

When Hitoshi met Bob: A Tokyo love story

In a new country with new rules, a friendship becomes something more

[Bob Tobin](#) Naha –



Island of our own: Bob Tobin and Hitoshi Ohashi have relocated to Naha and taken their gallery with them. | COURTESY OF BOB TOBIN

My life changed 30 years ago at a bar in Shinjuku.

I was in Tokyo on a short-term contract with the U.S. government as part of a university program that sent teachers to military bases. It was my first time

in Japan and after three days I made my way to Shinjuku Ni-chome, an area roughly the size of 12 city blocks that's known for its many gay and lesbian bars.

People didn't congregate on the streets of Ni-chome in the 1990s like they do now. Instead, they'd head straight to their bar of choice and stay there. Most of the establishments catered only to Japanese customers, but there were a few that welcomed non-Japanese ones as well. The most popular among the mixed bars was GB. There was no Grinder or Tinder back then, so if you wanted to meet other gay people then GB was the place to do it.

There were also no map apps back then. I headed to GB by myself, figuring it would be easy to find, but I was wrong. Eventually, someone was kind enough to lead me straight to the doors of the establishment, which was in the basement of a love hotel with a small sign and a very steep staircase.

Before I entered GB, I walked around for about 30 minutes. I had been to gay areas in the U.S. — Castro Street, West Hollywood — but Ni-chome was like those places on steroids. There were a couple of bookstores, but it was primarily bars. Similar neighborhoods in the U.S. would have more retail and residential options, but Ni-chome seemed solely concerned with entertainment.

Once I worked up the nerve to enter GB, I descended the stairs and got a look at the place. It was big enough for around 80 to 100 people, and the actual bar was square. I ordered a vodka tonic, took a seat at the far end of the bar and focused on the music videos that were playing on the screens dotting the room. I didn't notice the guy sitting next to me at first, but eventually we made eye contact.



Early days: Hitoshi Ohashi and Bob Tobin pose for a picture in matching outfits in 1993. | COURTESY OF BOB TOBIN

His first words to me were, "You speak Japanese?" I wasn't sure what he said and he repeated it again, slowly. I laughed and shook my head — I couldn't speak a word. Still, somehow we "talked" that night. As the night went on, more English came out, and we both made a real effort to try to understand each other. The bartenders also helped with translation. His name was Hitoshi Ohashi. We talked about Japan, America, our jobs and discovered something in common — it was both our first time at GB. Neither one of us was looking for a boyfriend, I thought I would only be in Japan for two months and Hitoshi had recently begun working as a freelance make-up artist and was focused on getting his career going.

But I was so happy to have a friend in Japan with whom I could have a truly honest connection. On the military base, I had to stay closeted. It was only 30 years ago but it was still a very different time: I had seen many people get fired and sent home if it was discovered they were gay.

Hitoshi and I made plans to meet a few days later at a Korean restaurant where we barbecued beef and vegetables on a small stove. For anyone looking for tips on dating in Japan, I've since been told you shouldn't go to a place where you could end up smelling like garlic. At that time, I wasn't thinking about that kind of thing. I was just glad to have a new friend. This time, both of us came armed with dictionaries. We were also genuinely interested in knowing about each other, and the conversation went smoother.

After that night, Hitoshi left Tokyo for a month to work in Osaka. Cell phones weren't widely used in the early '90s, so I didn't know how to reach him. Then, I started to worry about whether or not I'd see him again. Maybe I cared for Hitoshi more than I was willing to admit? Maybe he was more than a friend? I realized that it wasn't until he was away that I really had a chance to actually sit and reflect upon just how incredible and unique he was. This motivated me to track down his number in Osaka, and we made plans to meet when he returned to Tokyo.

Hitoshi was unlike anyone I had met before, He was so bright and energetic, generous and he was curious about me. The first time he visited my apartment, he brought two boxes of strawberries — no one had ever brought me strawberries before. He also asked questions nobody had ever asked me, like what I was like as a kid (I was the studious type, never in trouble) and one day he asked me if I had acne as a teenager. I was surprised; it was an unexpected question, but it didn't bother me. And, he was right. He saw me like no one else had ever seen me.

A not-so-tough choice

My work in Tokyo was only supposed to last two months, but was extended to six. That allowed Hitoshi and I the chance to get to know each other better and we learned enough of each other's language so that we didn't always have to rely on dictionaries. We knew by this time that we wanted to

be together, but at the end of my six-month stint I was set to be transferred to South Korea on a two-month contract. We came to the decision that we could handle the break, and Hitoshi was kind enough to let me keep my things in his apartment while I was gone.

When I got ready to check in for my military flight to South Korea, the local administrator told me that my assignment had been canceled and that I was to stay another two months in Japan, so I went to Hitoshi's apartment the same afternoon to surprise him with the good news. I never moved my things out and ended up spending most of my time at his place, a six-tatami mat room loaded with the contents of two apartments' worth of stuff. The size of the place didn't matter. It was cramped but, because of the feelings we had for each other, we made it work. When love strikes, inconveniences seem so small.

At the end of the two months, I had a major decision on my hands. I was told that I had to transfer to a military base in another country or return home. My dilemma: Do I stick with a secure job and head elsewhere? Or do I stick with Hitoshi and try to take our relationship to the next step? I chose Hitoshi, and quit my job.



We do: Bob Tobin and Hitoshi Ohashi celebrate in Tokyo five years ago after they were able to get married in the United States. | COURTESY OF BOB TOBIN

Creating community

It's hard to say this when people are facing job losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but I ultimately believe that jobs are easy to find, a soulmate is not. Sure enough, I found work teaching and consulting, and was eventually offered a full-time position at a Japanese university. I enrolled in classes at a Japanese-language school, and Hitoshi studied English in Japan and Hawaii. We'd show off our linguistic accomplishments by sending faxes to each other during the day. Soon enough, we were moving into a larger apartment together.

A lot of people ask Hitoshi and I if we have problems communicating or if there are culture clashes, and I admit there has been some of that but most of the time we laugh it off. In fact, our arguments are less about cultural issues and more about our own individual traits: Hitoshi is a neat freak. Me? Not so much. Hitoshi is impulsive and spontaneous. Me? I like to plan things.

More than 20 years ago, we got into a fight that ended up with Hitoshi deciding to move out. He packed up his stuff and even put a deposit on a new apartment. Before the moving date, however, one of his friends took on the role of mediator and, after the spilling of guts and the shedding of tears, we opted to give our relationship another chance. Hitoshi lost his deposit money, but that didn't matter — we were back together.

Fifteen years ago, I went on a trip to Southeast Asia and I decided I wanted to do something to help the amazing artists I had met there. When I came back to Japan, I told Hitoshi we should open an art gallery and, to my surprise, he didn't think I was nuts. Opening a gallery gave us a chance to do something together. We both love art and the business has allowed us to introduce many talented artists to Japan and markets overseas. We've learned a lot about running a business, and about each other, in the process. However, one of the biggest joys of this stage in our lives has been the ability to create a community of clients, artists and friends.

The secret to a relationship

As a gay couple in the 1990s, Hitoshi and I were not as open about our relationship with our clients and co-workers as we are now, but we didn't hide. He came to my university's Christmas party, we met each other's friends and colleagues, and we held a couple of fundraisers for AIDS organizations.

People ask us how we have made our relationship work for 30 years, weathering the outside pressures that come with being in a same-sex partnership. I think one thing that helps is that we're not afraid to speak the truth to one another; we don't harbor any secrets. We have mutual friends, of course, but we also have our own individual lives. We're both independent by nature and, rather than push us apart, that freedom has allowed us to grow together.



Home is where the heart is: Bob Tobin and Hitoshi Ohashi pose for a picture taken for The Japan Times in 2010. | YOSHIAKI MIURA

People change, and a good relationship is about adapting to those changes. Some people say relationships are about compromise, but I don't think either Hitoshi or I have given up any part of ourselves in the past 30 years. I've adapted to his need for neatness and speak more quietly in public now, and there's room in the fridge for both my peanut butter and his *nattō* (fermented soy beans). After some prodding, Hitoshi doesn't hesitate to say "I love you" anymore, and he's much more open about his feelings.

Sometimes couples come to me with their own relationship problems, and I find a common theme is that they don't make time for each other. One

custom that works for Hitoshi and I is our habit of morning meetings. Every day we “meet” for coffee together on our balcony. We would never take an apartment without a balcony since this is where we talk about our plans for the day, the gallery, our projects, our writing and whatever else is on our mind. It’s like a daily relationship reset. Try getting into the habit of a morning meeting — especially if overtime is an issue, as it can be in Japan.

Five years ago, Hitoshi and I were finally able to formalize our relationship when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was a legal right. We flew to California and got married on the steps of San Francisco City Hall. A few months later we celebrated in Tokyo with our extended family of friends, colleagues, clients and students.

In the meantime, we’ve made another big change. We decided we wanted a more relaxed lifestyle, so we packed up all our belongings and our two schnauzers, Momo and Hana, and left Tokyo for Okinawa. We’re now getting used to a different pace of life, new foods, customs, people and, unfortunately, typhoons. The pandemic has also brought new challenges for us as a couple and as gallery owners looking to start anew in Naha, but I’m glad I’m facing that challenge with Hitoshi.

It has been more than 30 years since that night at GB. We no longer need dictionaries to communicate, but we continue to learn about each other and explore this life we have created together.

Bob Tobin is a professor emeritus of business and commerce at Keio University, and the author of several books in English and Japanese about self-development. His most recent is “No Regrets: How To Kickstart Your Career And Your Life.” He and Hitoshi Ohashi run the Tobin Ohashi Gallery in Naha.

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