

# Eigo O Hanashimasu-Ka?

(Do you speak English?)

Well, I am finally sitting down to write the dreaded form letter... dreaded by many of you... but much more reasonable for me. There are so many things to talk about... it's hard to know where to start. Some of this letter will be meaningless ramble... so please don't get frustrated... read on... you will probably find some part of it to be interesting.

As might be expected... some of my experiences have been similar to the stereotypical descriptions that people present of Japan. However, for the most part, I have been surprised at the way things work. It's true that Japan is a fairly homogeneous/conformist society... BUT, that only applies to about 80% of the people. There are similar independent/wild people as in America... just the non-conformist attitude is a smaller element of society. For example, I spent a day among hundreds of punk teenagers in the Shibuya district of Tokyo... whereas I have only seen a few around Osaka.

Tonite, I had dinner with the general manager of the Tokyo R+D office. His home is about a 4 minute walk from the apartment where I live.

## Apartment

My apartment has turned out to be fairly\* nice... the company provided us with a lot of their new high tech products... the clothes washer is also capable of controlling nuclear reactors (it has an LED readout for time, water level, status, and several automatic features such as starting the wash at a certain time.) The air conditioner has a remote control... they gave us a "Flat Antenna" which receives satellite broadcasts. The shower on the other hand is kinda low tech. They do not have a central hot water heater for the house... so there is a special hot water heater for the bath tub / shower. The basic

operation includes holding control handles for unspecified amounts of time, constantly changing the hot-cold water mix, and bowing three times while facing east in deference to OG (the Osaka Gas hot water god). I believe that I have figured out the system... but I still have times of bitterly cold or screaming hot water flashes.

## Transportation

Public transportation here is phenomenal. For those of you who have experienced the public transportation in Europe or possibly the East coast, the next information will not really surprise you. However us California grown bodies have never really seen (let alone used) public transportation. The basic idea is that there are buses, trains, and subways that go just about everywhere. And everyone uses them. To get to work, I take a bus that stops almost right outside my door. It takes about 10 minutes to get to the train station. From there, I ride about 20 minutes on a local train. My stop is right across from the company. The system is very efficient and fairly fast... but it can be very crowded! I can not think of a time when I have ever been so close to so many people... Just when you think it is crowded and not another person could fit in, they stop at a station and stuff another 20 people into your section. This is the time when your brief case is transformed from a useful device for carrying papers, into a shield for future generations. For you physicists out there... the morning subway ride would be an interesting study in particle dynamics and fluid flow.

But I have digressed... I was saying the public transportation is great. We went to Tokyo recently entirely on public transportation. We never walked more than 2 minutes between forms of transportation during our entire trip.

This also gave us an experience on the Shinkansen (Bullet train) that was fairly impressive at over 120 miles per hour. So far, I have not needed a car... and it looks like that if I had one it would be a real pain to drive and park.

## Shopping

So far, shopping has not been too much of a traumatic experience. Probably the biggest difference is in the food stores. They do have supermarkets... but they are not stocked with the same type of items. Some American products can be found such as Nabisco, Green Giant, and Procter & Gamble... and there are fairly reasonable substitutes for most other things. Rice is approximately 5 times what it costs in the USA... the farmers have a strong hold on the government. As far as purchasing household items and furniture.. it's nearly the same as the US... except that the furniture is smaller.

## Eating

Japanese food in America is a fairly good rendition of good Japanese food in Japan. An equivalent meal in Japan is slightly more expensive. Day to day eating is a little less lavish. Most lunches and Y500 dinners consist of Soba or Udon which are brownish noodles thicker than Top Romen. Usually some vegetables, meat or tempura is thrown in for taste and protein.

## Local stores.

Instead of big chain stores, most of the stores are smaller neighborhood store. They offer excellent service, and are very willing to help gaijin even though there is often times a fairly significant communication barrier. If you buy anything of size... they will deliver it to your home free of charge... provided you can communicate your address to them... it helps to have it written down before hand. I have also found that if your purchase totals over Y10,000, they will round the price down to the nearest Y1000.

## Napkins / Tissues / Handkerchiefs

Now you would think that such a simple and useful device would be found in any civilized country... but here

### Home:

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Shimizudani-Corpo  
23-3-303 Suehiro-cho  
Neyagawa-shi, Osaka 572  
JAPAN  
TEL 011-81-720-34-0781  
FAX (same) 11pm-7am JST  
JST=PST+17 hours

### Work:

Stephen Palm  
Information & Communication R&D  
Lab  
Matsushita Electric Works, Ltd.  
1048 Kadoma  
Kadoma-shi, Osaka 571  
JAPAN  
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in Japan it is somewhat of a luxury. Now what I am taking about here is paper napkins. Only certain *nice* restaurants have them... and most establishments including the company cafeteria do not. Some restaurants provide a moist wash cloth at the beginning of the meal that can be substituted as a wiping utensil during the meal... but it's use seems to be somewhat of a faux pas. Now this trend also carries itself into the restrooms... there are no paper towels to accompany the sinks (no air dryers either). For the restrooms, you are expected to carry your own handkerchief with you at all time to use in the restrooms. And heaven forbid... don't ever sneeze or blow your nose into your handkerchief... you will surely receive surprised/icy stares from people who wonder why you are soiling your hand wiper. So the moral is... don't get anything on your face while eating... and never sneeze. The later is especially important in crowded subways where you have no possible way to get your hand up to cover your mouth!

The flip side to this is Kleenex or facial tissues for you trademark sensitive people. It apparently is one of the largest methods of advertisement in Japan. If you are riding in a taxi, the driver will give you a little packet of tissues when you get in. When you are waking in the street, people will hand out packs of tissues. Today I got a packet of tissues in the mail with an advertisement. They passed out tissues in the train station during national safety week. Tissues, tissues, tissues... but no paper towels. Well maybe you have figured it out by now... I sometimes use tissues as paper towels... seems to work... hope I am not offending too many people.

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## Uniforms

I know the picture is not too good... but try to imagine what a Texaco Gas Station uniform looked like 10 years ago. You get the idea. They are rather drab and ill fitting. Well.. we wear these uniforms everyday at work. everyone does...except the people in the Semiconductor Lab... they were uniforms that look like dental hygienists... I guess things could be worse for me. Anyways, the procedure is to get completely dressed in the morning with a tie and possibly a suit... go to work... change into the uniform... work... change back... go home. In my mind, it would be easier just to put the uniform on in the beginning. But from the otherside, it is nice to see nicely dressed people when I am commuting into work. The women here dress much

nicer than what you see in Pittsburgh... about the same as nice California clothes... but the women of Japan is another story.

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## Freshmen

Today I learned about one of the duties of new employees or "freshmen" at the company. This isn't hazing... but it resembles pledging in a fraternity. There are some things that freshmen are expected to do. One of them is doing company chores. The existing freshmen took great amusement in showing the gaijin freshmen the ropes. A little after 5 this evening, a bucket of brooms was produced, and through broken English and Japanese... we were asked to please help sweep the floors. Next week, and every third week, we are to show up a half an hour early for work to do some other chores. The nice thing about



having the employees do the company chores is that the managers are out there doing their part too... it's just that freshmen are expected to do a little more.

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Well, I hope I have given you some idea as to what I am up to. I am truly sorry that it is not more personal. I do try to give quick turnaround to personal letters though!

If you are thinking of spending any time in Japan... let me know... I generally have room for people if you stop in Osaka.

Until next time...