



## WHAT I MISS ABOUT JAPAN THE MOST (WHEN I'M AWAY)

Article | Chris Broad

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By Chris Broad

**H**aving spent the last few weeks on a top secret mission to Europe (that everyone knows about), there's no doubt I've missed Japan along the way.

With five years of living in Japan under my belt, the country very much feels like my home now. Consequently, I've adapted to the point of not just experiencing reverse culture shock, but even at times, feeling a sense of despair in the absence of certain aspects of the culture.

Coming somewhere near the top of this list are convenience stores, which still don't exist on the streets of the UK. It's devastating at 11pm when you feel a pang of hunger, only to realise there's no 24 hour convenience store nearby with which to serve you the fried chicken you so desire and deserve.

Following closely near the top of this list is missing the feeling of security when it comes to leaving your unguarded possessions in public. No sooner had I arrived in London last month, my taxi driver regaled a story of how he'd left his van running while he briefly went into a petrol station shop, only to find, upon his return, the van had magically disappeared.

Then there's the sensation of entering a shop in Japan and being treated like a God. I still recall purchasing my first mobile phone in Japan, an event so significant, that the staff got down on to their knees and held it out to me, as though bequeathing me a blade forged in the fires of Mount Doom.

When being handed my first mobile phone in the UK, the staff accidentally dropped it on the floor.

Then there's the threat of having your schedule ruined by lacklustre transport, from late trains to buses that never come. Even planes are rubbish.

Just the other week, Natsuki and I went to catch a flight to Paris from London, only to find shortly before our flight, that the airline (bloody British Airways) had cancelled all the flights for the next two days, because somebody in a room had tripped over an internet cable. Brilliant.

Frustrated, we then went to rent a car to drive to Paris instead, and even that took over 90 minutes of careful negotiations - nothing less than a fucking summit - before we had a car at our disposal.

Rent a car in Japan and you'll be in and out in roughly four minutes, all the while being carefully ushered around by an entourage of disciplined staff.

And yet, all of these things pale in comparison to the thing I miss the most; something far greater than all of the above combined.

Walk into a building anywhere in most of the world right now and you'll no doubt hear Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You" playing unquestionably on repeat, over and over, until song lyrics like "*We talk for hours and hours about the sweet and the sour*" and "*Your love was handmade for somebody like me*" are well and truly burned into your eardrums.

Having spent the last week commuting through four European countries, I've experienced this very song no less than ten times a day, every single day, to the point I've come to despise the song and even the precious, angelic Ed Sheeran.

Walk into a building in Japan though and you'll hear a George Michael song from the mid 80's, and lyrics such as "*Wake me up before you go go*" and "*I'm never gonna dance again, guilty feet have got no rhythm.*"

And whilst those lyrics may not be much better than an Ed Sheeran song, I couldn't care less. Hearing a George Michael song helps support my daily illusion that I'm in the 1980's.

In Japan you live in a bubble - a bubble where modern pop culture trends that sweep the rest of the globe, are beautifully absent. Ask a Japanese person what the X-Factor or Kim Kardashian is, and they won't have a clue. For all they know the X-Factor could be a popular western brand of washing up liquid, and Kim Kardashian the name of a silly cartoon bear in Ireland.

All of the endlessly repetitive pop trends of the western world, all of the gossip magazines, and tabloid news remain absent - and if there are western pop culture trends they're from 30 years ago.

To leave Japan is to leave the 1980's bubble and to shatter that precious illusion. And who wouldn't want to live in the time of The Karate Kid and The Empire Strikes Back?

"But wait!" you'll protest. "Japan is in the future! They've got a bullet train and food on conveyor belts."

"What about the Fax Machines?" I'll retort with a sly expression, arguing that the Shinkansen was invented and rolled across Japan in the late 1960's - it's just the rest of the world didn't need it - and conveyor belt food is inedible at best. Whilst conveyor belts are widely used in sushi restaurants, most sensible customers still order their food fresh, rather than grab a food item that's being going around a room in circles for 45 minutes under the noses of dozens of fellow customers.

The truth about Japan is many aspects of its culture remain stuck in the past.

A vast amount of the population find computers incomprehensible wizard magic, made by people in America. Ownership of personal computers in Japan is far lower than in the west.

Cash is still king in Japan, where it's not uncommon to find paying by card to be difficult in many smaller stores and online banking the subject of suspicion. In fact, many of my Japanese friends believe online banking means their savings are vulnerable to naughty pirates in distant Africa, and thus choose to avoid it altogether.

Instead most banking transactions are conducted on on giant ATM's that look like props from 2001: A Space Odyssey.

And as the rest of the world turns to digital media consumption, CD's and records remain phenomenally popular in Japan. In the US, roughly 24% of all music sales are through physical music formats. Japan on the other hand remains a world away, with a remarkable 75% of music sales in the form of CD's or Vinyl.

Incredibly, the country even clings to rental stores, with 2,400 stores across the country, renting out DVD's and video games, as the rest of the world looks upon Blockbuster as a thing of the past; a mere faded memory in the shadow of Netflix.

This is often referred to this as 'Galapagos syndrome' - where Japan's relative isolation (akin to the Galapagos Islands) and unique cultural identity, have led industries to cater exclusively for Japanese consumers and trends, with 3G, phone cameras and email emerging years before the rest of the world, whilst also neglecting broader consumer trends sweeping most other nations.

"Galapagos Syndrome" is a bit too vague for me though.

Personally, I like to refer to it as "fucking brilliant syndrome."

Because whilst websites in Japan might look like they were conjured up by children on Microsoft paint, and I can't bank from the comfort of my sofa, I'm nonetheless in a wonderful bubble outside global pop culture trends and news that I don't care about.

Yes of course, Japan has its own pop culture trends, but fortunately, given there are a billion pop groups in Japan, you rarely hear the same songs over and over like in the west - admittedly with the notable exceptions of AKB48 songs "Heavy Rotations" and "Fortune Cookie" in the last few years.

But watch a Japanese movie or anime from the 1980's and you'll find the bars and izakayas (Japanese pubs) of today, still look and sound more or less the same; from the neon lights and background jazz music, to the men in suits hunched over with a cigarette in one hand and a whisky in the other.

I don't advocate smoking (particularly as an asthmatic), but strangely I still find there's something romantically 1980's about people smoking indoors, in a dimly lit bar - even in spite of the lung cancer.

Against this backdrop, I will never get bored of strolling into a bar and hearing Michael Jackson, Wham or Queen either.

I can't say it'll be for everyone, but if you too want to be in the 1980's, or certainly the closest you'll ever be to it, Japan stands as perhaps the world's largest 1980's theme park.

To board a plane to the land of the rising sun is to gloriously transcend both time and space; to enter a bubble detached to most world events.

And frankly, thanks to Ed Sheeran, I can't wait to soon be back within the confines of that precious bubble.

*(If your not currently in Japan, here's a playlist of Japanese 80's funk music I've assembled to help you escape: <https://goo.gl/KoBXtE>)*