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JAPAN: A COUNTRY OF WONDERS



When it comes to Japan, the bigger cities like Tokyo and Osaka tend to dominate popular imagination. Whether by fate or by accident, I found myself in Kanazawa city of Ishikawa, a province unfamiliar to most foreigners. Instead of being sandwiched between Japanese "Salary Men" on the Tokyo trains I cycled freely alongside the river and walked in the mountains.

In the 2 years I was there I managed to take in all the cities I had my heart set on visiting. While sharing a common Japanese heritage, each city claims a unique identity; Tokyo's consumerism, modern wonders and curious, Kyoto's tourist magnet is its beautifully preserved temples, Sapporo's Snow Festival is a Winter Wonderland to behold, and Hiroshima still manages to command solemnity all these years after the Atomic Bombing. But forgive me if I am a little impartial to my adopted home town of Kanazawa where the famous Kenroku-en garden is adorned beautifully with sakura during Spring and kept safe under the Winter snow. But wherever I went the Japanese people were beyond polite, every one more than willing to help the Gaikoku-jin (foreigner).

Being a coastal province, Ishikawa receives fresh fish daily. Sushi lovers rejoice! But Japan has many other foods to try; during a friendly gathering I felt adventurous enough to try Natto - fermented soy beans - for the first and last time. I've eaten both Hiroshima & Osaka Okonomiyaki and feel that Hiroshima's is the better contender. During my last summer I was taught how to hand-make my own Soba noodles. And speaking of noodles, Japan has styles of Ramen so tasty I miss it nearly every day.

In a nutshell, that is everything I love and miss about Japan: the freedom to travel the country and experience the culture in each city. It's mixed in the food, etched in the architecture, on display at the famous sights, tucked away in the lesser-known alleys, growing in the hills and reflected in the rivers. And, of course, Japan's culture is in the eyes, hearts and smiles of her people. No picture book or video could compare to being immersed in the country.

The society is well-known for putting in long working hours. As a research, masters or Phd student, your supervisor & lab mates will determine your working life. I was fortunate enough to have a relaxed supervisor but some of my other friends weren't so lucky.

But don't let that turn you off Japan. While the people work hard they also greatly enjoy their holidays and leisure time. Work hard to play hard. As the Japanese people say, "Ganbatte!" (Do your very best!)