

With strawberries in season and cherry trees blooming in resplendent profusion, Matsudo offered a lovely welcome when I arrived. For the next eight days I would be a guest of the Miwa family: Noriko, her husband Shimpei, and their ten-year-old daughter Kyoko. As I stepped into their home, my hosts provided me with house slippers. Asian custom dictates, shoes are worn only outdoors, never inside.

Three years ago, the Miwas built their own home, a rarity in Japan. It's a modern two-story on a lot so narrow, there was no room for a yard. A spacious balcony makes up for it, where container tulips started to bloom beneath a clothes line heavy with the day's wash. Many residents of Matsudo, a city of almost 500,000, commute by train to jobs in Tokyo.

The strawberries are locally grown, Noriko said as she served them. Plump and fully ripe, they burst with flavor. The cherry trees, Shimpei explained in answer to my questions, were fruitless and grown solely in homage to Japanese passion for the blossoms. Soon the traditional cherry-blossom festival would begin; regrettably, by then the bloom would be over. Climate change had caused the trees to bud a week earlier than in times past.

Saturday the Miwas showed me the Tokyo sights and we stayed well into the night. Sunday was set aside for a visit to the university from which Shimpei graduated. Since his parents live nearby, afternoon tea would be at their house.

"My dad is past seventy and retired," Shimpei said, "but now has a job two days a week. He makes more money than I do." His mother's passion is gardening, he went on. I was to admire her handiwork in the couple's elongated, narrow backyard full of flowers.

Shimpei's dad, too, maintains a serious hobby, painting and sketching, of which I noted the results. The elder Miwa explained in fine English that he planned to join an excursion to an East European country, where the group would work and study for a week with an acknowledged master. In his younger days he had worked in New York, where Shimpei and his brother attended school for several years. The resulting facility with English gave Shimpei a leg up in the strenuous university entrance exams.

On the way to the in-laws, Noriko had stopped to purchase chunks of sweet potato, baked and glazed, which she served with the tea.

The university—"International Christian University, or ICU, like Intensive Care Unit," Shimpei explained, grinning—featured immaculate grounds. On this mild day in late March, its traffic-free avenues, lined with blooming cherry trees, invited leisurely strolls. Soon I was drawn to a building that throbbed with drum rhythms. On my prodding we entered and observed a group of young men and women working five enormous drums in perfect synchronicity, two at each drum. Every few minutes the players traded places with a replacement crew, never missing a beat. It

was mesmerizing. Regrettably, when Shimpei got his camera ready, one of the players came over: no pictures, please.

Monday it was back to work for Shimpei. In between sneezes, he muttered that the pollen would require him to wear a facemask, which his wife handed him. "Even inside, the pollen bothers you?" I asked. Noriko pointed to the family wash wafting on the balcony: This is how pollen gets inside. I soon got used to seeing people in the streets wearing facemasks like surgeons.

The Miwas, like most Japanese, refuse to own a clothes-dryer, though perhaps not to save on electricity. Each member of the Miwa household owns a cell phone, a laptop or think pad, or a tablet for electronic games. Above the breakfast counter is a flat-screen television set whose larger version sits in the living room, with a yet larger one in the couple's bedroom.

For me, the electronic wonder was the toilet with its heated seat. The Japanese disdain central heating as an American indulgence, but they insist on the cozy toilet seat. On a brisk day in a portion of the house that's unheated, I readily appreciated its worth.

This toilet, the "washlet," quickly acquainted me with its most prominent feature: it squirts water up your behind, then fans you gently until you're dry. The Japanese deem toilet paper a wasteful and inefficient way of cleaning yourself. My friends, however, having lived in Mitchell, South Dakota, where Shimpei managed Toshiba's toner-producing plant during the years I knew them, stocked their toilet cubicle with optional paper.

Shimpei's fifteen-minute hike to the train station would be followed by a one-hour train ride to Toshiba headquarters in Tokyo. When I asked whether he did computer work during his commutes, he laughed out loud.

"We are packed like sardines in there," he said. "The train attendants shove and push, to get more people inside."

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