

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 95):

Pockets of Japan In Australia

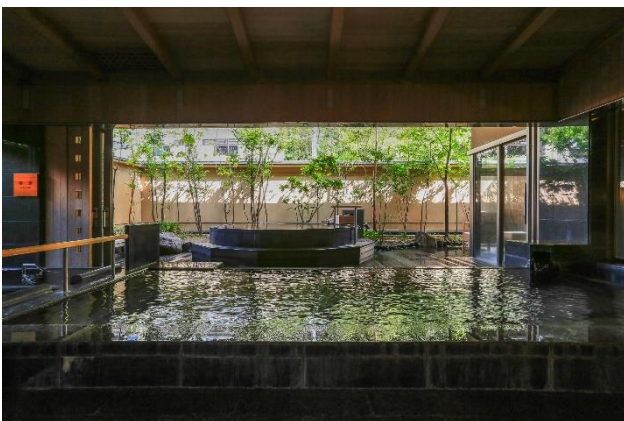
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Some of my readers in Japan ask me, “Aren’t there inconveniences to living overseas?”

It has been nearly 40 years since I began my life as a diplomat, and fifteen of these have been spent overseas. Before Canberra, I lived in New York, Washington DC, Hong Kong, Geneva and London. These locations largely came with good living conditions and, aside from the typical pressures of work, there were no particular difficulties associated with everyday life. That being said, there certainly are differences from Japan. Today, I would like to flesh these out for you.

1. “Japan sure is great”

As somebody born and raised in Japan, who had never even travelled overseas until beginning work, I suppose I was a bit of a ‘homebody’. Each time this ‘homebody’ returns to Japan, he experiences a moment which compels him to utter, “Japan sure is great”. This moment is none other than when I am soaking in a hot bath – and surely I am not the only Japanese person who thinks this.



Japan boasts wonderful *onsen* all over the country (photos courtesy of JNTO)

In Europe and the US, where ‘shower baths’ abound, the best you can do is wriggle like an eel in an attempt to immerse yourself completely in the shallow water. In Australia, there are many residences and hotels without bathtubs at all, only showers.

Therefore, on my recent trip back to Japan on business, as soon as I could, I made a beeline for my old haunt – the *rotenburo* (open-air baths) at the foot of Mt Asama in Nagano Prefecture. As I stretched out completely in the bath, admiring the abundance of hot water continuing to overflow down the sides, I could not help but say to myself, “Japan sure is great”.

2. A Japanese cypress bath in Sydney

I have had the unenviable experience of trying to fit into many a Western-style bath, so when I discovered a Japanese-style inn with a cypress bath in Sydney, my jaw dropped with surprise.



The cypress bath at *Gojyuan*. Incredibly, it was imported directly from Japan!



The immaculately manicured garden.

The Japanese-style inn, *Gojyuan*, is approximately 20 minutes from Sydney’s CBD, and was recommended to me by a Japanese expat. While renovating their home ten years ago, the owners decided to build two neat and cozy guest rooms on the first floor. The rooms themselves are quintessentially Japanese. What is more - according to the host, Ms Linda Evans, the Japanese cypress bath was imported directly from Japan. The bath is big enough that two adults can spread out

comfortably, and fresh hot water flows in constantly. Upon realising I was not in Japan (which took a moment!), I uttered the phrase, “baths sure are great”.

My surprise did not end there. That night, we slept on *futon* in a perfect Japanese-style room. Upon opening the sliding screens, we also found a shower and a toilet – equipped with underfloor heating. This was a lesson learned (in the spirit of *kaizen*) from cold nights at Japanese *onsen* hotels, when a walk down long corridors to the bathroom can chill your entire body. What a wonderful idea! The degree of attention to detail was astonishing. Topping things off was the superb Japanese breakfast – complete with *koshihikari* rice.

I believe the reason *Gojyuan* is booked up for the next three months must be that this *ryokan* has earned popularity with both Japanese and Aussies alike.



With the host, Ms Linda Evans



The elegant Japanese garden

3. The rising popularity of the washlet

Second to the *onsen* on the list of things I miss about Japan would be the toilets. However, I do not miss traditional Japanese-style toilets in the slightest. That’s right – here I am referring to the ‘washlet’.

There was once a young man in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who astonished his superiors by announcing that he ‘would not be posted to a country without washlets’. I do somewhat sympathise. While washlets are gradually being

introduced in Taiwan and South Korea, Australia still seems a long way off.

For the sake of research, I decided to stay in some of Sydney's high end hotels and take the opportunity to walk around. The result of this was the discovery that only rooms at the Park Hyatt and the Crowne Plaza are furnished with washlets, while the Shangri-La plans to install them during their next renovation. I am very much looking forward to their numbers growing, even if only by a little.

I even heard a rumour that a Hollywood star who visited Japan took home a washlet as a souvenir. As a fine example of Japanese innovation, I have no doubt that washlets will sell like hotcakes in the near future when their ingenuity becomes better known. By the way, my residence in Canberra is also equipped with washlets, so please do not hesitate to use them if you have the chance!

4. Noodles

The third thing I long for during my overseas postings is a good bowl of noodles – any variety of soba, udon or ramen. The Japanese food boom of recent years has brought many restaurants selling sushi, tempura and teppanyaki. And yet, there are so few high-quality noodle restaurants, due perhaps to the difficulty in preparation, and how hard it is to turn a profit by selling a large quantity of this low-margin dish.

In saying that, I have fond memories of the ramen and Kyoto-style tsukemen restaurants in Midtown and Greenwich that I frequented while I was studying in New York in the late '80s.



The Japanese noodles that I long for while overseas (photos: JNTO)

With this context in mind, it is possible to see how Australia is in fact blessed. Authentic soba and ramen restaurants, such as Sydney's 'Chaco Ramen', 'Ichibanboshi' and soba restaurant 'Shimbashi', and Melbourne's 'Hakata Gensuke', are rapidly expanding – and loved by Japanese expats and Aussies alike.

The reason Sydney and Melbourne have so many quality restaurants which can easily compete with the likes of New York, London and Paris could be because of the many Japan-loving and Japanese-food-savvy Aussies, who know how authentic Japanese food should taste.

5. Towards a two-way exchange

And so, in each of these three aspects of *onsen*, toilets and noodles, you could say that Australia is progressing steadily towards becoming a place where Japanese people will no longer feel homesick.

Japan's borders fully reopened on 11 October. For this reason, I hear that flights to Japan from major Australian cities during the Christmas holiday period will be almost completely full. In this way, Aussies who have been charmed by Japan's amazing products will bring some of these home with them, and by extension attract more tourists from Japan. While waiting for this synergy to take off, I was intently slurping up curry nanban soba in Sydney.

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