
When a Trip Goes From Good to Unforgettable

By Chris Broad

On a freezing, snowy New Year's Eve in 2012, I hopped in my Toyota Starlet and spent the next 9 hours battling horrific blizzards along the coastline of the Sea of Japan, en-route to Nagano, a city nestled in the heart of the Japanese Alps.

I'd come to meet my friend Luke, a fellow Brit living in Japan, and together we planned to spend a few days over the New Year's holiday travelling around central Japan, kicking off with Nagano, home to the infamous snow monkeys.

Unfortunately, snow monkeys aside, we didn't really come with a plan or any knowledge of Nagano's nightlife and by 8pm it was quickly becoming apparent that we may pay the ultimate price, in the form of a mediocre New Year's Eve, shivering at the side of a road clutching reasonably priced beer. However, thanks to a chance encounter our fortunes were flipped around and it ended up becoming one of the funnest, most memorable nights out that I've ever had.



Monkey magic

As we stood outside a Seven Eleven convenience store, beer in one hand, Google maps in the other, we struck up a conversation with two 30-something year old Japanese hipsters, smoking nearby. (I say hipsters - they were wearing swanky hats).

Luke and I had only been learning Japanese for 4 months at the time, but luckily our shockingly poor language skills proved satisfactory in holding an amusing conversation. After just a few minutes, the guys took a liking to us and invited us to join them on their travels, thus beginning a magical all night journey through the dive bars of Nagano, in an evening filled with alcohol, hilarity and wonderful unpredictability.

The more confident of the two guys, a guy called Tomohiro, was one of the coolest, most hilarious Japanese guys I'd ever met; a self-professed player, he spent most of the evening talking about how delighted he was that his girlfriend wasn't in Nagano for New Year's, as she'd gone home to Tokyo, meaning he could dedicate his resources to chatting up various girls across the city.

The entire evening felt more like an adventure to the promise land, as Tomohiro described the fine nightclub that we'd be visiting at the end our journey - a nightclub filled with beautiful girls. And after 7 hours of bar crawling we reached the nightclub and Tomohiro's persistent bragging was finally vindicated, as his popularity with girls proved thoroughly accurate after all. Perhaps it was the hat, or his eccentric personality, but the last time I saw him he was sitting in a booth, surrounded by half a dozen women, giving me a wink and a thumbs up. It was my first New Year's in Japan and one of the best New Year's I can recall.

Six months later, I found myself passing through Osaka, at a time when the city resembles something closer to a furnace than a city. I was on my way back to Tohoku, having visited a friend in Kobe and I found myself alone in the city for 24 hours, with a flight out the following morning at 7am. Running low on pocket money, I decided to spend the entire night wandering around the city, in favour of shelling out for a hotel. It was my first time in Osaka, and I was bursting with excitement at the prospect of getting lost down the streets for hours on end, immersing myself in Japan's most vibrant city.

Late in the afternoon I bumped into a 'Hub', a British themed pub chain dotted throughout Japan, and one of the few sources of cider in the whole country. It wasn't long before I was hunched over my delicious (but insanely expensive) cider, chatting to surrounding customers.

One of these customers was Miya, a Taiwanese girl staying in Osaka on business, and who appeared to have come to Hub primarily to find somewhere to charge her smartphone. As the evening progressed and the smartphone battery recharged, we got on quite well and had a rare chemistry. She decided to join me on my all night adventure, strolling aimlessly down the streets of Osaka (with the promise of more charging points for her smartphone along the way).

For the next 12 hours, we journeyed through the city's parks, bars, streets and rivers, alight with the reflection of an endless amounts of neon, and it was honestly one of the most romantic evenings I can recall. The experience ended up feeling eerily like the plot of Richard Linklater's, 'Before Sunrise' - a film in which an American guy, Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and a French woman, Celine (Julie Delphy) meet randomly on a train to Vienna and end up exploring the city together all night long before his flight out of the city the next morning. (Highly recommended viewing).

I'd have to say it was the most romantic encounter I've had - few things can beat discovering a city with a stranger, in a romantic setting and even now, three years later, I can remember those 24 hours in Osaka, better than I can remember nearly any other day in the last half decade. Whilst the romance ultimately ended at the end of the trip, we stayed in touch and I found myself discovering another spectacular city with her two years later, when we met in Taipei (probably the most underrated city in Asia).

These are just two of many fun encounters I've had with strangers in Japan, and to me, they underline the most important thing I've discovered through my travels - not just in Japan, but around the world - that the key to turning a good trip into an unforgettable one is defined by the encounters you have along the way.

I used to be quite shy with regards to talking to strangers on my travels, and saw it all as a bit of a hassle. But since moving to Japan, I've always tried to stay open-minded and made an effort to meet new people along my travels and in everyday life in general. You never know who you could meet or where it may lead. After all, I bumped into another stranger on a street three years ago and thank god I took him up on his offer of karaoke that night.

It's worrying to think that if I'd stuck with my old philosophy, the world may never have had Natsuki...

Next week, I'll be giving tips on how to increase your chances of fun encounters while you're in Japan.

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