

TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



Three exhausted and jet-lagged individuals arrived in Tokyo on a grey Wednesday at the end of November. My husband and five year old daughter were wide-eyed at the sight of the sprawling city that's to be our home for the next four years.

Being somewhat blasé about city life myself after years of living in London, I tried to note the conspicuous differences this new city presented. Immediately obvious was the exceptional cleanliness, with teams of cleaners on every street corner sweeping up the falling leaves. Also apparent was the lack of graffiti, although I have since discovered that artistic graffiti occasionally decorates the walls under bridges. Tokyo was greener than I was led to believe, with tree-lined streets and potted plants in profusion outside every home and shop.

I was expecting to see architecture similar to the stylish skyscrapers of Hong Kong, but instead my first impression was of a sea of grey concrete. This, I surmised, is a necessity as the buildings are built to withstand frequent earthquakes and the Japanese apply their highly-tuned aesthetic qualities to other areas, like gardens and arts and crafts.

After a welcome full night's sleep I was rudely awakened by spine-chilling screams and guttural shrieks. With relief, I soon realised this was the Japanese birds' dawn-chorus, far more discordant than the melodious British songbirds. The day became bright, clear and sunny so I spent a little time exploring the immediate neighbourhood. Surprisingly for late November, there are camellias in flower,

daffodils in bloom and a nearby house has grapefruits growing in the garden. The trees are changing colour with splashes of brilliant yellow and orange.

Our first full day here was a public holiday so friends were able to show us around and first stop was the Tokyo Metro. At first glance the map looks very complicated and has been likened to a plate of multi-coloured noodles. In fact the trains are easy to use, but the stations themselves are problematical with many exits, and if you go out the wrong one, you can be lost for ages. Most people in the larger stations seem to be lost and drift around looking intently at signs or maps. Luckily, there are maps everywhere on the streets and in the stations and all are clearly marked "You are here" in English.

The Metro system itself is inexpensive (about 70p for most trips) and very easy to navigate. And, it works! Large pot plants adorn the stations and everything is immaculately clean. There are lots of staff in evidence and the trains run exactly on time. The longest I have waited for a train was four minutes and that was on New Year's Day after there had been three derailments on other lines. In the highly unlikely event that a train is late, staff hand out "late slips" so you can pass them on to your employer. My most-used phrase so far has been, "can you imagine this in Britain?!"

Our first day out proved that my initial impression of all buildings being bland concrete had been incorrect—there are some really interesting structures around. The building in the picture below is the Asahi Brewery and the golden "flame" was designed by Philippe Starke. The building to the left represents a glass of golden beer with a foaming head.

Till next time....Sayonara!

