

Life in Japan

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Abstract

A russian researcher shares his Impressions about life in Japan

Social Life

My association with Japan's High Energy Accelerator Research Organization (KEK) began about 15 years ago, after meeting with Japanese scientists at the Stanford Linear Accelerator (SLAC) in 1989. Some time after that I came to KEK on my first short visit. I have now resided in Japan for over three and a half years.

My first impressions of Japan, of course, can not be forgotten. The year was 1990, the time of Perestroika ("reconstruction"), but really a revolution in Russia. Japan appeared a rich and flourishing country—a good model for our Perestroika. I saw well-groomed houses, new shining automobiles on the streets (all Japanese), an abundance of cell-phones (even among school children), conveyor sushi-bars, and stores full of goods. The taxi drivers and bus drivers were all in the uniform and wearing white gloves. Unfortunately no geishas in kimonos were in the streets, however, neither were there any police (how it was it possible in such a wild bourgeois jungle?)—all it was unexpected and pleasant. But the important thing is the wonderful feeling of safety and peace. With respect to crime, Japan is a very lucky country. At any time of day or night, at any place, in any town or village, you feel comfortable and completely safe. Even theft is practically nonexistent. No need to worry much about an open car left on the street. Visitors here are often astonished by unlocked, unoccupied offices at any time of day.

Most everyone has heard of Japanese politeness and

friendliness; moreover, the average education here is very high. I have come to the conclusion that knowledge of English only is quite enough to survive in Japan. Even at a gasoline station, as a rule, there is someone who can speak both languages. And the level of service is quite good. In Japan I feel myself an indispensable man. Those in the service industries are courteous and friendly and seem genuinely pleased to help. At least they look very happy when they see me.

I cannot skip several words about Japanese cars and roads. When I became a Japanese driver, the reliability of Japanese cars struck me. To run more than 100,000 kilometers without any repairing—this seems like a miracle. Wait . . . ! It is not true! I had a Toyota and I did have to repair it when it had about 100,000 kilometers. And I did it myself—I changed a light bulb.

About the roads: yes, they are too narrow sometimes. In spite of the great number of car and frequent traffic jams, the traffic safety is good. The high quality of roads, good marking, and discipline of drivers make them safe enough. I have tried several times to lose my way, but have never succeeded, even at night. Bi-lingual direction signs at each crossing make it impossible. My wife had a driver's license in Russia but not enough courage to start driving. Yet she did it easily here. Now I must buy a second car because I also want to drive sometimes.

Regarding traffic jams, I should say that I found myself in jam in the most unexpected place . . . at the top of Fujiyama! This was our first climb in the middle of August (coincidentally it coincided with my birthday. How many people can brag of celebrating a birthday

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on the top of Fuji-san?!). We ascended all night from the eastern side through the wind and the storms. Lightning flashed at our level and below. At the very end of the ascent, close to the top where the paths from the north and the east merged, the quantity of climbers became so much that it was necessary to wait for our turn to set foot on the top! However, at the top, there was enough room for everybody. Standing at the edge of a many-colored cosmic-sized crater we shouted “Banzai” for the rising sun and my birthday. My daughter said that she would be proud of this night feat all of her life. Really, it was not so easy.

Besides this Fuji adventure, we have traveled much and frequently, hiking among the mountains of Japan. For me it was unexpected that Japan is mountain country. Mountains make for spectacular views and much more attractive journeys. We have met astonishingly large numbers of hikers, especially in their senior years. This condition speaks about the good health of a nation. I can say that hiking is the Japanese national sport. It is not surprising, who can resist the views of waterfalls, mountain lakes, and autumn hills? Nikko is especially beautiful in autumn. My friends abroad doubt the authenticity of photographs taken from Nikko—the colors are so vivid sometimes.

Another Japanese national sport is onsens (hot spas). It is close to my heart. Russians, as the inhabitants of not the warmest country, adore saunas and, I think, understand perfectly the attraction. There is a great number of spas in Japan. With all my guests from Russia I try to visit the Tsukuba onsen, which I think is one of the best. And, if possible, we go to the Nikko-Yumoto onsen. Fragrant hot water flows directly from mountains, warm pools among the snowdrifts after a day of skiing—what can be better.

I should say couple words about Tsukuba, the town where I am living. I suppose that Tsukuba is not a typical Japanese town. The modern elegant architecture and feeling of expanse are the features of Tsukuba, which are unusual for the majority of Japanese towns with their narrow streets. The champion of density is Tokyo, of course. I am a country-man and the view from a bus window moving through the Tokyo highways at the levels of roof tops evokes the questions: How is it possible? Why do people need to live like this? Poor Tokyo-folk. At the same time, it is great

fun to see it. There is some beauty in this chaos. The eye never tires.

The cultural life of Tsukuba is quite rich—festivals, lectures, concerts. For example, I have managed to hear the famous Russian violinist here. To get tickets for his concert in Russia is rather difficult. The Tsukuba Festival, or Tsukuba Matsuri, was something I had never before seen. The whole city takes to the streets yelling, dancing and eating, eating and eating. I hope my wife shares my positive impressions on Tsukuba life. She is a very busy person, dividing time among courses in Japanese and English, schools of ikebana and sumie, flamenco dancing, tennis and skiing. This set of hobbies is possible only in Tsukuba.

Laboratory Life

Before KEK, I worked at two laboratories: the Budker Institute of Nuclear Physics, and its Protvino branch. So I can compare KEK with these two laboratories. The initial impression is the large number of outside companies involved in KEK projects. My previous organizations were more autonomous. They had their own industrial base and usually all stages of scientific development from the idea to hardware are completed by the laboratories themselves. At KEK we see a different approach. This approach has an advantage: KEK can concentrate on scientific sides of problems, leaving the routine technical parts to a large number of professionals in their fields. The result is a high quality of work and a strict schedule. Once my boss from Russia visited KEK during the B-factory construction and saw an empty tunnel. He was puzzled, since there was little time before the scheduled start of the B-factory. An enormous volume of installation work needed to be done. He said it was impossible, but the machine started operation on time. The plan is the plan.

Another important feature I noticed here is mobility and the ability to quickly adapt. I was at KEK when the consensus began that future linear colliders should be based on cold technology. Before that time, KEK worked exclusively on warm-technology based projects and established a scientific base and large infrastructure in that area. After the adoption of a cold-technology based project, the reorganization was done almost instantly, in my opinion. Working groups were

organized and the institution began working for the new project in full scale. This shows the high level of organization. One last feature is the collective decision-making process and noticeable number of meetings. As a result the solutions are well thought-out and are the product of joint effort. It makes the realization effective and ensures a healthy climate.

An attractive aspect for me as visitor is the atmosphere of creative freedom. During my work here I always receive only general directions, having complete tactical freedom. Combining this atmosphere with outstanding equipment and the most contemporary instruments and computers turns work into pleasure.

I should mention the important tradition to celebrate

the remarkable laboratory events, such as the start or end of facility operations, or the arrival of new specialists and students. Such events call for group barbeques,; where else can you have good conversations with colleagues as with a glass of beer and a plate of yaki-soba.

And finally I want to point out the wonderful everyday environment of KEK. The dormitory and guest-houses are located near the job site with all necessary equipment, cafeteria, bar, gym, pool, tennis-court, all these making the life of a visiting scientist much easier and enjoyable.

I love this country and it is my luck to be working here at KEK.