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An Interesting Interview and Two Nights in Nikko

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Postcard from Kyoto, Japan

Year Abroad 2010-2012 An Interesting Interview and Two Nights in Nikko

Nikko—two hours' train ride from Tokyo in the heart of Tochigi Prefecture; the retreat of ascetics, mentally unstable emperors, and city-weary Leahs. But I get ahead of myself.

Before coming to Japan, I was able to receive the Boren Scholarship—funds for a year abroad from the National Security Education Program (NSEP) of the U.S. State Department, in return for a year of service in the government after I graduate. About a month after arriving in Kyoto I received a surprising email from Mrs. Suzanne Basalla, senior advisor to the current Ambassador to Japan, John Roos. “In my last job at the Pentagon we hired a former Boren scholar,” she wrote to all Boren scholars currently studying in Japan, “And I was so impressed I took the liberty of getting your email addresses from NSEP. If any of you ever come to Tokyo, feel free to drop in at the Embassy and we’ll get together for coffee.”

It’s not every day I get invitations to coffee by the Ambassador’s senior advisor, so I decided during Spring Break to make a special trip up to Tokyo to meet with her. To be honest, I heartily dislike the sprawling metropolis. I had visited earlier in the year, and it was then that I realized how rather than Japan in general, my heart is given to Kyoto—quiet, sweet-smelling Kyoto, lovingly circled with modest green foothills (as someone who grew up in the shadow of the Cascades, I couldn’t quite call them ‘mountains’).

So I thought I would endure the 6-hour ride to Tokyo on the overnight bus, meet with Mrs. Basalla, and then return to Kyoto the same evening. But then an idea came into my head: “Nikko. You’re going all the way to Tokyo on that awful night bus; you might as well make use of it! Why not book a few nights at a hostel in Nikko?” The name brought to mind images of dark forests, cold, clear air; *mountains*. Yes, I was very much in need of some mountains.

I was just a bit nervous about traveling so far alone.

“You never know,” said my dorm-mate Stacey in her Yorkshire accent, “You might meet some cool people.”

I snorted. “I’m not going there to meet *people*, just to get my mountain fix and tree-worship in,” though when I said it I thought I’d never done something so utterly self-indulgent as traveling someplace with the sole goal of *enjoying*. Well, I defended myself, I’m in Japan, I have to be a good exchange student and step out from time to time and explore.

On a crisp, grey morning, at a Starbucks near the Embassy (I had a cherry-blossom-flavored latte) I met Mrs. Basalla. She was very kind, and talking with her was like talking with a professor from back at Linfield. She was interested in my life at Doshisha and told me stories of her own experience studying abroad in Japan. She also sprung an interesting question on me. “It’s really dismal how few young Japanese are studying abroad. The Ambassador and I are

trying to brainstorm creative ideas for attracting more Japanese students to the U.S. Do you have any ideas?"

I realized how difficult her job must be, appeasing pressures from Washington to advance national interests in the face of a foreign country not always very interested. Hmm, I thought. Did I really want to go into government? The world was suddenly looking entirely too big and serious for me. Time to escape to Nikko!

When I got off the train in Nikko, I noticed instantly how clear and delicious the fresh mountain air was. I gulped it in eagerly and set off to find the hostel I would stay in for the two nights. It was a tiny Japanese-style place. From the booking website I'd gathered it was run by a friendly married couple called Sato. When I opened the door Mr. Sato, in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, was lounging with his legs in the *kotatsu* (a wonderful Japanese invention consisting of a low table with a heating element under it and a quilt spread over the top).

"Oh hey, Leah-san! It is Leah, isn't it?" he called. He set me up with tea in the toasty kotatsu before showing me my tatami-mat room.

The next morning I gasped as I stepped out of the hostel at the view of the mountains that I hadn't seen in the dark last night. I set off for what turned out to be a magical, but weary day of hiking through snow and shrines and silent cedar forests. In late February, the snow was still deep, but the trees dripped and whispered of spring, and the streams flowed loud and fast. I made a new friend: a tiny cinnamon-colored stray cat. She came running out of under a temple building mewing at me, and when I crouched down to her she jumped right into my lap, and gave me a kitty-hug by putting cold little paws up to my neck. I think she also gave me a few fleas.

I went back into town for lunch at a little place that advertised yuba-udon. Yuba is a specialty of Tochigi but I'm not exactly sure what it is. It seems to be a by-product of the soymilk-making process, but it was delicious. I was the only customer, so I tried chatting a little with the owner, an old man with a toothless smile. I often have a hard time understanding older folks' Japanese and they seem to have a hard time understanding mine, but we got along. I asked him what his favorite season in Nikko was. "*Tashika ni* (certainly) Nikko is famous for the fall leaves. This shop gets really crowded then. But I like early spring, when there is new green on the hills. You should come again then, or stay longer," he chuckled.

I spent the remaining daylight, which fades quickly when the sun drops behind the mountains, walking along the Daiya River. I had read somewhere that the Taisho Emperor who came to Nikko to escape Tokyo summers loved the river and wrote a poem about it that is inscribed on a rock somewhere nearby. I never found the rock, but it was indeed a beautiful river: clear as light in the shallows and deep turquoise in the pools.

That evening four more guests came to the hostel, German girls visiting their friend Juliane who was studying at Keio University in Tokyo. They were very friendly and when they

saw I was alone they invited me out to dinner with them. Living with three Germans in my dorm I've gotten used to their pert, direct style and dry sense of humor—if Americans are notorious for talking straight I think Germans deserve the reputation as well! I spent the dinner laughing at their banter. I learned later in the evening that the girls were planning a trip to Kyoto the next week—I offered to meet them and show them around for a day or two. Juliane and I stayed up late exchanging stories of study abroad. She had arrived at Keio the same month I had come to Doshisha, and was also staying for a year. “Once I went to a host-club,” she said, “But it was so weird to pay for flirting. I asked one boy “Do you have plans for your future?” but he just kept saying I am so pretty. What a joke!” I tried not to laugh too loud. I could just see the practically-minded Juliane ruining the mood by asking the host about his future.

In the morning I got up early to set off for a soak at Yumoto-onsen, a tiny town in the heart of the mountains built around natural hot-springs. The two-hour bus ride was breathtaking, especially the morning brilliance reflected in the white snow and powder blue of Lake Chuzenji. Then came the Senjogahara Plain, in winter a white expanse dotted with elegant birch trees. Yumoto-onsen was deep in snow, with the plowed piles at the sides of the narrow roads reaching almost double my height. The sky was a brilliant blue and the wind roaring in the pines seemed as loud as jet engines. A sulfur smell hung over the town. It was empty at midday and the first onsen I entered I had to myself. My favorite are the outdoor baths; this one was built against a snowy hillside and the bitter wind flowing under the black pines blew tiny ice crystals across my bare shoulders.

In the next onsen bath I visited, a young Japanese woman was also enjoying the mineral-rich pools. I felt it was a little awkward to be naked in a small bath with a complete stranger without saying anything, so I said, “It feels good doesn't it?”

The woman's face lit up. “Yes,” she said, “My husband and I came from Yokohama to visit Nikko's onsen.”

We chatted a bit about the joys of onsen, and then she said, “Were you born in Japan?”

This question was so different from the usual, “Which country are you from? Your Japanese is very good!” that I was immensely flattered.

“Oh no,” I said, “I'm from America. I'm just studying abroad.”

The conversation left a warm feeling that lasted long after the warmth of the mineral water had gone. Enjoying myself in the Japanese context of an onsen, talking freely in Japanese, I had been mistaken for (almost) a native. At the 6-month mark of my stay, when I was frustrated at not seeing progress either in my Japanese skills or in my ability to connect with Japanese people, I felt a change in myself, as if a string, lying quiet all this time, had been plucked suddenly and vibrated now with new confidence. Yes, spring was coming.

All too soon I had to return from Yumoto to the hostel. I must pack up my things and take the evening train for Tokyo to catch the overnight bus back to Kyoto. The time in Nikko had been entirely too short. The merry German girls I would meet again in Kyoto, but the Satos, the woman I had met at the onsen, little brown cat, the places I had wanted to see but didn't have time for, the morning view of the mountains...I would miss it all so much. Even Mr. Sato appealed to me.

“Do you really have to go so soon? Won't you come tonight to a full-moon party?”

I wished he hadn't invited me. It made me sadder to leave. “I'm sorry,” I said, “I really have to catch that bus. But is tonight a full moon?”

When I had the leisure to sit quietly in my seat as the train pulled away, a few tears started swimming in my eyes. For the first time I was returning to Kyoto reluctantly. I looked glumly out the window as the moon rose, round and golden as a 500 yen coin in the purple sky. I was already thinking of when I might have a break long enough to come back—May? I could see the “new green” that old man in the yuba shop had mentioned. End of June? Senjogahara would be waist-deep in wildflowers. But oh dear, there are still so many other places in Japan I wanted to see, and the train was trundling inexorably back to Kyoto, to a new semester of life abroad in Japan.

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