

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 81 (2015)
Heft: [4]

Artikel: Japan - the bigger Switzerland? : A travel report
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943541>

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Japan – the bigger Switzerland? A travel report

Every time my colleague raves about Japan, he tells me 'you know, Luzia, Japan is even cleaner and better organised than Switzerland, believe it or not!' Of course I would roll my eyes thinking 'you just have no clue'. Until I went there myself last month.

My colleague, of course, is not the first one to compare Japan to Switzerland. Both countries are famous for their delicious chocolate, attractive ski resorts, punctuality, economic situation, cleanliness, and organisation skills. But is Switzerland really Japan's little-brother-from-another-Samurai-mother? Here is my very own (and certainly limited) perspective on this relationship:

My trip involved visiting Kobe, Osaka, Tokyo, and Kyoto. Within the cities, I walked pretty much everywhere, which turned out to be a most rewarding activity to do: Walkways are not only abundant but remarkably wide and safe. It's the place where cyclists, walkers and runners cross - always securely and quietly. Pedestrians are given priority over cars when it comes to road rights and crossings are everywhere. Reaching the other side of the road, even in the hustle and bustle of Tokyo, is easy: Green lights glow long and are announced by electronic bird chirping. And if you can't cross on the road, then you can most certainly cross above the road, on a 'skywalk'. The Japanese cycling culture also very much reminded me of Switzerland: Shopping, commuting, transporting kids etc. is all done via bicycle. There are large cycling 'parks' and hardly a place which isn't lined up with bicycles outside.

Between the cities, I travelled on trains, and let me tell you: if you manage to find your platform and train on time (can be tricky at bigger stations and it's advisable to allow plenty of time), you can expect highest efficiency: absolute punctuality, very clean trains, and an extensive railway network (so far pretty Swiss, right?). But here comes: if you're female, you can also choose to sit in a pink 'women only' carriage (apparently, Japanese men sometimes are a little too friendly...). If you travel on the Shinkansen (high-speed train), you fly through the cities at speeds of up to 320 km/h. That's why a train ride between Kyoto and Tokyo (513 km) only takes 2 hours and 18 minutes! Before you board the Shinkansen train, a team of pink-dressed women and blue-dressed men clean the train, and the passengers begin to form a perfect queue outside. In the train, there are designated areas for

smoking and phoning (you're not allowed to speak on the phone on Japanese trains). Moreover, once the conductor has checked all tickets in a carriage, he takes a deep bow facing the travellers, and leaves.

Apart from similarities regarding basics, Japan distinguishes itself sharply from Switzerland when it comes to details. Let's start describing the comfort they offer: unless you happen to have to relieve yourself over a squat, you will usually be able to enjoy a spotlessly clean electronically heated bidet toilet with a control element attached to it that is so complicated, you might not be able to flush. When you buy Onigiri (rice balls) you will be amazed to find a plastic layer between the rice and seaweed (nori) leaf that you remove just before eating so that the nori remains fresh and crunchy. Unfortunately, though, food packaging in Japan is not only extraordinarily clever, it is also extraordinarily wasteful. Each piece of fruit gets its own plastic wrapping and you get another plastic bag upon paying! Hot and warm foods are further separated by more plastic bags. That's not where the plastic craze ends, however. If on a rainy day you enter a department store, you are required to wrap your soaking umbrella in a plastic bag provided for the purpose by the store, put it in your backpack, and throw it away when leaving.

In terms of organisation, the Japanese really do amaze. Due to the extreme limitation of space (337.1 Japanese /km², compared to 198 Swiss /km²), they have come up with the most incredible space-savers: cars and bicycles are stacked upon each other with a multi-level parking system (see picture). Elevated motorways are above ground for miles. It therefore is even more astonishing how clean the country remains. In fact, I cannot remember seeing a single cigarette butt or any trash in areas that weren't designated for it (everything in Japan has its designated area). This also means, however, that as tourists, we are particularly prone to doing things wrong. I quickly had to swallow my chewing gum in a museum after being caught and told off by a security guard. I was also told off by a shop keeper for wanting to step on the tiny carpet area in a changing room without removing my shoes. I was again told off by a hostel receptionist for putting on my shoes 10 centimetres away from the designated area by the door. Now just imagine what happened when I wanted to dry my soaking wet shoes with a hair dryer upstairs in the bathroom!

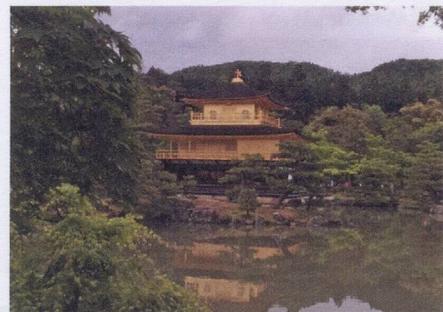
Let's be fair though, even the rebukes are

administered in a friendly manner in Japan. In fact, it's impossible for me to remember an unfriendly Japanese. Even when I wanted to dry my shoes, I was offered towels (not just newspaper) to stuff them with overnight. When I (wrongly) believed my towel was taken from the dorm and complained at the reception, they offered me one of theirs to keep (I had accidentally left mine in the bathroom). When I asked people for directions and they couldn't speak English, they would just walk me to my destination. Store keepers would come outside with me to give me directions. Hostel receptionists happily operated as information centres for my every query. I could go on and on. In short: if you have the chance, do go and see Japan and find out for yourself that our supposedly bigger brother really is a cousin thrice removed.

By Luzia Sauer



River with Kimono girls, Kyoto



Gold temple in Kyoto



Stackable carpark in Osaka