 1999 with a degree in English. She and Geoffrey now live in Raleigh, N.C., where she is a copy editor for the News & Observer.