

SOLO TRAVEL: JAPAN

by **Kat Avila**

"Don't try this yourself. You could get hurt," I sardonically rolled over in my mind as I tried to figure my way out of yet another uncomfortable situation. No matter how well you prepare, it follows Murphy's Law that the most peculiar things will happen when you least expect them to. But that's part of the adventure, isn't it? My 10-day solo trip to Japan wasn't perfect, but it was still a refreshing change from normalcy and routine.

MOTIVATION

Something deep and vital within me needed to reconnect with the Japan I knew as a youth. I had been away long enough for a new generation of Japanese to have been born, gotten married, and given birth to a new generation. Being powerfully motivated to make the trip helped me slog through the overtime I needed to put in and to also push past the exhausting portions of my journey.

ANXIETY

Going to Japan was like a parachute jump. I was nervous about how much culture shock I would experience or if my language skills would be sufficient. Anxiety surfaced on occasion during the trip. Yet I reminded myself of the words of a jump instructor to our group before boarding the plane for our first parachute jump, that we would not be there if we had been truly afraid, that a certain amount of anxiety was normal.

FINANCING

To raise money for the trip, I averaged 10 hours a week in overtime for three months. But before my trip even started, some of my fun money went bye-bye to pay for new tires, a C.V. boot, rear brakes, and a major 90,000-mile maintenance service for my car. The credit union only loaned me half of what I asked for, but together with my overtime money it was enough to cover the \$3,000 price tag for the trip.

The credit union loan paid for roundtrip airfare from Los Angeles, five nights standard hotel accommodations in Tokyo, two day-trip bus tours, and a seven-day Japan Rail Pass voucher. With my overtime money I bought a convertible backpack-to-suitcase and a warm jacket to protect me from the rain and snow I expected to encounter in mid-November. Additionally, that money covered meals, gifts, and the last five nights accommodations in youth hostels and business hotels.

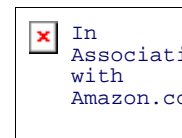
The initial part of my trip was part of a package. The single supplement cost me \$400. The Japan Rail Pass was only \$267, an enviable bargain (the train fare just from Tokyo to Kyoto and back would cost you the same). For the budget traveler I normally am, the travel package was expensive and luxurious. However, starting off comfortably - having a major hotel as a home base and tour guides to consult - fortified me for the more risky part of my trip.



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PACKING

The night before I left the U.S. I did not sleep. There would be plenty of time to snooze on the 12-hour flight to Japan from Los Angeles. I recklessly left much of my packing to the last minute because of a hectic work schedule and a research article due earlier that day. An emptied laptop computer case held my passport, wallet, itinerary, a page of e-mail addresses and telephone numbers, notebook, Eiji Kanno and Constance O'Keefe's NEW JAPAN SOLO guidebook, and a zippered pouch filled with pens, pencils, keys, small bandages, and tissue paper. My laptop case sat easily on attached food trays on the plane and train. This made rummaging for money, the guidebook, or paper to write on a snap. My backpack was small enough to be an airplane carry-on, and could be heaved onto and grabbed quickly off the overhead luggage racks on the trains.

Into my backpack I rolled up two changes of shirts, jeans (one black pair, one tan), and socks. I made sure my running shoes were in good condition because a size 9 wouldn't be easy to find in Japan. A week's worth of underwear and tampons went into a waterproof storage bag. Vitamins and cramp-relief tablets were stored in a seven-day pill container, which also doubled-up as emergency storage for my contact lenses. Makeup was limited to an eyelash curler, eyeshadow pencil, and lip ointment. I forgot sunscreen. A lead-laminated pouch held my pocket-size cameras and the remainder of money not in my wallet. The outside pocket of my backpack held a muffler, gloves, compact umbrella, and tissue paper. Zippers on my backpack were secured with two small locks. Identification tags hung from my backpack and laptop case, tags later removed for privacy and security after leaving the airport.

TOUCHDOWN IN JAPAN: THURSDAY, NOV. 16

At Narita airport I am met by an airport service woman who holds up a sign for "Mr. Kat Avila." It would not be the last time a guide expected a solo man, but not a solo woman.

FRIDAY, NOV. 17

My first morning in Tokyo the city is shrouded in gray and my high-rise window is spattered with raindrops. After eating breakfast at McDonald's, I prepare to go back out into the street. One of the brackets of my umbrella breaks. A bad omen. I tie the bracket back to the frame with string.

For my tour of Tokyo I walk over to a nearby hotel for the pickup. Though it is Thanksgiving week, there are decorated Christmas trees in the lobby. I wait and wait for the bus, finally catching it because another woman staying at that hotel was unable to book the tour she wanted and ended up booking the same tour as mine. The travel agency had given me an itinerary with the wrong pickup point and time. I was supposed to have waited at my own hotel. I also don't have a tour voucher, but the tour guide accepts my itinerary/invoice as proof I paid for the trip.


Our first stop is Meiji Imperial Shrine, built to honor Emperor Meiji and his empress. Meiji was responsible for accelerating the Westernization of Japan. At the Shinto shrine we are shown how to purify ourselves. Wash the left hand, the right hand, rinse the mouth and spit, then return the water ladle. I offer thanks to the deity for getting me on the bus.

Next we visit the 1,093-foot-tall Tokyo Tower and its main observatory. Tokyo Tower is taller than Paris's Eiffel Tower. One guidebook said the TV and radio tower was not worth visiting, but I am so excited to be here! It's a great feeling to be at the top of the world, even though I can't see much of it at the moment because of the rain.

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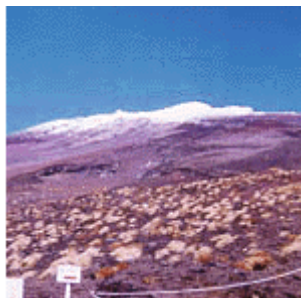
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Lunch is at the Ginza entertainment and shopping district before an uneventful boat ride on the Sumida River to Sensoji (Asakusa Kannon) temple. We reach the temple as what is left of the daylight dwindles away. The early onset of evening and the abbreviated off-season hours of some tourist attractions plague me on this trip.

SATURDAY, NOV. 18

I join a bus tour to Mt. Fuji and Hakone, a hot spring resort area. There isn't a rain cloud in sight. Several photographs of Mt. Fuji do not come out because the snow-covered cone blended in too well with the subtly blue sky. At our first rest stop, I bravely negotiate a traditional Japanese squat toilet.

On the drive back down the mountain, the bus driver burns out his brakes. For the rest of the excursion we are shuttled around in taxis. By 5 p.m. it is dark. I seat myself outside on the pleasure boat going across Lake Ashi. A Japanese youth sitting front and center lights a cigarette. I wonder what he is thinking as he looks past the bow of the ship toward the mass of lights where we will disembark. Most of the passengers have retreated inside to the warmth of the cabins.



Our tour group eventually breaks up. Half of the group will return by bus to their hotels, the rest of us are given Shinkansen (bullet train) tickets to Tokyo Station because we paid more to get back faster. But there will be no one to help us get back to our hotels at Tokyo Station - Japan Railways' largest train station - a complex maze of transportation links and stores. A couple of people are resigned to taking taxis back to their hotels, if only they could remember the

addresses. A fellow American traveling with her mother and grandmother shows me how to take the train back to my hotel, located fortunately across from a major train station.

SUNDAY, NOV. 19

Tremulously I return to Tokyo Station to exchange my Japan Rail Pass voucher for the pass, which I should have done at the airport. I place a telephone call to a friend of a mutual friend. We will spend the day in Kamakura visiting the Great Buddha and surrounding temples and shrines. I put 10 yen into the phone. Our conversation cuts off mid-sentence after a minute. I put in 100 yen and hope that will be enough.

In Kamakura I watch a toddler leave his tracks in a Zen rock and sand garden while his mother gently calls his name, oblivious to what is happening behind her. I thoroughly enjoy my visit to this site of Japan's first military government, mostly because I'm sharing the adventure with a new friend who knows her way around the place.

MONDAY, NOV. 20

I revisit Tokyo Tower, stopping along the way at Sengakuji Temple where 47 legendary samurai lie buried. Every Japanese boy and girl knows the story of the loyal and courageous samurai who were ordered to commit ritual suicide after avenging the death of their unjustly humiliated master. I have the 47 men to myself in the mist and rain since it is still early morning. After a tour bus unloads, the air fills with fragrant clouds of burning incense.

That afternoon I have a reunion with a former English student in Ueno Park. Tokyo National Museum is closed, so we head for an onsen (hot

spring bath) she heard about. We soak naked and undisturbed in a steaming pool outside. The heat relaxes my aching leg muscles, sore from walking from my hotel in Shinagawa to Tokyo Tower to Hamamatsucho Station. As I gaze upward, the light rain falling on my face and shoulders is cool and soothing.

TUESDAY, NOV. 21

The next few days after Tokyo I am always on a train going somewhere. The Japan Rail Pass is handy because most of the time I need only flash the pass at the station clerks. Train seat reservations are easy to obtain because it is off-season.

I head north first from Tokyo. In Yamadera I determinedly climb the thousand stone steps to the top of Risshakuji (Yamadera) Temple. I now understand Matsuo Basho's famous haiku poem about the powerful peace enveloping the temple: "The silence is so complete that even the song of the cicadas is absorbed into the rocks" (trans. Kanno and O'Keefe, p. 480). My sister later comments the endorphins probably kicked in from the climb. As I take a break on the highest step, the sun peeks warmly through the clouds.

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 22

Leaving my hotel in Aomori - at the northern end of Japan's largest island Honshu - I am surprised to see it is snowing. The flakes melt as soon as they hit the ground.

Why do I venture this far north? Looking out the train window at the imposing untamed frontier of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, I find my answer. The wild creative spirit of life, the impulse, still exists here.

I travel into Hokkaido as far as Shiraoi, where a well-known Ainu folklore museum exists, where it's already dark and everything is, of course, closed. Disappointed and waiting for a southbound train, I note everything I'm wearing is slightly damp and is starting to smell.

Headed for Hakodate to catch a train to Honshu via the undersea tunnel, I get off a stop too early and the station closes before I realize my mistake. Feeling really pissed off, I stubbornly walk the distance from the station to the JR Hakodate Station, though I easily could have taken a taxi. The walk takes 45 minutes.

The JR Hakodate station is now closing. The station clerk doesn't throw me out because I have a pass and I will be catching the 3 a.m. train to Honshu. I spend the next few hours flipping through S. Sheba's book *JAPANESE IN 3 WEEKS*. I move to the women's restroom to warm myself against a radiator there. A small, old homeless woman is curled up asleep in the luggage rack beside me. I don't sleep that night.

THURSDAY, NOV. 23

There was a point I could close my eyes and still see the forests of the Tohoku region (northern Honshu) flashing by from the train window.

When I reach the youth hostel at Tenshoji Temple in Takayama, I go to bed early. I am awakened only once by the early morning chanting of a Japanese-Brazilian sharing the room with myself, two Australians, and a native Japanese.

FRIDAY, NOV. 24

Takayama, a "Little Kyoto" situated in the Japanese Alps, becomes my favorite city as most sights are within walking distance of each other. Coming back from Hida Folk Village, I hear the joyful squeals of young

children. I turn the corner to see a teacher scooping up an armful of brilliant red and orange maple leaves from the path to toss into the air. The children with their bright yellow hats gleefully follow her lead.

I reach Hiroshima that evening and view the Atomic Bomb Dome at its eeriest and loneliest, and return to the train station via the city's vibrant, electronically flashing downtown area. Is it just coincidence I arrived in Hiroshima riding the thirteenth car and I'm leaving Hiroshima from track thirteen?

I sleep in Shin-Osaka, a point almost midway between Hiroshima and Tokyo. It's the best the station clerk can do for me at that time of night. All the morning trains from Hiroshima to Tokyo are booked, but I'll be able to catch a train to Tokyo Station from Shin-Osaka, then from Tokyo Station to Narita Airport. I breathe a sigh of relief as I have to check in at the airport before tomorrow evening. I might make it back to the U.S. after all, I smile to myself.

RECOMMENDED WEB SITES FOR SOLO WOMAN TRAVELERS:

Budget Travel: Women Travel Info; Internet resources for woman traveler.

<http://www.budgettravel.com/women.htm>

Connecting: Solo Travel Network

<http://www.cstn.org/>

<http://www.earthwisdom.com/>

Magical Places: A photographic journey by artist and solo woman traveler Ellen McDonough.

HERmail.net: Connecting traveling women around the world.

<http://www.HERmail.net/>

Journeywoman: The Premier Travel Resource for Women

<http://www.journeywoman.com/>

Traveling Women: Resources for the Woman Traveler

<http://www.travelingwomen.com/>

Her Own Way: Advice for the Woman Traveler 2000, published by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

http://voyage.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/consular/Her_Own_Way-e.HTM

Kat Avila has an M.A. in Communication from University of California, San Diego, and is of Japanese and Mexican-Indian ethnicity. She has a website devoted to Chicano/Latino theater and Asian-American theater at <http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>. Feel free to drop her a line at kavila0@sm.ivc.cc.ca.us.

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