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HÉCTOR GARCÍA

The bestselling author of *A GEEK IN JAPAN* and
IKIGAI: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life



The Magic of JAPAN

Secret Places and Life-changing Experiences



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INTRODUCTION

My Fifteen Years in Japan 5

CHAPTER 1

The Magic of Japan 15

- Mr. Casca and Ms. Wonder 16
- Visiting Kiyomizu-dera Temple 18
- Sakura, the Glorious Cherry Blossom 20
- The Magic of Shinto: My Okinawa Wedding 24

CHAPTER 2

The Four Prisms of Japan 27

- The Sakoku Prism 27
- The Prism of Natural Disasters 31
- The Prism of Feudal Structures 37
- The Prism of the Islands of Few Resources 43

CHAPTER 3

Japanese Idiosyncracies 47

- Nekojita and the Art of Slurping 47
- My Top Five Ramen Places in Tokyo 49
- Absurd Jobs? 50
- Queues 51
- Where the Streets Have No Names 52
- Where the Streets Have No Trash Cans 52

CHAPTER 4

Key Cultural Concepts 55

- Collectivism and Individualism 55
- Group Dynamics in Japan 59
- Non-verbal Communication 60
- Physical Contact and Personal Space 63
- The Japanese Bow 64
- The Old and the New 65
- Hansei: Self-reflection 66
- Heishojin: A Calm Mind 69
- Shoshin: A Childlike Heart 71

CHAPTER 5

The Japanese Spirit 75

- The Spirit of Yamato 75
- Fujin Raijin*: A Key Work of Japanese Art 79
- The Soul is in the Belly 80

CHAPTER 6

Religion in Japan 83

- Shinto and Buddhism 83
- Matsuri: Festivals 89
- Shinto in Ghibli's *Spirited Away* 97
- Satoyama and the Gods of Nature 99



CHAPTER 7

The Dark Side of Japan 103

The Yakuza 103

Madogiwa: Ostracism 104

A Shared Lie: Honne and Tatemaie 107

Ijime: Bullying 109

Uwaki: Infidelity 111

CHAPTER 8

The Magic of Tokyo 115

50 Things I Love about Tokyo 116

CHAPTER 9

My Japan Travel Diaries 137

10 Tips for Travelers 138

Karuizawa 142

Fukushima and Miyagi 145

Niiijima Island 150

Gunma: Snow Country 152

Nichitsu Ghost Town 156

Niigata Prefecture 158

Ibaraki and Mito 160

Miyajima 165

Hakone 168

The Izu Peninsula 170

Kusatsu Onsen 172

Ise Grand Shrine 175

Meoto Iwa, the Wedded Rocks 178

CHAPTER 10

More of My Favorite Things 181

Izakaya Restaurants 181

Shiitake Mushrooms 183

Senko Hanabi Fireworks 183

Hasedera Temple in Kamakura 183

Jizo Deities 185

Hiking in Japan 186

Akihabara Radio Center 188

Shisa Lion-Dogs 189

Green Tea 190



“True poetry consists of
leading a beautiful life.
To live poetry is better
than to write it.”

—Matsuo Basho

INTRODUCTION

My Fifteen Years in Japan

It seems like yesterday I landed in Japan for the first time, but it's already been a decade and a half. I was twenty-three when I arrived and ready to devour the world like some wild, fearless cat; now I'm thirty-eight and I look at the world more from the perspective of a bird, observing and analyzing.

Many years have passed, but the burning curiosity that makes me want to understand and continue to explore the culture of this country hasn't diminished in the slightest.

When I arrived in Japan I experienced culture shock as I confronted a society was unfamiliar to me, but now I feel like any other resident of Tokyo. I'm at ease here and I know more or less how things work; you could say that I live within my comfort zone. Now I feel a shock when I get on a plane and travel to other countries and have to deal with non-Japanese cultures.

Japan has become my home. Every time I land at Tokyo's Haneda or Narita Airport, I feel I'm back in the place where my heart belongs.

The first few years as a foreigner here remind you of being a child again, a time when you were encountering life for the first time and couldn't stop asking questions of your parents. Everything is new and exciting; you get the feeling you're exploring a distant planet populated by strange beings. Walking through the streets you can't read even half the signs and notices; your brain is in a

constant state of activity as you try to make sense of this new world.

Everything you come across grabs your attention, from your first magical and unforgettable sighting of Mount Fuji, down to the yellow lines on the sidewalks and the station platforms. If you're a photographer or a designer, the stimulus to your creativity is exhilarating.

There's so much detail, both in the urban landscape and in the countryside, that at first it takes you by surprise and it can be hard to take everything in. What's magical is that feeling of being transported to another dimension.

I'm certain that it's all this newness and unfamiliarity that is so stimulating and seductive for those who've just arrived, and is one of the main reasons why Japan is such an attractive and addictive place to visit – if people travel to Japan once, they're highly likely to come back again.

But eventually, if you settle here, once you get to grips with the language and adapt to your new surroundings, everything gradually becomes more normal and you start to feel like one of the locals. When you've seen Mount Fuji hundreds of times you realize it's always there on the horizon, keeping watch over Tokyo, a regular feature of everyday life.

When that first thrilling stage of being the new

As well as visiting the Ghibli Museum several times, I've also been lucky enough to visit the offices where Hayao Miyazaki and the Studio Ghibli artists work.



The sculpture *Yellow Pumpkin* (1994) by Yayoi Kusama, on the island of Naoshima, has become one of Japan's magical landmarks.

arrival has passed and you want to feel more accepted by society – to be treated like just another member of staff in a Japanese company, for example – that's when you might come up against certain immovable obstacles. I don't use the word "immovable" lightly: I've discovered that appearances can be deceptive and what may seem at first sight to be a very friendly society, is true only superficially and in context.

I've been coming up against closed doors in Japan for years, and have rarely succeeded in opening them. I'm not alone; foreigners who've been here for years have realized that you have to accept the role of *gaijin* ("foreigner," lit., "person from the outside.")

The United States is an example of a more integrationist culture: you can arrive as a foreigner and over the years you can actually become another American. Whereas here nobody will ever call me "Japanese." But I'm not complaining; I've reached the conclusion that it's better that way, because I will always want to be myself.

"I'm turning Japanese" sang pop group the

Vapors in 1980, and you may well feel that way when you first arrive in Japan and you're still exploring the place with an open heart. But I've never turned Japanese in the way the song says, and that's a good thing, because I'm still me, with my own identity, although I'm not the same man I was fifteen years ago. I have to thank this place and its people for having turned me into the person I am now.

Japan fits my personality very well, because I'm not someone who wants to put down roots anywhere. I don't want to be categorized as someone who comes from a certain place, I simply want to be an inhabitant of planet Earth. In this sense Japan is the ideal place for me since I'll always be a "person from the outside."

My home is where my heart is. The physical location of that home is less and less important to me. I'm as happy when I travel as when I come back to Tokyo.

神は細部に宿る

God Is in the Details

As the saying goes in English, “the devil is in the details.” There’s a similar saying in Japanese, but the connotation is more positive: “gods/spirits are in the details,” whose translation I have broken down below. I hesitate when it comes to translating the first word **kami** 神, because the concept of “god” for Japanese people is very different to the Western concept (see chapter 6). The reputation the Japanese have for attention to detail is real at all levels: whether it’s the organization of a city’s streets, product design or human relationships—if you’re a customer in a store, for example, you’ll find yourself treated like royalty.

神は細部細部宿る **kami wa saibu ni yadoru**

神 **kami** *god or spirit*

は **wa** *particle*

細部 **saibu** *details*

に **ni** *particle*

宿る **yadoru** *to dwell*

Of course, I miss my family and my friends. My heart feels torn when I have to choose, but my home is no longer a fixed point for the rest of my life; it travels with me wherever I go.

A Third of My Life in Japan

I arrived in Japan when I was twenty-three, with three hundred euros in my pocket and one suitcase containing some clothes, a few books, and a two-megapixel camera. For the first few months I stayed in an apartment measuring six tatami mats – about a hundred square feet (ten square meters). I’d recently finished my university studies and I had a whole new world before me to discover. Having nothing to lose I thought I was invincible, but at the same time I felt quite lonely; I was surrounded by millions of people, but they were all strangers.

Over the years I’ve made good friends, traveled throughout Japan and other Asian countries finding new and interesting places. I’ve met

Colors, lines, order and the little details let us know we’re in Japan.





extraordinary people and worked in several leading technology companies – one of my most thrilling experiences was to be part of the pioneering group that brought Twitter to Japan.

But what has added a special touch to my life here are certain anecdotal events, moments I would describe as surreal because when I recall them I have the feeling that maybe they never happened.

My friend Rodrigo, who's also been in Tokyo for more than a decade, is always saying to me: "You have to invest in stories."

Some of the best moments from my collection of stories have been my appearances on Japanese television. On a TV program shown by Japan's public broadcaster NHK, I had to eat snake meat in front of the camera and give my opinion on how it tasted. On a show broadcast by the network Fuji TV, I had to play the role of tourist guide around a Tokyo neighborhood for a famous Japanese television personality, taking him to my favorite places.

Which is more beautiful, the reflection or reality? Which is more real? If you live inside the reflection perhaps you'll never know what's beyond, and vice versa. I took this photo on one of my trips to Kyoto's Temple of the Golden Pavilion.

On Tokyo MX news, the newsreader held up my first book, *A Geek in Japan*, and explained that it was the bestselling book abroad about Japan.

Something else that I can hardly believe happened was when one of Japan's most famous theater directors chose a photo from one of my trips to use on the tickets and flyers for his latest work when it was opening at the National Theater of Japan.

An interesting period of my life began thanks to a collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology research laboratory, MIT Media Lab, when I ended up renting a rice-growing plot in Chiba Prefecture to test a system to monitor rice production using IoT devices.

Through a work project, I also had the chance to

meet and have dinner with Masi Oka, the actor who played the legendary character Hiro Nakamura in America's NBC television series *Heroes*.

Many years ago I tried to pursue my dream of working in the video game industry. I had several interviews with Nintendo which seemed to go well, and got as far as what I was told would be the final interview in front of several company executives, where they decided I wasn't the right person for the job.

Eventually I abandoned my childhood ambition of working in games production. But I still remember the Nintendo interviews and I have a story about a couple of badly paid afternoons of work in which I had the honor of voicing one of the characters from the game *Ace Attorney* (*Gyakuten saiban*) for Nintendo DS.

I also had the opportunity to meet Dr Nakamatsu, the person with the highest ever number of patents to his name, even more than Thomas Edison. He met me at his Tokyo mansion and explained his creative process in great detail.

Another extraordinary experience that's close

芸能人 Geinojin

A **geinojin** 芸能人, also known as a **talento** タレント, is a famous personality who often appears on television. Some geinojin start off appearing on TV variety shows, and thanks to that end up becoming well known. Others are people with real talent, such as actors and singers.

One of the largest groups of **geinojin** are comedians, of which there are thousands in Japan. In order to be considered a **geinojin**, you normally have to be signed to an agency, which takes responsibility for nominating you to appear in television programs or at other events.

The literal translation of **geinojin** could be "person with talent," where the meaning of each character is as follows:

芸 **gei** art

能 **no** skill, talent, ability

人 **jin** person

BELOW LEFT The Appearance of my first book, *A Geek in Japan*, on Japanese TV news.



ABOVE RIGHT I spent a day with Dr. Nakamatsu, the most famous Japanese inventor.

外国人・外人

Gaikokujin or Gaijin?

The word **gaikokujin**, or **gaijin** for short, is used to mean foreigner in the Japanese language. The longer version of the word, **gaikokujin**, is more formal, whereas **gaijin** is used in casual situations.

Gaijin is written 外人. The first character 外 means “outside” and the second character 人 means “person.” **Gaikokujin** is written 外国人: the first and last characters are the same as those of **gaijin**, and the middle character 国 means “country” or “region.”

to my heart was meeting Hayao Miyazaki and Toshio Suzuki, founders of Studio Ghibli, my favorite maker of animated movies.

Since the day I first landed at Narita Airport I’ve written about my experiences on a blog at kirainet.com and over the years I’ve published seven books analyzing different aspects of Japan; the one you’re holding is number eight.

Anyone who lives here in Japan, especially in Tokyo, is exposed to a huge number of opportunities if he or she is prepared to move around and look for them.

But life hasn’t always been a bed of roses for me since I came here.

That’s me in the picture, playing music and dancing games with geisha in Niigata. The geisha of Niigata are known as *furumochi geigi*.





I started up a business with a partner and it fell through. Losing the money I'd saved during my first few years in Japan and having to start again from scratch wasn't easy.

As an employee I've also had my low points; in one of the companies I worked for things went badly wrong and I was fired, Japanese style. In chapter 7, I'll tell you what happened in detail.

But these are mere trifles compared with the hardest thing by far, namely fighting a chronic intestinal illness called SIBO which attacks me relentlessly every day. I've been suffering with it for years, and having to deal with the medical system here isn't easy.

Another miserable time was living through the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in 2011 at close quarters. I was in a skyscraper when the earthquake struck and although I was frightened at the time, with hindsight I was never in any imminent danger, being relatively far removed from the earthquake's epicenter and subsequent tsunami. Even so, the dozens of daily aftershocks in Tokyo,

The shallow waters of the Katsura River in Kyoto reflect the green of the surrounding forest, giving the scene a beautiful aura.

and the continuous threat of possible nuclear contamination from the nearby Fukushima plant was enough to put all the city's inhabitants into an intense state of anxiety and fear. Later on, I had the chance to visit the Miyagi and Fukushima coastal towns that had been ravaged by the tsunami; I'll tell you all about it in chapter 9.

But let's put the difficult stories to one side and get back to the good, the positive and the beautiful!

Perhaps my most magical experience was my wedding, at a Shinto shrine by the ocean in Okinawa. The moment when my wife and I addressed the *kami* (gods or spirits) directly, with nobody there to come between us and them, is forever engraved in my heart.

I keep peeling back the thousands of layers of the onion skin which make up this culture. In my first book *A Geek In Japan*, I shared with readers my

observations and reflections on Japanese society. In this new book we'll go deeper, to try to reach the heart of the onion.

Good or not so good, I love this land. Everything I write is a tribute to this place and to the people who live in it.

"What makes you want to stay in Japan?" is one of the questions I've been asked most over recent years. It's not an easy question to answer; I could respond with objective facts, saying that I work here or that I married a Japanese woman. But that's not enough, because I could go somewhere else with my wife and find a new job; I sense that the truth about why I'm still here goes deeper.

Little by little I've reached the conclusion that what keeps me here is the mystery and magic of Japan. To this I'd have to add my endless curiosity as I strive to get to know the soul of this country.

My *ikigai* (reason for being) is to give into my curiosity, to write about what I learn and to communicate it to others. Why do I use the word "magic" and not a different word? Because even when I think that I've found explanations for every Japanese cultural phenomenon, I often end up realizing that things weren't what they seemed and that I was wrong. Suddenly my perspective changes, as though I've been taken in by a magic trick – I thought I knew how it was done, but then I realize that I actually knew nothing.

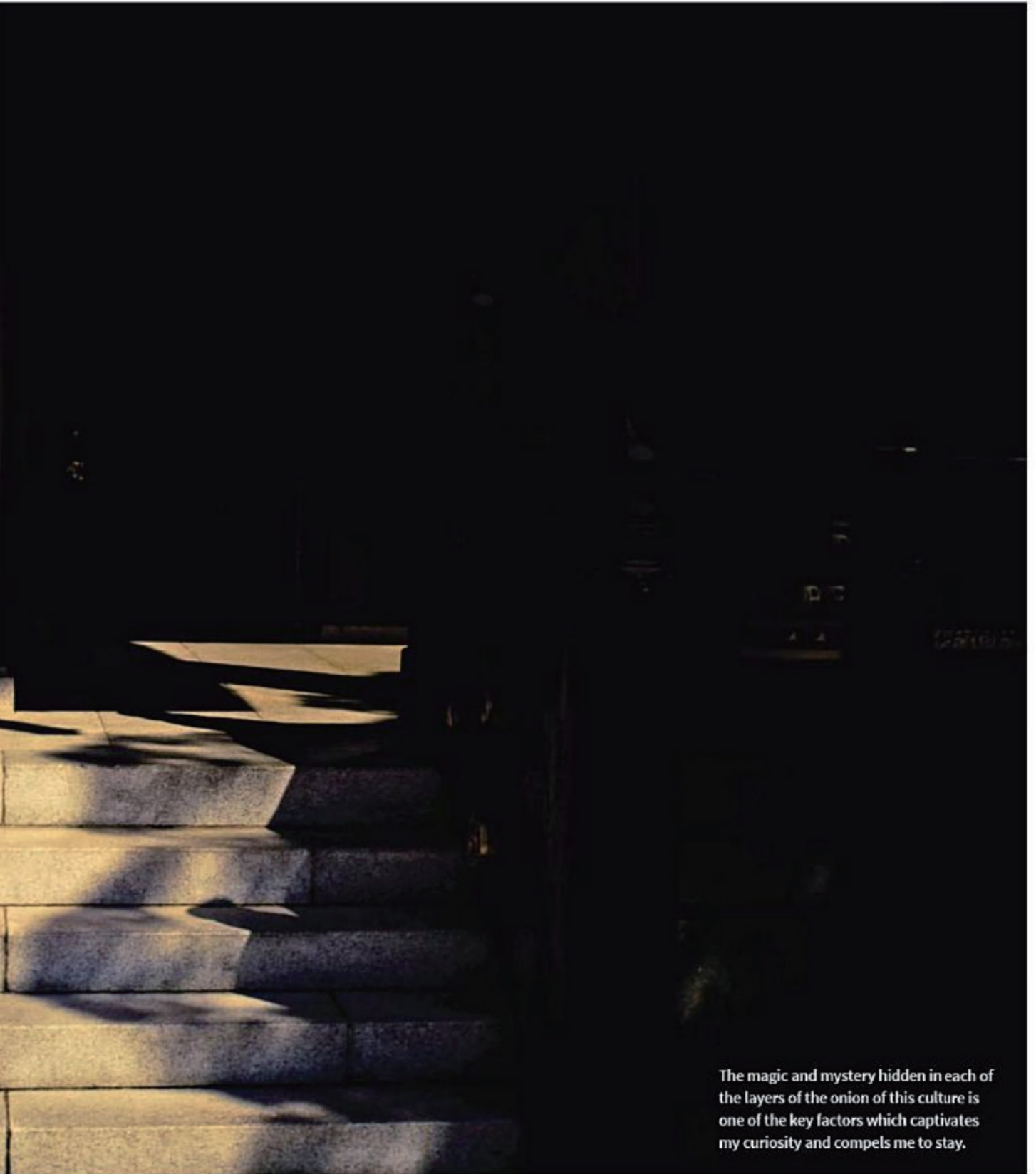
So, the definitive answer to the question "What makes you stay here?" is: *the magic of Japan*.

Dear readers, together let's explore the key concepts that have shaped the Japanese mentality, philosophy and way of life, and discover what it is that has made Japanese culture so unique and magical.

*Welcome to the endless mystery
and magic of Japan!*

—Héctor, Tokyo 2021





The magic and mystery hidden in each of the layers of the onion of this culture is one of the key factors which captivates my curiosity and compels me to stay.



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*“How strange it is to be alive
beneath the sakura!”*

—Kobayashi Issa

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CHAPTER 1

The Magic of Japan

There's something magical in each of the cultures that inhabit this planet. It's our mission as human beings to care for and to appreciate each one; they all have something unique and distinctive. Of course there are also things everywhere that we find unpleasant, but for the moment let's concentrate on the good, the beautiful and the magical.

I like to analyze cultures through the analogy of the fish. The sea represents the culture in which we live and we human beings are the fish that live in this sea. If you're a fish that has spent its whole life in the depths of the sea, perhaps you end up thinking that you know everything there is to know about it. But what happens if one day you jump out of the water and you see the sea from the outside? You may suffer a kind of shock.

Just like the fish that realizes the sea it's been swimming in all its life doesn't constitute the entire universe, the same thing happens to us humans when we spend many years stuck in the same surroundings and then suddenly we travel, or we go to live in a faraway place.

Being in Japan I have learned about its culture, and this in turn has helped me to appreciate my own culture in a different way, not from within the sea, but from without. Of course, after so many years here, I'm beginning to feel

like a Japanese fish, and now I feel a certain culture shock when I travel back to Spain.

When you live for a time in one place, it starts to become familiar and many of the things that caught your attention at the beginning gradually stop surprising you and start to become part of everyday life.

But it's not the sea that stops being beautiful and exciting, it is we fish who lose the sensitivity with which to admire it. This is what is happening to me after so long here; if I don't make the effort, every-

LEFT A traditional Japanese dancer at my wedding.

RIGHT A woman lights incense at Kiyomizudera temple. Incense is one of the elements that tells us we are at a Buddhist temple (not at a Shinto shrine).





thing starts to seem “normal.” To combat the apathy of habit, I use my love of photography.

Taking photos helps me focus on the things that feed my curiosity every day and trains my eye to pick out what is special or magical about Japan.

For me, magic is something that has an ingredient that can be explained but also an ingredient that is inexplicable: something surprising or mysterious. For example, good art is capable of generating magic, because no matter how much you try to explain or understand it, there is always something in it that can only be felt. Magic means you never really know what to expect. It's like a novel that's interesting from start to finish because you're always wondering what's going to happen next, with the exhilaration of the explorer.

The uncertainty we feel when we travel to a place we don't know has the power to activate the human capacity to perceive beauty and magic.

Mr. Casca and Ms. Wonder

There are many kinds of traveler, but in general I would divide them into two main categories: the

The magic of Japan can be felt by the sensitive traveler, especially at a shrine or temple that is surrounded by nature.

person with an inflated ego who thinks that his own life is better than what he sees when he travels, and the person who has had so many experiences that she knows there's something good, something bad and something beautiful in every place and culture on the planet.

I'm going to create two fictional characters that I will use throughout this book:

Mr. Casca (from the Spanish word *cascarrabias*, meaning “grouch”) is a man of fifty years of age who, although he has traveled widely, is always convinced that the food from his home town is the best, and that his friend Pepe is the best site supervisor on the planet. Walking through Osaka, every fourth street he complains of how badly built everything is and he loves to explain to his wife how his friend Pepe would do it better. The truth is that Mr. Casca isn't really interested in traveling: what he wants is always to be right and to be able to impose his views

wherever he goes. What he thinks is true is absolutely and unshakably true.

Ms. Wonder, when she comes across something she can't understand or someone behaving strangely, is curious, and finds herself asking questions to try to understand. Ms. Wonder knows that no matter how much you learn about the things you encounter while you're traveling, the truth will always be partial and will depend on the lens through which things are seen, and that's exactly where the interesting part of traveling lies. When Ms. Wonder goes back to her home town after traveling she always feels changed, a different person, and she also sees her own town and its people in a more special way. Ms. Wonder is capable of seeing magic more than most.

The last time I was in Kyoto I revisited the temple of Kizomizu-dera. Erected on the side of a mountain to the east of Kyoto, with views of the city and surrounded by forest, it's one of the most spectacular Buddhist temples in the country. The wooden columns that support it are majestic and they manage to create the sensation that the whole complex is floating above the forest, keeping watch over the city.

I was there at dusk and the sunlight tinged the wood with ochre tones. The floorboards reflected the shadows of the tourists in a strange way, giving the sensation that they, the shadows, were living beings. A girl dressed in a *yukata* summer kimono stopped for a while to light incense; the smoke and the aroma added an even more magical touch to the sunset.

You could hear the murmur of visitors talking discreetly, birdsong in the trees and little else. But all of a sudden the peace was shattered by a voice, almost shouting, saying in Spanish: "Look at the state of these columns! We've come half way round the world to see an old building that's rotting to pieces."

I blinked, trying to ignore what I'd just heard. But he carried on.

"This building has no architectural value," he said to his partner as if he were lecturing on the subject. Finally, the last thing I remember him saying was: "Let's hope that woman gets out of the way now, so I can take this photograph and we can get out of here." It wasn't a pleasant experience bumping into someone like this, but I have to thank this man because it was he who inspired the creation of the character Mr. Casca that I will be using in this book.

He also helped me to reflect a little, because in a slightly less exaggerated way I too have been a bit Mr. Casca on occasion. I suspect that we all have. So that we don't fall into the ego trap of thinking that what we have is always best, the trick is to catch yourself when you're thinking like Mr. Casca and to change your attitude: instead of projecting your beliefs onto what you're looking at, try asking yourself questions so that you can understand the history of what you're looking at from the perspective of the local people.



Standing before this *torii* gate Mr. Casca would say: "Have I come all the way to Japan to look at four pieces of wood? What a disappointment." By contrast Ms. Wonder would say: "I'm fascinated by the simplicity of Shinto shrines, there's something that makes me feel different when I walk through one of these gates."



清水の舞台から飛び降りる

To Jump from the Platform of Kiyomizu-dera Temple

There is a popular saying in the Japanese language, “to jump from the platform of Kiyomizu-dera temple.” It’s been used for hundreds of years to refer to the risk of confronting the unknown. A non-literal translation could be “to take a decisive step” or “to take a leap of faith in the darkness.”

Now it is merely an expression, but in the past it was actually done. People would go to Kyoto to jump from the temple platform, because it was believed that if you survived, all your wishes would be granted. During the Edo period (1603–1868), 234 people jumped and 199 of them survived. It’s a 42 foot (13 meter) jump and there are trees below.

Today the jump is prohibited. But there is a much easier way to make your wishes. Near the base of the platform from which people used to jump, water pours from the mountainside in three separate streams. It is believed that drinking this water will make your dreams come true.

In Japanese the expression is 清水の舞台から飛び降りる
Kiyomizu no butai kara tobioriru:

清水 **Kiyomizu** is the temple name without the suffix “dera” meaning temple. Kiyomizu literally means, “pure, crystalline water”

の **no of**

舞台 **butai platform (or theater stage)**

から **kara from**

飛び降りる **tobioriru, to jump off**





FACING PAGE, TOP Kiyomizu-dera temple.
FACING PAGE, BOTTOM Schoolboys drink the water that has the power to make all your dreams come true.

ABOVE When you walk down the narrow Shinjuku alley Omoide Yokocho (lit., Memory Lane), you'll feel as though you've been transported fifty years into the past.

MY TRAVEL TIPS

Visiting Kiyomizu-dera

As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kiyomizu-dera temple is often crowded with tourists and Japanese visitors. To avoid the crowds, don't go on weekends. If you're an early riser, the temple is open from six in the morning. You don't need to get there so early to enjoy the temple, but there is a big difference between the experience of walking around the monument at eight in the morning when there are almost no people, and at ten in the morning when the hordes of tourists have arrived.

The temple closes at six, and if you go there at four or five o'clock there are usually fewer people and you can enjoy the sunset with unforgettable views.

From mid-November to the beginning of December there is a special timetable which allows you to see the temple

illuminated, and the woods that surround it are tinged with the colors of autumn (known in Japanese as **koyo** 紅葉, where 紅 means red, and 葉 means leaves). During cherry blossom season in March, the temple is also illuminated in the evenings.

The special illuminated evening timetable is usually from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., but it's a good idea to consult the homepage Kiyomizu-dera.or.jp/en/location/#OpenHours as times change from year to year.

HOW TO GET THERE

- From Keihan Kiyomizu Gojo Station it's a twenty-five-minute walk to the temple.
- Bus numbers 100 and 206 both pass close to Kiyomizu-dera temple. From the Kiyomizu-michi stop it's a fifteen-minute walk to the temple.
- Entrance fee: ¥330

Let's be travelers whose minds are open to magic. Let's be less Mr. Casca and more Ms. Wonder.

With the right attitude and my camera in hand, now I can enjoy any random corner of the streets of Tokyo. Some well-cared for plant pots in the window of a tiny house, hidden away in the district of Setagaya? A little park with a couple of flowering cherry trees? This is all I need for a wonderful afternoon.

But I wasn't always so open to new experiences. Let's take a look back at my first brush with Japanese cherry blossom.

Sakura, the Glorious Cherry Blossom

When people ask me what the best time of year to visit Japan is, I always tend to hesitate before giving my answer.

It doesn't matter when you come; Japan always has something different to offer. Its landscapes change appearance radically according to the seasons. Traveling here in winter, when everything is covered in snow, is a completely different experience to traveling during *sakura* (cherry



Outdoor dining at an izakaya, one of the most popular types of local neighborhood restaurant in Japan because of their atmosphere and the variety of food available.

blossom) season when the blossom transforms the landscape in a festival of beauty.

At first, I underestimated the magic and influence of sakura on Japanese culture. When I was told that cherry blossom season was approaching, I showed hardly any interest; I thought it would be like when the almond trees flower in

桜 The Language of Cherry Blossoms

The word *sakura* 桜 on its own can be used to refer both to the tree and the flower. Here are some other key cherry blossom terms:

開花 *kaika*, where 開 means "opening" and 花 means "flower." This is the moment when the flowering of the sakura begins. Depending on the weather in a given year and on the geographical location, the date of kaika tends to vary. In several dozen cities there is a "marker" tree that is monitored every day by the Japanese Meteorological Agency to determine the exact moment of kaika in each region.

満開 *mankai*, where 満 means "full" and 開 means "opening." This is the moment when the cherry blossom is in full bloom and usually happens approximately one week after kaika.

花吹雪 *hanafubuki*, where 花 means "flower," 吹 means "blow" and 雪 means "snow." This word is used to refer to the falling of the sakura petals after mankai, an event of extreme beauty and similar to the falling of snowflakes. It is said that the average speed at which sakura petals fall is two inches (five centimeters) per second.

花見 *hanami*, where 花 means "flower" and 見 means "look." This is the act of enjoying the sakura.

MY TRAVEL TIPS

Best Times to See Sakura

According to an average calculated from the last sixty years' worth of statistics from the Japanese Meteorological Agency, March 26 is the day that marks *kaika* (when the blossoms first open) in the Tokyo area, and April 3 marks *mankai* — the day on which the cherry trees are in full bloom.

The dates below are approximate and they tend to vary depending on the weather during the preceding months: a cold winter, for example, means a later cherry blossom season. Despite this, I would dare to suggest that if you're in Tokyo during the last week of March and the first week of April you're unlikely to miss it.

- **Kyoto:** average *kaika* is March 28, average *mankai*, April 5.
- **Hiroshima:** average *kaika* is March 27, average *mankai*, April 4.
- **Fukuoka:** average *kaika* is March 25, average *mankai*, April 1.
- **Sapporo:** average *kaika* is April 30, average *mankai*, May 4.



Spain, and nothing more, something to see from a distance as you drive along some country road.

But I was totally wrong. The Japanese cherry tree isn't just found in the mountains and in the fields, you see it also in cities, parks, along urban river banks, and in temples and shrines. When it

ABOVE The flowering of the *sakura* in Nakameguro (Tokyo) is a spectacular sight.

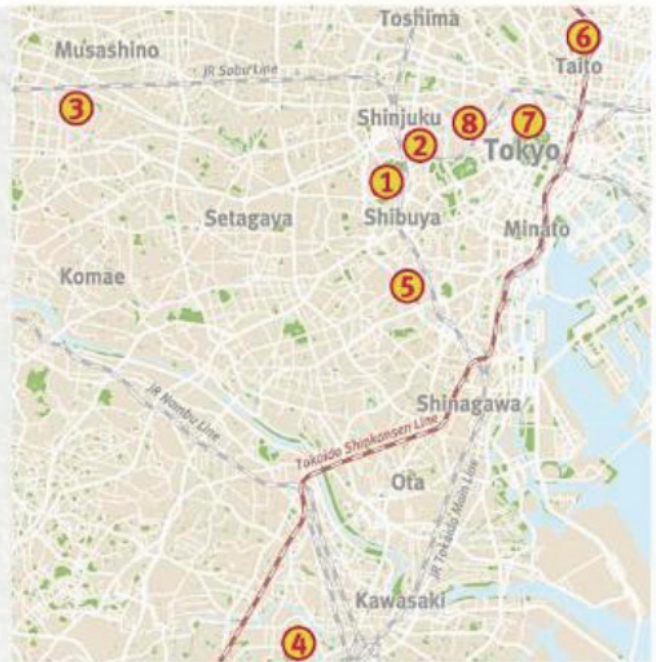
BELOW Cherry blossom is found in cities, parks, along river banks, and in shrines and temples.



MY TRAVEL TIPS**Best Places to Photograph Sakura in Tokyo**

This map is a general guide to give you an idea of the best places to photograph cherry blossom. Look for exact locations on your favorite maps app, using the names below as search terms:

- ① **Yoyogi Park:** one of my favorite parks. It has a small number of cherry trees near the pond with the fountain.
- ② **Shinjuku Gyoen:** my favorite spot, although it's always packed with people which makes the flower-viewing less enjoyable. To avoid the crowds try going first thing in the morning. The park opens at 9 a.m.
- ③ **Inokashira Park:** the area around the boating lake is where the most of the blossom is.
- ④ **Mitsuike Park:** small but it has many varieties of cherry trees with blossoms of various colors. It's near Kawasaki Station.
- ⑤ **Nakameguro:** sakura blooms all along the river that runs from the station in the direction of Shibuya.



- ⑥ **Ueno Park:** has enormous sakura trees lining the main pathways that run through the center of the park.
- ⑦ **Imperial Palace:** only a few sakura but there aren't many people and it's peaceful.
- ⑧ **Ichigaya and Yotsuya:** most of the cherry trees are in the area around the moat.

blooms, all corners of Japan are awash with the pink and white colors of its flowers.

Before I'd heard the word sakura, I learned the word *hanami*, which means "to look at the flowers," when I was invited to a hanami party. I couldn't understand why this event was important enough to have its own name and to warrant meeting up "to look at the flowers" together.

"They've invited me to look at the flowers . . . how strange . . ." I said to myself, a little confused. "I don't need anyone to invite me to look at flowers." This bad-tempered attitude toward hanami is in line with the Mr. Casca way of thinking. In those moments I was a Mr. Casca – this whole sakura thing seemed absurd to me and my ego made me think that what I knew was better. "There are flowers in my town too, and I bet they're prettier than the sakura!"

I consider this to be a clear indication of my lack of understanding of the culture. When you catch yourself rationalizing like Mr. Casca, it's not a bad thing: we all do it when we're outside our comfort zone; the important thing is to realize what you're doing and to change your attitude. My prejudices collapsed immediately the first time I saw a cherry tree in flower. And then there was a particular moment when I saw a single sakura flower floating on a small pond. It sat up elegantly on the water giving the sensation that the reflection of its petals in the water was more real than the flower itself. Possessed by the utter beauty of the image, I couldn't help but run toward it and start taking photographs. To this day I still remember this encounter vividly.

The following day I attended the hanami I'd been invited to. I had such a good time that I've

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Tel: 1 (802) 773-8930; Fax: 1 (802) 773-6993

info@tuttlepublishing.com; www.tuttlepublishing.com

Japan

Tuttle Publishing

Yaekari Building, 3rd Floor, 5-4-12 Osaki

Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo 141-0032

Tel: (81) 3 5437-0171; Fax: (81) 3 5437-0755

sales@tuttle.co.jp; www.tuttle.co.jp

Asia Pacific

Berkeley Books Pte Ltd

3 Kallang Sector #04-01, Singapore 349278

Tel: (65) 67412178; Fax: (65) 67412179

inquiries@periplus.com.sg; www.tuttlepublishing.com

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See you soon!

I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I did writing it. Apart from knowledge, I hope you take away with you the tools and techniques to look at Japanese culture from different perspectives so you can construct your own opinions and explanations. I also hope my book has not only inspired you to appreciate Japan, but every other culture on this planet. I don't regard myself as an expert on Japan;

I like to keep learning every day, like a child. The voyage to discover Japan continues for all of us. I'll keep writing, and I'll be waiting for you in the next book. It's my wish that you find magic, not just when you come to Japan, but also in everything that life brings you from now on.

– Héctor, Tokyo, April, 2021.

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