

# TOKYO TALES

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## Shake, Rattle and Roll

**B**ritain's recent earthquake, whilst stronger than usual, was not unusual. Minor tremors occur quite regularly and mostly go unnoticed. They often happen in the quiet early hours of the morning and are unnerving for those still up and frightening for those disturbed from their sleep.

Japan is one of the world's most dangerous earthquake zones. This is because the country is located in an area where 4 tectonic plates meet, and Tokyo itself is built right on top of the junction of three of these plates. Scientists have recently found a major fault running dangerously close to the surface right underneath Tokyo. This is not a reassuring piece of knowledge. On average Japan has one earthquake per week. Luckily, we don't feel all of them as the country covers a large area.

Within a week of arriving here from England we experienced our first tremor. It was quite a strange one as we felt no shaking, but instead heard a loud "whump" on the windows as if a strong gust of wind had suddenly hit. When a second thud sounded a minute later we realised what it was. It measured only 4.6 on the Richter scale, but left me trembling for ages afterwards. A couple of days later, a proper "shaker" happened which had me diving under the nearby table. At this point I decided to find out about earthquakes and what to do about them. On arrival we were given a few survival guides which I carefully studied.

Thankfully, modern Japanese buildings are constructed to resist earthquakes. They have very deep foundations which is why we feel less shaking than the quake you experienced in the UK.

Often I will be downstairs while my husband is upstairs and he will come down saying "Did you feel

that tremor?" and I have felt nothing. This happened recently with a 6.2 magnitude one. Even my cat, who is supposed to be sensitive to this type of natural phenomenon, continued snoozing. Being at ground level is useful!

On talking to friends about this particular quake the following day, I discovered that one friend's dog gave her 10 minutes warning by running around and whining. Another friend, who lives on the 7th floor of an apartment block, was torn between looking after her dog and protecting her new vase! Earthquakes are a fact of life in Japan, day-to-day living goes on as normal and all you can do is do your best to prepare for them.

We have an earthquake kit in a large cupboard under the stairs and various items of emergency equipment in each room. These include items such as hard hats, blankets, a satellite phone that is constantly plugged in, first aid kit, emergency lighting, huge containers of water, water purifying tablets and a box of non-perishable food. The idea is to be able to survive up to five days on your own.

Large items of furniture such as bookcases are secured with various anti-toppling devices: a plastic runner underneath to tip the case slightly backwards and an extendable pole that reaches from the top of the case to the ceiling so fixing it tight.

All school children practice their earthquake drill in the same way that children practice fire drill in the UK. The standard brief is Drop, Cover and Hold. *Drop* to the ground before the shaking knocks you over; take *cover* under a table or in a doorway and cover your head; and *hold* onto whatever you are sheltering under in case it starts to move away.

We are constantly aware that Tokyo itself is long overdue "The Big One", as it's commonly described.

The last major quake Tokyo suffered is known as the Great Kanto Earthquake. On 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1923, just before midday, a quake measuring 8.3 struck and obliterated over a third of the city. As it was nearly lunchtime when the tremor hit, people had just lit gas powered fires. Such was the power of this earthquake that most buildings collapsed and the traditional wood and paper constructions fuelled the flames at such a speed that fire-fighters couldn't cope. The main water pipes had broken too. Around 30,000 people took refuge in a large park but a firestorm erupted and killed most of them. In total, 142,807 people were either killed or listed as missing and another 103,724 were injured and over a million people were left homeless.

Nowadays, earthquake insurance is covered by the government. A private company organises it and the premiums go into a government fund in case payout is required. The cover lasts for 5 years and they will only pay out 50% of the claim. On a good note though, premiums have decreased in price since October 2007 as geologists say there is little chance of a major quake anytime soon.

I only found out this snippet of information whilst writing this article, so I feel a good deal happier now!