

**Essay
by
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“Osaka Essay”

I can still smell the potato korokke, and the okonomiyaki. I only need to close my eyes to envision the precisely cut delicacies of fish or the thick savoriness of fried beef. It's funny how I remember the food, but in my mind it is symbolic of the culture itself. In this world, we all use the same resources, and we all eat the same "things." The difference, though, lies in the way the "things" are prepared. Japanese cuisine, especially in Osaka, has a wonderful and distinct flavor. And here I was thinking I had experienced the essence of Japanese food from the local restaurants. There is nothing like actually going to the source of such exquisiteness, for culture as well as for food. Thus, I have returned to America with a renewed perspective of the world and an increased appreciation for the people of Japan. My trip to Osaka was unlike any experience I had ever had.

It is impossible to describe my journey without first mentioning my home stay family, for it is they who made my stay so enjoyable. I had one family of five for the three weeks that I was there. The Nagamizu family was heaven sent. They made me feel welcome from the start and pretty soon had me feeling like a part of their family. I realized that the hospitality and courtesy of the Japanese people in general is unrivaled.

I don't like making assumptions based on single perspectives; however, I did find that the nature of the Nagamizu family and that of other Japanese families seemed to resonate a particular theme. I noticed that the family was very united. This, as well as other observations, has led me to believe that Japanese teenagers are less independent than their American counterparts. There is almost a certain naivete that remains longer in the Japanese child. When this child grows older he/she seems to be more attached to the family. Japanese teenagers also tend to live with their parents longer than American teenagers who are stereotyped as "dying to leave the house" for a chance of "real" independence. However, times are changing, and Japanese teenagers too are shifting in their attitudes.

This shift in attitude has largely to do with western influence. In this world where globalization is the trend, it is difficult to miss such cultural integration. During my three week stay in Japan, I recognized many American labels such as Gap and McDonalds. American movies, celebrities, and singers were also recognized by the Japanese. This influence has led to a vastly different generation. This generation is more independent and hip. The Japanese even seem to be getting taller! The younger the age group, the taller they are becoming, and I believe this is due to the change in diet. Many young adults eat more "westernized" foods such as steaks or hamburgers. The change in height may also be indirectly affected by the change in lifestyle. The Nagamizu family, for one, always ate on a high table with chairs rather than on the floor with their legs folded under them. Masae san once told me that when she was a little girl the whole floor of the house was tatami; now there was only one little square of the mat off to the side.

I have dwelt on several differences between our American culture and that of the Japanese, yet there are also several intrinsic similarities. People from both worlds like to have fun, to explore, and to learn. No matter where a person is situated he/she will have dreams and goals in life. I had a rare chance to enjoy sightseeing with an interesting group of Japanese, American, and Australian. We all spoke about our lives from our separate countries and found that we all were very much the same. As the days went by I let go of my analysis so that I could enjoy just being.

Of course, no trip is complete without a few misadventures. One day my independent edge goaded me to set out to explore by myself. I felt skilled and confident as I decoded the signs and found my way to the shopping streets of Osaka by bus. The way home, however, was not as

successful. True, the family had eagerly provided me with a little drawn map and address, but somehow the buses that I took kept taking me to different sites. I must have asked a dozen people to help me by the time I made it back home. The manner in which I was helped by Japanese strangers enforced my previous statement about their courtesy. They went out of their way to explain things to me. Some even guided me themselves to the area in question so that I felt a little guilty for making them go through all the trouble. If it were not for the consideration of these Japanese strangers I may have wound up in Tokyo!

My favorite site was Nanzen-in in Kyoto. There was something about the place that lifted my spirit high above the pure green tinted leaves of the garden trees. The pond rippled gently with each tap of the overhanging branch and seemed to echo the age and wisdom of its wooded wonderland. It is for this opportunity to travel to such a place and experience all that I did that I am grateful to the San Francisco Osaka Sister City Association for making it all possible. My trip to Osaka opened my eyes to a larger world. I had the time of my life.