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Finding solace in the streets of Tokyo

I used to think finding yourself in another country was the most cliché among all clichés until it happened to me. Back in 2017, my *Angkong* randomly surprised me with a ticket for me and my mum to Tokyo, Japan that was set out to fly the day after, saying that I needed to go “soul-searching”. As an angsty 17-year-old teenager, I repeatedly told him that I didn’t think going to another country was going to help me feel any better. When I realized I was not getting out of the trip, it dawned on me that this would be my first time traveling without my dad, much more my first time traveling with a budget. Accustomed to the comforts of luxury when traveling, I found myself dreading the 5-day trip thinking it would bring about unnecessary stress. What I didn’t know was that being stripped of the comforts I was craving for was the reason why the journey I was about to embark on would be the most memorable trip I ever had.

Finding adventure in being lost in Japan

The feeling of dread left me as soon as I saw the huge Narita International Airport. As I enthusiastically answered the questions at the immigration station, I cheerfully said *kansamnidah* to say thank you in their language, earning a look of disdain from the officer in charge. Then I realized: I should’ve said *arigatōgozaimashita!* Laughing at my little mishap, I figured that this trip was going to be full of these small and mundane mistakes.

As someone who’s grown accustomed to car rides with barely any experience in riding public transportation, I felt like the elaborate train system of Tokyo was going to swallow me whole. It was already confusing enough that there were different kinds of trains, but what made it

worse was that each of those trains had its respective routes categorized by lines, colors, and dots with instructions I could not read.

My mum and I hopped on the train that was supposed to take us to APA Hotel in a place I have never heard of called Sugamo with a handful of luggage. There were quite a few senior citizens, most of them being men in suits who were coming home from work. I kept wondering how they were staying still since the train was so fast compared to the MRT in Manila. After getting off the wrong stops and wasting the credit on our Suicas, Japan's prepaid transportation cards, a Japanese local who could speak in English overheard my mum and me trying to figure out the train system. Thanks to her suggestion to use an app that helps you navigate the train systems, my mum and I eventually reached our hotel at 11 PM.

For the next 3 days of our trip, my mum and I explored all the places that we could. During the day, as a part of the tour packages we availed of, we visited picturesque destinations like Mount Fuji, Lake Ashi, a small town called Hakone, Meiji Shrine, Tokyo Skytower, the Imperial Palace Gardens, and a Buddhist temple in Asakusa called Sensō-ji. Being in an unfamiliar place learning its history and the way things work with the help of locals like Alice, our tour guide, while also meeting people who are from completely different places than where you come from, was arguably one of the best parts of the trip given how much you learn in such a short span of time.

As soon as the tour would end, my mum and I visited other parts of Tokyo like Shibuya, Ginza, Odaiba, and Harajuku to eat and shop. Though we had to be mindful of the money we spent, we couldn't help ourselves from splurging as we entered department stores like Don Quixote because of the cheap prices and amazing variety. The giant Muji and Itoya stores in

Ginza were impossible to resist especially since I'm into bullet journaling. Tokyo is also filled with novelty stores like the Awesome Store in Shibuya and Johnny's Shop in Harajuku.

An equally important experience is the food in Japan. Since most of our itinerary consisted of sightseeing, we would just eat wherever we happened to be. Although most of our meals were rushed, all of the food exceeded our expectations, from fast-food stores like Yoshinoya, takoyaki from a pop-up store, and the crepes in Harajuku all the way to the sandwiches from Family Mart and the ramen in a small stall at the train station. The one time my mum and I did plan our meal was for our last dinner to cap off our trip at a fresh sushi store in Shibuya that was ranked #1 on TripAdvisor, which also meant that the queue was long and the food was pricey. Though we've barely scratched the surface of the food Japan offers, one thing is for sure: it is renowned for a reason.

Though I didn't return to the Philippines feeling like I found myself, I found comfort in knowing that there was so much I was left to experience outside of the world I've grown accustomed to. As I boarded the plane to leave the land of the rising sun, I felt the same way I do every time I see a sunrise — a certain sense of solace knowing that new beginnings and experiences await us outside of our small corners of the world. It was definitely the best trip of my life, so I'd give it a 10 out of 10.

As we continue to be stuck in quarantine, I find myself looking forward to the day where I will be exploring the places I daydream about where I can create new experiences, namely South Korea. I often find myself playing Future by Red Velvet while pretending I'm walking the streets of Myeongdong. Though much remains uncertain on the future of traveling post-COVID, the idea of just being able to see the world again is enough for me.