

Japan Then and Now

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I was a student in Japan from April 1977 until the beginning of 1987. Coming from a small rural New Zealand town, with Wellington the biggest city I was familiar with, everything was a new first: from the lemon tea (who would put lemon in their tea? – an American thing I later discovered) served on the JAL flight (we went via Sydney), and the bird's-eye view of the industrial area around Haneda as we landed (Narita opened later that year), to the sight of men relieving themselves at the road-side on our bus-ride into Fuchuu, where we would spend the first year, and our first visit to Akihabara, which was then a purely electronics section of Tokyo.

During my first year I travelled extensively – from Osaka to Kyushu in the summer holiday, and around Yamagata prefecture in the winter holiday. I soon realized that I should have done the trips the other way round. To this day I have a negative impression of Osaka, so hot and seemingly uncivilised (compared to Tokyo), and alighting from the train at Yonezawa, the first stop on my winter trip, I found myself treading around in 10cm of muddy snow. However, I would highly recommend travelling around Japan alone to any student of Japan(ese) – for someone with two or three months of Japanese language lessons under their belt, two or three weeks travelling alone, staying at youth hostels and arranging your own train timetable, can be more educational than the same period in the classroom, both in terms of language acquisition, but also for the amount you can learn about Japan and the Japanese.

I am writing this in Japan, and Japan has changed a lot over the past 20 years. People now eat and drink on the commuter trains (*quel horreur!*), Shinjuku has become unrecognisably more cosmopolitan, the price of eating out has gone up, and the price of international phone calls has dropped. But some things have not changed. For one, in spite of some high-profile violent crimes, Japan is still incredibly safe – people leave their laptops unattended in libraries and coffee shops without needing to worry that they will be stolen! Also, less central areas have not changed so much – the Waseda area, just 10 minutes from Shinjuku, still has the same shops, probably run by the same people, albeit with a Starbucks now thrown in for good measure.

Japan has always been a fusion of old and new, and that has not changed. One step off the main streets will take you back into a Japan of 40 or 50 years ago. Granted – the hair styles and cars may have changed, but the people haven't.