

THE TRIATHALON COMMUTE

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The ASIANetwork Exchange welcomes short reflective essays by students on their experiences in Asian Studies courses or Study Abroad programs.

I had the marvelous experience of spending my junior year (1994-1995) at Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka Prefecture. During those months, my horizons were broadened substantially, and the elementary seeds of an understanding of Japan were firmly planted.

I engaged Japanese culture on a daily basis both as the welcomed member of my gracious homestay family and as a foreign traveler to and from the university. My host family took pains to ease any transitional difficulties I might have had in adjusting, and indeed their efforts made life very comfortable.

Osaka's club scene

On a weekly basis, trips to Kyoto and Osaka (each only sixty minutes away) provided further intellectual and social rewards. Exploring Kyoto's historic districts or Osaka's lively club scene were relatively hassle-free cultural adventures, especially in the company of easily-made Japanese friends.

The year did pose numerous challenges which drove me to new levels of personal growth and awareness. My mistakes provided, in the end, opportunities to learn more about Japan and its character. What follows are observations and insights concerning a telling test, the twice daily commute to and from the university.

The commute

At Eckerd College, I could literally crawl from one extreme of the campus to the other in fewer than fifteen minutes. In Japan, two hours of commuting to school, work, or recreational activities are as common as eating rice, and my 60-90 minute daily trip from home to school was a typical

Japanese endeavor. My "commuting triathlon" utilized the bicycle, trains, and buses.

Initially, I doubted that I would survive three hours of commuting while juggling school, social, and family activities. After a couple of weeks, however, the trip became habitual, and proved to be an essential component of my learning experience. Aside from honing time-management skills close to perfection, the commutes allowed me to participate in a very routine segment of Japanese life.

Bike portion

I began soon after 7 a.m. with a ten minute bike ride from home in Kisaichi to the train station. While short in duration, this ride packed the equivalent of six cups of caffeinated coffee in terms of its effect on waking my morning-weary body. My home was high in the hills, the station was low in the town's valley, and the route down was one of seemingly endless switch-backs and hair-pin turns which tested the limits of my morning navigational and coordination abilities.

This first leg of my daily journey took place on a 1960s, baby-blue, 1-speed classic, complete with tired brakes, bald tires, warning bell, and front basket. I was a sight as my blond-haired, blue-eyed body recklessly struggled with the descent, brakes screaming, bell ringing, and nodding "ohaiyoo gozaimasu" ("good morning") to the women involved in their own morning ritual of seeing off salaryman husbands and weary-eyed school-children. For nine and a half minutes of the ten minute ride, I worked the brakes and did zero pedaling. Close calls with other bikes, cars, scooters, and the brutal road-side, open rain gutters were a common feature. By the time I reached the train station, I

was more than awake as I left my bike in a bicycle parking lot in company with countless Japanese also ending the first stage of their own daily commutes.

Train portion

Stage two of my travels was tamer, but just as entertaining on the thirty minute train ride from Kisaichi to Hirakata City. The trains were true to their down-to-the minute punctuality, and their interiors were extremely clean. Fortunately for me, Kisaichi was the originating point on the line so I could choose where to sit. Succeeding passengers were not so fortunate. By the trip's midpoint, the train was full, and at each stop, only a few souls would get off before the flood of new commuters crammed themselves in.

As conditions became uncomfortable for those too late to find a seat, I had to admire the quiet acceptance of such miserable conditions. How so many bodies fit into the space of one train car boggled my mind. If there were an accident, the chance of injury from being thrown was minimal as there was no space to fall into. The worst of such cases occurred on rainy days when wet bodies crammed into one another, and the sealed windows forbade the aid of ventilation. I tried to imagine these conditions in America and concluded that proximity to one another in such a cramped environment could only lead to ugly situations as pent-up frustration sought escape and devious thieves skillfully emptied the pockets of their neighbors.

During this portion of the commute, I observed how Japanese acted towards themselves and towards me, an American student. With seats arranged bench-style along the sides placing passengers opposite one another, evading a foreigner was nearly impossible. The passengers maintained an eerie silence, and conversations were whispered. Most commuters preferred to read a newspaper or comic book or simply to close their eyes and avoid any social interaction.

Stereotypes

Non-Japanese faces were few, and thus my barbarian features commonly drew stares. While most seemed intrigued, some (usually older women) were visibly frightened. I had to adjust to watching older women relocating to "safer" zones away from me. This fear (or disgust) is possibly traced to World War Two, but more likely is due to the limited, but often sensational media reports about American society. Many acquaintances were shocked to learn that though I lived in Florida, I did not own a handgun and had never been involved in a car-jacking. While crime is a more visible component of American life

than in Japan, it was frustrating to face such abundant fear, and it illustrated to me the personal ramifications of widely-held stereotypes.

Bus portion

The last leg of my triathlon commute was a twenty minute bus ride from the train station to Kansai Gaidai University. While the precise timing of Japanese public transport is commonly noted, I was amazed that this efficiency held even with the buses. I could understand how trains could follow timely schedules. But that buses, facing the random variables of traffic, accidents, and weather conditions, also maintained near-perfect timing seemed exceptional. This precision meant that being a minute late in making my bus resulted in an additional fifteen to twenty minute delay waiting for the next bus.

I will not forget the second day of my home-school commute when I mistakenly boarded the wrong bus. At that point, I knew that the #23 bus went to the university. Unfortunately, I did not know that there were two different #23 buses distinguishable by the Kanji characters posted on the buses' sides. As I hurried from the train just in time to board the bus, I silently congratulated myself for timing things perfectly. But the view from the windows was not the same as the day before. Perhaps, I thought, it was a different route, so I soaked in the passing scenery. I began to worry as more people disembarked, and as no one else on board was my age. When the last passenger exited, I sheepishly wandered to the front and asked, in garbled Japanese, something which probably sounded like, "Uhhh, bus...this...university goes to...does it...?" From the driver's response, I understood that the bus would return to the train station, so I wandered back to my seat, highly embarrassed, but equipped with a valuable lesson about bussing in Japan: learn the Kanji for your destination!

Daily experience as education

Through my adventure-filled commutes in Japan, I gained additional physical acumen (that ten minute bike ride downhill in the morning came back to bite me during the evening as a twenty-five minute, don't-stop-pedaling-or-you'll-roll-backwards, quadriceps-burning uphill climb) as well as unique and personal insights into Japanese life. While the idea of spending two to three hours of every day traveling to and from school initially promised to be a major down-point of my experience abroad, engagement in the common commuting ritual, a Japanese daily experience, became an enjoyable piece of my education.