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Guesthouse Living Isn't for Everyone

Learning what is important to make a place home

By Kat Avila | Web Published 12.5.2003

I guess our first experience with group living is with the household unit we were born into - our parents, maybe grandparents, a brother or sister, or more. We learned that particular types of behavior would guarantee a certain amount of harmony or disharmony within the group.

Next, maybe our next experience is at summer camp, a college dorm, or a military barracks. Our parents were replaced by other authority figures, sometimes our peers. And we learned other ways to cope.

The reason I bring this up is because in recent years I've been in a number of group/paired living situations. I've lived at the YWCA, with my sister, as part of a household with a private entry room, and, most recently in Japan, in a coed "gaijin house" (foreigner guesthouse) and in a women's dorm with Japanese roommates. Sure, I wouldn't mind having my own place, but my lean pocketbook says otherwise.

All this shared living hasn't made me an expert on how to get along with everyone, but I've learned what is important to me in order to call a place "home." Namely, a



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certain level of cleanliness and peace.

It seems I've been doing a lot of cleaning lately.

When I moved into a private room at the gaijin house, I immediately noticed the dirt stains on the walls and floors, a healthy growth of mold in the shower stall, unwashed dishes in the kitchen sink, and layers of dust on the venetian blinds and hallway air filters. I didn't dare put anything in the refrigerator.

"You didn't notice the handprint in the middle of the island of dirt above the TV set?" I asked one person after I had wiped down the lounge area walls with bleach. After I had cleaned, no one knew I had done it. If a person had been bothered by the dirt in the first place, like I had been, he or she would have taken care of it already, which leads to an interesting observation.

People have different levels of awareness when it comes to dirt. A cigarette butt in the toilet bowl doesn't raise an eyebrow in some households. One woman who doesn't clean up after herself is too self-absorbed; she'll spot a tiny zit forming on her pretty face before she remembers the mess she left in the kitchen.

Same thing applies to noise. I slept with earplugs almost every night I was at the guesthouse. There was the guy who'd come back home at 3 a.m. to announce, "I'M DRU-U-U-NK!" Another guy relieved his stress by cleaning; unfortunately, he choose the wee hours of the morning to do his scrubbing and rinsing.

"Yes, it bothers me, and Tracy

hasn't been able to sleep the past couple nights. What do you mean what kind of noise? Does it matter? You should be SLEEPING LIKE THE REST OF US! Okay. I'll stop yelling."

There was this really strange smell coming from the kitchen when I moved into the women's dorm. "What smell?" responded one woman quite innocently, while another nodded her head to indicate she understood what I was talking about. I scrubbed mold off the food discards basket, cleaned the drain, rinsed out the waste receptacles, and scrubbed beneath the portable gas oven unit. That wasn't enough, so I cleaned the inside of the fridge (that took a couple days), microwave oven, and toaster oven. Now I'm not so sure how much of the smell came from the kitchen itself and how much from the sort of food my dorm mates eat.

Anyway, I'm happier in the women's dorm. I haven't had to wear earplugs to go to sleep. I don't have to listen to guys trash talk about girls (paper-thin walls), or put down the toilet seat, or figure out how to inconspicuously discard used tampons. But I do miss the sight of a half-naked resident fresh out of the shower in my doorway with a half-cocked smile on his face.

Kat Avila is still in Tokyo meeting interesting people like Shinji, the owner of a beachside cafe & bar who can speak Spanish and Portuguese fluently because he spent three years in South America.

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(323) 259-0388 Fax (310) 496-2972 info@latinola.com

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