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## Passing Time in Japan

*It's going to be an interesting year*

By Kat Avila | Web Published 5.18.2003

"Ni soy coreano,  
Ni soy japones,  
Yo soy desarraigado.  
Fly, Daddy, fly."

--an advertisement on a train in Tokyo



Web latinola.com



The sakura (cherry blossoms) are gone. They disappeared days after I arrived in Tokyo, Japan, before I had a chance to really enjoy them. During Golden Week (spring vacation), I headed north to chase the late-blooming cherry blossoms.

dusk in Nikko:  
sakura twirling quickly  
toward the deep green pond

sakura petals  
twisting in the wind  
caught by a spider's web

bees in the cherry tree  
busy kicking  
the petals away

In Nikko, I sit on the stone steps leading to the alien and gigantic Sanbutsu-do Hall of Rinnoji Temple. Except for an occasional passerby, I am by myself, for it is early evening and all the tourists have retreated. Only ten minutes away is the riverside youth hostel where I have left my backpack.

There is a certain nobility of spirit you experience when you are surrounded by great natural beauty and impressive spiritual architecture. For my restless

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mind and heart, it is all extremely calming and soothing. I tune in to the rush of falling water and a strange bird's song. But it's not the bird that is out of place, is it? After all, I'm the foreigner here.

I will be here for a year, according to the contract I signed with an English-language school. For now, I'm taking it day by day. The job is demanding and unpredictable. I was thrown to the lions after a teacher quit after one week. Another teacher was recently sacked after being blamed for students dropping out. I try to keep my goals in front of me: to become a better writer and to save up enough money to revisit Mexico.

The presence of Latino art and culture can surprisingly be found in Tokyo without too much difficulty. At the National Science Museum, I pushed my way through the crowds at the "Maya: Kingdoms of Mystery" exhibit. There was a 50-minute wait just to get inside.

At the Tokyo International Book Fair, I spoke with the director of the Portuguese Cultural Center. He told me by the year 2005 Portuguese will be the second most spoken foreign language in Japan after English. This is partly because of the large immigration of third- and fourth-generation Japanese Brazilians to Japan.

The Japan I'm encountering is not the Japan you read about in books, but a society struggling with the changes brought about by people moving around the globe. It's not much unlike what California is experiencing - the collision of different cultures and the sociocultural changes they effect.

Ancient and modern Japan - it's a good time to be here. You can still see the occasional kimono-wearing Japanese woman, but there's also the punky looking kindergartener with his hair dyed blonde. Next to the noble Buddhist temple there's a boxy, gray apartment

building. Yep, it's going to be an interesting year.

silent temple bell  
the last sakura  
clinging to the branches

*Kat Avila has been in Tokyo, Japan, since early April. She maintains a web site on Chicano and Asian American theatre at [www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia](http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia).*

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