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Growing up, there were times when Japan seemed to be the fountainhead of everything I loved. At the age of 7, I was watching Dragon Ball Z obsessively at friends' houses; at 12, I spent weekends devouring manga at my local library. Japan was the home of Nintendo, of Pokémon and Mario and Zelda – games I shared hours of my childhood with. A few years down the line, it was the literature that grabbed me, then, later still, the art and the street fashion. In recent years, as a runner, Japan's development into a distance running powerhouse has drawn me to it yet again.

Suffice it to say, I've been eager to visit the country for quite a while. The Japanese Language and Studies Programme at Nihon University looked the perfect opportunity: 3 months living in Tokyo, meeting new people, exploring, learning the language, and so on. It didn't disappoint.

The many public holidays that fell in September and November aside, my beginners' class of roughly 10 students from around the world had Japanese lessons every weekday morning. We'd squeeze onto the packed and silent commuter trains and arrive at the language school for 9. The lessons were generally good, the teachers lovely, and we made quick progress – helped by conversation classes with Japanese volunteers and the odd afternoon lesson.

In the afternoons and evenings, we explored: gawping at the madness of Akihabara, getting lost in the maze of Shinjuku station (the busiest in the world), and braving the neon-flooded Shibuya crossing. With the Japanese volunteers often leading the way, we picnicked in Yoyogi Park, nomihōdai-ed at izakayas, and spent nights in Shinjuku karaoke bars after missing the last train home.

The weekends, too, were free for us to use how we liked. Perhaps inevitably, these proved some of the highlights. A group of us attempted to climb Mount Fuji out of season, but were thwarted by snow. We went to a festival celebrating soba noodles in Nikko – with another mountain trek thrown in for good measure. I spent a weekend wandering around Kyoto, marvelling at the old imperial capital's temples and gardens. Other, more local trips took us to the likes of Kamakura, Hakone, Mount Takao, and Yokohama.

It was my day-to-day existence in Tokyo that I look back on most fondly now, though. The food definitely helped: my almost daily bowl of hot soba noodles for lunch, the cheap and hearty ramen you could find behind every other shop front, sushi at the incredible Tsukiji fish market (a must-visit early one morning), yakitori from the vendors along the delightfully named "Piss Alley", okonomiyaki which you cooked yourself on hot plates in the middle of tables... Then there were the delights of the konbini ("convenience stores") that stood on every street corner: onigiri, melon bread, nikuman... As a food tour alone it would have been second-to-none.

Even more than the food, though, I think it was the general sense of being able to make a life for yourself in such a foreign environment that I loved. After about 6 weeks, the language started taking shape in my head and I could at least understand one in every 25 words said to me. I could survive in a restaurant without English, and was soon recognised as a regular at some (not hard when you're one of only a handful of blond people in the city, I suppose). I swiped through ticket barriers with my commuter pass without a second thought, and had joined a local running club.

This sense of feeling at home, though, would have been very difficult but for the people. In almost every situation I can remember, in Tokyo and beyond, the people I met – even those I dealt with in shops and restaurants – were faultlessly polite and welcoming. I rarely felt uncomfortable, and quickly had the sense I'd been accepted into the seething throng of this city with over 37 million inhabitants. Most welcoming of all were the volunteers, and I became good friends with many. I have little doubt we'll stay in touch, and that this will be only the start of my relationship with Japan.