

Brenda Elwell writes a popular monthly Single Parent Travel Newsletter available on e-mail through her Web site, www.SingleParentTravel.net. Her new book entitled, "The Single Parent Travel Handbook," is now available and may be ordered through her Web site. A veteran of over thirty years in the travel industry, she has traveled to over 60 countries and 45 states, half of them with her two kids in tow. Brenda may be reached via e-mail at Brenda@SingleParentTravel.net.

In light of the forthcoming holiday season I thought readers would find interesting a single parent travel story about how a non-Christian country celebrates Christmas. Sounds like a contradiction in terms? Yes, but then Japan is a country full of contradictions. Enjoy the story and may you and all your loved ones have a wonderful and warm holiday together, however you celebrate.

SINGING "JINGLE BELLS" IN JAPANESE

It was an inauspicious beginning to our trip. After more than twenty hours of travel time my thirteen-year-old son and I arrived at Tokyo's Narita Airport in the early evening (Tokyo time). My daughter, having completed her fall semester at Temple University Tokyo, was supposed to be there to greet us. The three of us were to spend a week touring Japan followed by a week of sightseeing in Hong Kong. After waiting anxiously for twenty minutes, I left my young son with the luggage (I knew he was safe in Japan) and began scouring the length of the airport searching for my daughter. Although I am a confident world traveler, it is always disconcerting, after a long flight, to arrive in a country where you are completely and utterly illiterate. Other than the symbol for the Ladies Room, I was clueless concerning the signs posted around me, all in Japanese characters. My daughter was to be our interpreter. Where was she?

Our travel plans had been carefully calculated and coordinated. My twenty-year-old daughter had proved to be a reliable and responsible person. What could have gone wrong? Was she all right? I hid my growing concern from my son as we continued to wait. Suddenly, an hour after we had arrived, we heard a voice yelling down the corridor. "Mom, Mom, I'm Here!" The sound of her voice was sweeter than a Beethoven symphony. As we smothered each other with elated hugs and kisses, my daughter explained that she tried out the brand new express train from downtown Tokyo to the airport. There was confusion with the train schedule; she missed one by five minutes and they were running hourly, not every half hour. Now that we were all reunited, my son turned his attention to his favorite topic. "Let's eat," he announced.

The next morning was spent in a beautiful Buddhist temple in the heart of old Tokyo. People were chanting, lighting candles, and throwing coins in a revolving offering box. The smell of incense permeated the air. We joined in and said prayers for our loved ones who would be celebrating Christmas without us this year. My daughter and I towered over the locals surrounding us. We felt like two female Gullivers in a Land of

Lilliputians, but no one seemed to pay us any attention. That evening we took the subway to the famed Ginza District, Tokyo's answer to Times Square. I was pleased and surprised to see the entire area decorated with tinsel and Christmas lights. "How come?" I asked my daughter. "Pay no mind, Mom," she said. "They are only decorations and have no religious significance to the Japanese." She went on to explain that the Japanese will adopt any religious custom that suits their needs. "It is not uncommon for a Japanese person," she said, "to be christened in a Shinto shrine, married in a Christian style ceremony, and later buried as a Buddhist.

" The following day we headed off to Tokyo Disneyland. It was a cold and bitterly damp day but we were dressed for it with warm coats, hats and gloves. Disneyland was covered in Christmas spirit. Every building was decorated with a holiday theme and all the Disney employees wore Santa caps. One of the things you immediately notice about the Japanese people is that they are always impeccably and appropriately dressed. The small parties of attractive young men and women were wearing warm wool jackets and slacks, coupled with color-coordinated woolen scarves, hats and gloves. As we stood in line I noticed something else. Those young women who were with a date were wearing tailored wool suits, high heels, and no overcoat. They looked cold. Stranger still, their male companions were dressed appropriately in slacks and warm coats. Turning to my daughter, I quietly asked why. My daughter replied, "In the Japanese culture it is expected that the woman will look "perfect" for her man, even if it means suffering discomfort. To wear a coat would spoil the look of her suit."

Finally we got to the front of the line and entered Bear Country USA. As the familiar music started and the computer-operated moose and reindeer heads began to move, I was unprepared to hear these Disney creatures begin singing "Jingle Bells" in Japanese. It was one of those delightful quirky memories of Christmas in Japan that will stay with us forever.

The next morning we rode the famous bullet train past snow-capped Mt. Fuji to the ancient city of Kyoto. We settled into our budget-priced ryokan (Japanese inn) and attempted to do a laundry. Key word here is attempted. In Japan it is easy to find a workable clothes washer but almost impossible to find a decent dryer. Where available, they do not work, and when they work they are too small and too inefficient to dry more than one pair of jeans at a time and even that took an hour and many coins. In this land of state-of-the-art technology, it was another of Japan's contradictions.

That evening was Christmas Eve. The weather, although cold, was dry and pleasant. To celebrate we visited a well-known Shinto shrine, commonly known as the Love Temple, located high on a hill overlooking Kyoto. Surrounding the temple were many free boardwalk-type attractions that measured your "love quotient" and were great fun. One of them required you to walk about thirty feet from one large stone to another with your eyes closed. The direction your feet headed determined the future of your life. My daughter was able to translate some of the Japanese characters. We recruited help from

the locals for those that were indecipherable. Everyone was in a festive mood and eager to help us.

I remarked to my daughter that most of the people we saw were young couples, many of whom were outwardly displaying affection toward one another, a very rare occurrence in Japan. "Oh yeah, Mom, I forgot to tell you. Christmas Eve is Love Night in Japan. If a young man secures a date on Love Night he can expect his date will go to bed with him. It is part of their culture. Unmarried men book a hotel room a year ahead hoping they will find a date for that night."

When Christmas Day dawned the kids and I exchanged the few meager gifts we had brought along on the trip. It was cold and rainy and the room in our ryokan was damp and spartan. My son remarked that it didn't feel like Christmas. He missed the festivities and the warmth of the extended family around him. For the past thirteen years we had hosted our annual family gathering on Christmas Day. Hoping to lift his spirits I suggested a walk around town. Much to our surprise everyone was back at work as if it were a normal day. Offices and shops were filled with "Christmas Cakes" that had hearts on top. The Christmas holiday had now taken on the appearance of Valentine's Day and all those "lovey-dovey" couples were busy exchanging pieces of cake.

In a last ditch attempt to cheer us up I began singing the opening refrain of "Jingle Bells," in fractured Japanese. Pretty soon we were all laughing and singing together. Hong Kong lay before us and we knew what to expect from the Chinese on New Year's Eve: Lots of fireworks. All we had to do was toot our horns.

AUTHOR'S NOTE #1: If you are planning to entertain some Japanese friends for Christmas dinner and want to make a hit with your guests or simply want to put a new twist into your Christmas Carol singing, here are the words to "Jingle Bells" in Japanese.

Yuki o keru, noyama o koete,
suberiyuku karui sori.
Utage mo takaraka ni.
Kokoro mo isamu yo.
Sori no asobi.
Jinguru beru.
Jinguru beru.
Suzu ga naru.
Kyoo mo tanoshii sori no asobi.
O! Jinguru beru.
Jinguru beru.
Suzu ga naru.
Saa, ikoo yo!
Sori no asobi.