

**Essay  
by  
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**“The Truth About Guidebooks”**

I was told that in Japan, the streets were busy. I did not expect the streets to be so flooded with people, that police regulated a constant flow of pedestrian traffic. I was told that in Japan, the weather is hot and muggy. I did not anticipate an average temperature of 95 degrees. I was told that Nato, a delicacy enjoyed throughout the Kansai area, is very unpleasant to the immature American taste buds. I did not, and still do not understand how fermented soybeans can expel such a strong flavor. I was told that the Japanese are warm, welcoming, and willing to provide utmost comfort for anyone. I did not expect to receive such benevolence and hospitality from each and every person that guided me through the most memorable three weeks of my life. As you can see, I underestimated the power of Japan. Or perhaps, my many guidebooks just didn't provide with adequate information. Sure, my initial expectations were satisfied, but during my stay in the greater Osaka area, I learned something more meaningful about culture than just the mere basics. This epiphany, one that every human being deserves to experience, has changed my view of the world itself through cross-cultural relations. I learned that the most fulfilling cultural experience of all is living the culture itself. When I say, “living the culture”, I mean the true devotion to incorporating every aspect of the culture in a daily life. Simply said, one learns the most by breaking away from one's original culture and living in a new society. Simply experiencing new approaches, ways, and views of life can enable anyone to easily attain a genuine appreciation of the world around us. How lucky I feel to have had this life-changing experience.

I do not blame the authors of my guidebooks for they were not misleading in any way, they just did not inform me of the limitless potential of an introduction to a new culture. The truth is, it is impossible for a written work to reveal the atmosphere one experiences from all five senses. A guide to Osaka may say that the fish markets are heavily populated with determined shoppers even at five in the morning, but this statement does not provide any meaningful cognitive values of a culture. The only way to become truly acquainted with this cultural experience is by actually smelling the freshly sliced salmon, hearing the loud remarks shouted across the small shops: “irashimase”, “arigatou gozaimashita”, “ano osashimi o futastu o kudasai”, feeling the cool breeze of artificial air, and losing your host in the plethora of hungry natives frantically making their way through the market-mazes, attempting to keep the rain off their business suits. The guidebooks state that, in Osaka, there are “underground shopping walkways” that connect various subway stations. I envisioned these “walkways” as little corridors; simple, direct connections between train depots. Little did I know that the underground pathways were layered, air-conditioned, went on for miles on end, and enabled a sweaty commuter to walk from one part of the city to the next protected from the brutal heat of July. I even tried to capture the busyness, the hustle and bustle of the shopping centers in Osaka through several photographs. But even then, no realistic perspective of the ambiance could be caught on film.

I would have never thought that a foreign experience could be so enlightening. I never would have guessed the temples and shrines I visited to be so spiritually uplifting. I hate to admit it, but I thought I knew a lot about Japan before I traveled overseas. After two years of studying Japanese at my high school, I tricked myself into thinking that I would not be stupendously amazed by a trip to Japan. I anticipated the trip to consist of all aspects of Japanese culture that I learned in school. Of course, my expectations were high, but I did not presume be so emotionally and spiritually impacted by such a different world. I knew, for example, that the Japanese temples and castles were spectacular and created an omnipotent atmosphere. Not being a practicing member of Shintoism or Buddhism, or for that matter, not belonging to any religion at all, I did not expect the astonishing emotional release that occurred when I first felt the presence of even the

humblest shrine. It is funny how one can absolutely underestimate the influence of something not understood.

After practicing Japanese for two straight years, I felt able to communicate the basics of the language, qualified to avoid the usage of English during my stay. My initial encounter speaking Japanese was relatively straightforward and comfortable. It was an easy exchange with Ms. Ito, a translator who works for Osaka City Hall. Her Japanese was lucid and consisted of nothing but the pure basics. I said to myself, "this is going to be easy". What I did not understand is that Ms. Ito was being especially clear, making sure my first impression was welcoming. My very next encounter changed my whole view of my ability to speak Japanese. I was stupefied by the way sentences were slurred together, particles were dropped, and words changed so drastically depending on the area or origin. At first, I had a hard time understanding what seemed to be so intimidating. I found myself nodding while trying to spot out at least one or two words hidden in the chaotic jumble thrown at my ears. But, once again, I was underestimating the potential of my situation. It only took a couple days before I started to comprehend what was being said, and after only one week, I started to think in Japanese, sing in Japanese, and speak the Japanese that seemed to be so enigmatic only a few days before.

I find it hard to believe how much my first mental fabrication of Osaka differed from my first physical interaction. Not to say that my vision was negative by any means, but that I believed what I wanted to believe. I had no predisposition of how Japanese culture looked, smelled, felt, tasted, or sounded. I see now that it is so unfair to make any assumptions of a person, place, object, or belief. One cannot be considered culture-savvy without understanding the essence of its origin, or as I like to call it, "living the culture".

I envy the winners of next year's scholarship for they will soon discover and cherish the feelings I now express. They will soon feel their bodies pressed up against strangers while crossing a bridge to get a better view of the fireworks displayed during the Tenjin Festival. They will soon appreciate the cool, air-conditioned atmosphere of a local Yoshinoya noodle house after basting under the muggy Osaka skies. They will soon feel embarrassed to have publicly underestimated the spiciness of authentic Japanese wasabe. They will soon gasp at the overwhelming beauty of various temples and shrines. They will soon find their place in a culture so different from their own. They will soon see that there is much more to a culture than what a guidebook can tell us.