

Home and away

Japanese abroad give a flavor of six continents in these 'postcards' to JT readers

AUSTRALIA

Respect brings harmony without being workaholic

Sumi Kuramoto is a housewife in her 30s. She moved from Osaka to Australia in January 2005 when her husband took a place at a vocational cookery college in Adelaide. She is the mother of two boys, ages 5 and 2, and the family is hoping to qualify as permanent Australian residents in 2007. Kuramoto shares her thoughts on life Down Under at: www.adelaidedream.com/

G'day!

It's been almost a year now since we moved to Australia, and of course we've found various differences between Japan and here.

Right after we moved, we had problems finding a place to live. In Japan, real-estate agents in general provide a good service for people looking to rent a place. Once you have informed them of your needs and your budget, they will try to find you somewhere suitable. They will take you in their cars to view properties and, if you don't care for one, they can show you others easily.

In Australia, though, it is the customer's responsibility to see the unit on the day the agent decides. After letting many prospective tenants view the unit, the agents decide whom to rent it to. Since we had to find a place to live as soon as possible, we wanted to make a contract without checking the unit. We negotiated with several agents, but all of them slammed the door in our face.



Sumi Kuramoto with her family and one of Australia's best-loved furry residents at a wildlife park outside Adelaide.

Although we finally found an understanding agent and a place to live, this experience taught us the different attitudes toward work between Japanese and Australian people. We Japanese tend to consider work as the center of life, and as workers we are trained to provide good service to customers. Contrary to this, Australians consider that work is just a part of life, and workers make arrangements to suit themselves, not their customers. Living here, I became keenly aware that Japanese are workaholics.

We were also surprised by the difference in education curricula. When we arrived here, we had to send our older son to a local kindergarten. His classroom was divided into several playing sections, and each pupil was doing what he or she wanted. Some were drawing pictures or building blocks and others were playing with personal computers.

In Japan, pupils have to do the same thing all together in class, and if a pupil cannot or will not join in, then they might be left out of the group and eventually become a target of bullying.

Australia is a multiracial nation comprised of people with different cultural backgrounds. They communicate with each other in a common language -- English -- but at home they might use a different language. Everybody is different, and by respecting the difference Australians seem to live together in harmony. I can see this attitude everywhere in the society here, not to mention in the education field.

My son entered an elementary school this month and I am very excited to see how he grows up.

Sincerely,
Sumi

PHILIPPINES

Fun and strains

Fourteen-year-old Miharu Harada is a student at International School Manila. Her father is an international banker who was posted to the Philippines in 2005.

Mabuhay!

The first time I came to the Philippines was in April last year. My first impression was that it seemed kind of familiar, because I spent three years in Mexico.

Filipinos are really fun: They love talk, play . . . and politics. Almost every day I see people singing while walking -- and whether rich or poor, it doesn't matter. People are very energetic.



Miharu Harada's school class on a trip to a war memorial

But the situation here is very difficult. For example, on the streets there are many barefoot boys who are selling *sampaguita* floral wreathes. Some of them are around my age, some are younger than me. When I see them I feel like buying their flowers. But I am not allowed.

I feel very guilty when I watch them from behind the glass of my father's car window.

Kita-Kits!

Miharu Harada

ARGENTINA

Never too late to talk

"Shiatsu" Arakaki is an aikido instructor and shiatsu specialist (hence the nickname). In 1970, at age 12, his parents emigrated from Okinawa to Argentina, where, he says, "They thought the future was."

Hola!

It is nice weather and a good time to enjoy *asado*, Argentina's style of barbecue, and tango. At the bar, they start dinner around 9 p.m. or even 10 and keep eating and talking through the night.

The Andes mountains are absolutely marvelous -- much bigger than Mount Fuji.

When I first arrived, I missed my friends so much. When I started going to school, I was so isolated and every night I couldn't stop thinking about going back to Japan.

Japanese immigrants don't mix much with the locals, just with other Japanese at weekends. But when I turned 15, I started studying Spanish more seriously and to make friends. I got along with Argentinos because they are friendly and open and keep talking forever once they gather.

Adios
"Shiatsu"

BURUNDI

Warmth abounds as a sad past slowly recedes

Tomoko Shibuya, a former Japan Times reporter in the 1990s, is now assistant program officer (education) for the Unicef office in Burundi, Central Africa. For an update on her activities, check her blog (Japanese only) at: spaces.msn.com/tshibuya/

Mwaramutse!

Last year I moved to Burundi, a small landlocked country in East-Central Africa, to work for the Unicef office here.

As you may already know, Burundi experienced a civil war that lasted for 12 years, and it is now in the process of transforming itself into a democratic state after a long, drawn-out peace process. Although we still hear of shootings and bombings from time to time, people in general are so tired of war at this point that they just appreciate the fact that they can now live each day in peace. For instance, at the beginning of the year, I asked a Burundian friend how her New Year's Day was, and she responded: "It was really great, because there were no shootings this year." This comment made me realize the preciousness of peace, something that I used to take for granted before coming here.

Another thing that has struck me here is the number of orphans because of the war, and how they are being looked after by Burundian families, regardless of their income level. Even my



Tomoko Shibuya and some of the children she works with in her role as a Unicef assistant program officer for education in Burundi.

Burundian friend, who only earns \$ 40 a month, takes care of two orphans. Of course, there still remain many orphans and street children who have no home to return to, but without the spirit of sharing and helping that is inherent in the Burundian culture, I think the situation would have been much worse.

My work here is to support the development of the education sector. The new democratically elected president declared last August the abolition of primary school fees, which had been preventing many poverty-stricken children from attending school. Following this declaration, the number of new first-grade enrollments more than doubled -- without there being matching school infrastructures or equipment. As a result, there are often more than 100 pupils in a classroom, with no chairs to sit on. So Unicef is building classrooms, providing school equipment and textbooks and training teachers -- with financial support from the Japanese government. I hope that this will stop Burundian children from giving up education and dropping out of school.

For Burundians in general, Japan is a country very far away and mysterious, yet it also arouses interest and respect because of its rapid economic development. I sometimes feel very aware of the gap between their idealized image of Japan and the country that I know, with its many social problems. I nevertheless feel proud of having been raised in that modest and hardworking culture, which I can confidently share with my Burundian colleagues and friends. I hope you may be able to visit Burundi one day, as it is a country with lovely people despite their sad history.

With love,
Tomoko Shibuya

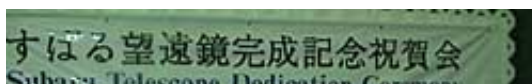
HAWAII, USA

Teacher care that's not to be sniffed at

Chiaki Noumaru is a freelance writer and the author of "Gokuraku Hawaii-to no Kurashikata (How to Live in the Paradise of Hawaii's Big Island)," which was published in 2005. Her husband Junichi is an astronomer at Subaru Telescope, which is operated by the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan atop 4,205-meter Mount Mauna Kea. Noumaru writes about her Hawaiian life at: www.noumaru.com/chiaki/

Aloha!

This September, it will be 10 years since I started



living in Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii. Time flies. I can't remember exactly how many times I've gone back and forth between Hilo, Honolulu and Narita in all those years (there is no direct flight between Hilo and Narita). I've noticed over the years that each airport has its own "smell."



The Noumarus at a company event on Big Island, Hawaii

When I land at my Hilo Airport, I smell a subtle odor of something like dried shiitake mushroom. Hilo is arguably the most rainy town in the United States; it's got a rain forest and has moss everywhere. Honolulu Airport smells like sweet flowers. It's probably because the airport has lots of open spaces, where breezes scented with tropical flowers can flow through the buildings. Narita Airport has the savory smells of soy sauce and miso, probably coming from Japanese restaurants there. These are the smells that make me most cheerful.

To me, it is the smell -- rather than scenery or music -- that vividly brings back old memories. So whenever I smell Narita, after being released from nearly seven hours of confinement, I get excited, thinking, "Wow, I'm back!" Then the images of Japanese food start swirling in my head, like *takenoko* (bamboo shoots) in the spring, *yanaka shoga* (ginger) in the summer, *matsutake* (mushroom) in the fall and *mikan* (tangerines) in the winter. When I go back to Japan in the future, every time I soak dried shiitake in water, my heart will probably ache, making me remember the days in Hilo.

By the way, my son Kosuke started to go to a kindergarten here last August. He enjoys going every day. But the other day, he was teary-eyed. He said three boys made fun of him. I couldn't quite tell from his story what happened, so I wrote his teacher a letter. Then he came home with a letter from her, which said: "This morning, I spoke with Kosuke alone to get an idea of what was happening. I then spoke with three boys together to hear what they had to say about the situation. They finally admitted to 'making trouble' for him. We talked about how they made Kosuke feel. . . . I told them everyone has a right to come to school and feel happy -- and not worry about people bullying them at school. We discussed how 'I'm sorry' means 'I won't do it again.' " After that, my son became close friends with the three boys. People say there is no bullying in schools in Hawaii. I think that must be because teachers act quickly

like this.

Bye for now,
Chiaki

FRANCE

It's just my cup of coffee!

Takumi Sawada, 30, is a pattern cutter for fashion designer Anne-Valerie Hash. He lives in Paris with his wife, Helene, and their 6-month-old son, Ernest. Takumi maintains an online diary about child-raising at www.sodatsu.com

Salut!

When my French wife first came to Japan, she was puzzled to see people drinking cold coffee from cans. To her it seemed very odd, and she was horrified at the horrible taste of the beverages, which she regarded as a poor approximation of the "real thing." In France, coffee most often equates to espresso. The French sip on this potent brew for hours on end while lounging at a cafe poring over books or magazines or chatting with friends - it is an integral part of their culture. There's no doubt that coffee imparts a refreshing feel after a meal and is good for a change of pace when you're tired.



Takumi Sawada outside one of the Parisian cafes he loves.

Of course, we Japanese have our own famed national drink: green tea. There is a similarity with coffee in that you put a small amount of the drink into a large vessel and there are tiny bubbles floating on the surface. You might think that green tea would go well with the French *flaneur* spirit, but in fact it almost certainly wouldn't. Japan is famed for reinterpreting and refining imported concepts -- nicely epitomized by how it has co-opted coffee: turning it into a very different beverage and putting it in cans. But the French are very protective of their cultural heritage. They won't tinker with the original format of a part of theirs, or anyone else's culture. When they love something, they love it right until the last. I think that doesn't apply to romantic relationships, though!

A bientot,

Takumi

UNITED STATES

Looking back appalled at the media of my youth

Illustrator Hideki Sahara, 38, and his wife Yuki, a florist, have lived in New York City since the mid-1990s. Although their neighborhood is run by the Mafia, Hideki -- who calls himself Tony (meaning "To:NY") -- worries more about a violent streak in the society he left behind.

Hey! What's up?

In comparing New York with my native Fukushima, one issue sticks out. In 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) instituted its film rating system. Since then, U.S. films have been rated for sexual content, violence and profanity.

After living here more than 10 years, I have developed some American viewpoints -- and as a parent, I am always on the lookout for sexual content, graphic violence and profanity. When I look back at the way things were at home, the American side of me is appalled to realize what the Japanese side of me grew up with.

In Japan, even in children's animation, I remember nudity, blood and gore, death, extreme violence and killing. One children's show was about a boy whose quest was to go up his teacher's skirt and touch her breasts. There was a popular detective show in which one of the detectives dies every year or so and is replaced by a new actor. Ratings increased as people tuned in for those episodes when the detective died. It was the producers' way of raising ratings. These are just a few out of hundreds.

Judging from Japanese TV, I would imagine that all children would end up as sex offenders or serial killers. Until now they have not, thanks to a strong, traditional family moral standard. However, as I watch Japan from the outside, I do see that Japanese are beginning to cross the border between reality and TV shows. Probably it's a global trend.

I will eventually go back to Japan, but I know I won't live in the Japan of my past. Or maybe I should move somewhere else that is still rated for "general viewing."

Later,
Tony

LIBYA

Tough love answers my toddler's pretend prayers

Hiroko Nakamaru moved to Tripoli, the capital of Libya, in 2004 when her husband's trading company transferred him to the ancient North African city. Here, the 34-year-old homemaker describes placing their boy in a daycare center.

As-salaam alaykum!

It's hard to believe time has passed so quickly, but this spring my 3-year-old son Kei will have been attending the local day care center for a whole year and a half. I put him in school soon after arrival in Tripoli so I could go about my housework a bit more efficiently, and also to give the little guy a place to play and develop friendships.

In the beginning, Kei would cry in the mornings when I left him at the doorstep -- and teachers were quite strict with him! At first I thought they were saying, "Here, here, it's alright. Mommy will come and pick you up later," as they would in a Japanese day care center. I don't speak Arabic well, but when I listened closely I realized that what the teachers were actually saying was, "No more crying! No more crying!" And really sternly!

But when I picked him up in the evening, Kei had kiss marks all over his forehead and cheeks. Teachers here treat every kid like a member of the family, scolding them a lot but also showering them with affection. As someone from Japan -- where everybody's afraid of other people's kids and unable to reprimand them -- this was a welcome breath of fresh air.

After six months of being here, Kei started speaking Arabic when playing alone. He's also taken to reciting from the Quran. If there's a carpet nearby, he'll get down on it and do pretend worship. He also urges me to wear a scarf, like his teachers do. I don't wear one, so he wonders why not. He's just picking up on the Libyan way of doing things. Watching him learn so many new things makes every day a treat!

Ma'a salaama
Hiroko

MENORCA, SPAIN **Paradise found**

Keiko Glass, 40, is from Kobe. but since 2000 she has been living with her English husband Ian and their young sons Michael and James on the small island of Menorca in the Mediterranean, where

her husband's sister has a house.

Hola!

In Menorca this year, spring was lovely, with wild flowers blooming everywhere after a damp and cold winter season. In March, when the almond trees flower, it looks very much like cherry blossom, then after that all the wild flowers start to bloom in one breath and the whole island is covered by their colors and scents. Despite our location, which is very handy for the airport, the atmosphere around our traditional old house is so rural. From the bedroom window right now, we can see a flock of sheep in a field, and tortoises taking a walk after their winter sleep. Here is like Mutsugoro



The boys with a friend and her horse outside home

Animal Kingdom in Hokkaido. There are donkeys, horses, dogs, cats and chickens all around.

In Spain, the Catholic traditions are still very strong, and at Easter the locals made a big, solemn parade to carry statues of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary from the church. At our house, though, Easter was the opening day of the long summer BBQ season and we celebrated it with a party. That was just the right way to celebrate the start of the spring season, I think! Enjoying BBQ and beer in a county garden in Menorca -- this is a paradise.

Cheers!

Keiko

FINLAND

Free to live simply

Fascinated by the functionality and craftsmanship of Scandinavian architectural design, Nao Saito went to Finland in 2003 to study at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. She hopes to do research in that field after completing her master's program in December 2006.

Terve!

Spring has finally come to Helsinki. The snow has



disappeared and now the sun sets at about 10 p.m. This is when I start to get confused about the time, because the days are so long.



Nao Saito in her neighborhood of Helsinki

The other evening, when I left the university, it was raining heavily so I visited my Finnish friend Anni's new house to take shelter. She lives in one of the oldest wooden houses in Helsinki, built when it was developing as a harbor city in the 19th century. Five young couples, including an artist and craftspeople are living there, sharing the shower, fireplace and sauna. Anni works as an antique furniture restorer. We had tea from Tasmania, where Anni has just been to visit a relative, and drank it from red-and-white dotted Russian porcelain cups in her room scented by the hay she uses to stuff her chair cushions.

That house is just 30 minutes by bicycle from the city center, but from her window, we see trees and rocky hills.

Finnish people mostly renovate, repaint and repair their houses by themselves. And luckily it is still possible to find a good, cheap place like hers in Helsinki. When you need furniture, there are many flea markets. Also, when an apartment building is being renovated, old furniture is often thrown away in large garbage containers -- and they are great places to find antique furniture! Last week, when I was in a container hunting for stuff, I met my neighbor, a photographer in his 50s, there, so we chatted for a while.

Compared to people in Japan, people here have more free time, but it doesn't mean they are lazy. Actually they are very quick to act and they work hard.

Since I have been here, I have used my body for my work and in everyday life much more than I used to when I was in Tokyo. I think that's very healthy and it suits me well.

I know shopping is a lot of fun, but I also realize that people in Japan spend most of their time just selecting things. There are fewer choices for products here, but people know how to make things suit them, which I now think is much more easygoing and fun.

Terveisin,
Nao

ENGLAND

Distance lends enchantment

Emiko Honey was a hairdresser in Tokyo. In 1990, aged 28, she moved to London, and three years later married an Englishman. In 1994, she had their first son, Alex, and her second son Kris came along in 1997. In 2003, she got a divorce and since then, as a single mother, she has studied graphic design at college and now works as a freelance Web designer from her home in the country town of Petersfield, in the southern county of Hampshire.

Hi there!

I suppose spring has already come and gone in Japan. Even in this gray-sky country, I can feel it bursting out everywhere lately. I am thankful to see clear blue skies in England as it is so rare to have such beautiful weather here.



The young Honeys with a friend (left) on hills near home

We are all fine, and especially the children, who are too lively sometimes. Alex has got used to being at his boarding school, but he is so busy studying that he has given up on practising music. As his mother, I wish he would continue with his violin and piano lessons as he has been learning for a long time, but he's already 12 so it is up to him now.

Kris attended a "Pinewood Derby" organized by the Cub Scouts the other day. It was a competition for children to make model racing cars they carved from timber, and some of the models were so fantastic that they looked like real cars. Kris asked his granddad to help him carve his, but he painted it by himself and it looked very nice. Unfortunately, his car did not win a prize in the end.

I wish I could have gone back to Japan during the cherry blossom season. I desperately miss the beauty of sakura trees in full flower.

Recently, I have, in a funny way, been feeling more like a Japanese person than I did even when I started to live in England. Strange to say, but I talk lots about Japanese history with a Japanese friend who has also lived in this country for a long time. We especially talk a lot about the last days of the Tokugawa/Edo Period and about modern Japanese history. I, personally, miss a lot of things from the

Showa Era when I spent a happy childhood. When I think back to the scenery and the atmosphere of those days, I immediately recapture the feeling of those times. It was so marvelous in Japan then. I suppose this is a clue telling me that I have become old.

All the best,
Emiko

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