

# Hiroshima: An American in Japan

by Kate Berardo

**Hiroshima is a city you feel you need to go to when in Japan. The lessons to be told are undoubtedly difficult, but necessary for many people to hear, especially Americans.**

Arriving in Hiroshima, you get a big city feel, albeit a lush city, with many canals, no shortage of trees, and views of mountains in the distance. Our main purpose in going to Hiroshima was to contemplate the events of August 6, 1945 and its aftermath. It was our last stop in Japan after a year teaching up in Sapporo and before heading on to South Korea.

So, after dropping our bags at a local ryokan, the first thing we did was head for the Hiroshima Peace Park Museum. The museum traces in great detail the events in Hiroshima leading up to the Atomic bomb. It mentions, although not dwelling on, the destruction and devastation Japan was causing as it invaded other Asian countries in the lead-up to the bombing. And, it constantly drives home the message that nuclear weapons must be eradicated to ensure the future of mankind; it displays the making of nuclear weapons, the effects of radiation and the devastation from the Atomic bombing.

On the walls of the museum, there are letters from the Mayors of Hiroshima, from shortly after the Atomic bombing up until September 20, 2003, which are all protests to the countries with Nuclear Weapons (the big five: The US, Russia, France, UK, and China) and a call to disarm nuclear weapons. When you see two walls of these letters, delivering the same message over and over again to figureheads like Putin, Clinton, and Bush with seeming futility, you can lose heart that the flame burning in the Peace Park could ever be extinguished (it will be put out when the last nuclear weapon is destroyed).

That's not to say no hope remains, but that the hope for a better future stems more from what happens

on a daily basis in Hiroshima than what you can see at the permanent exhibits of the Museum. It comes from the people who go there, and the reactions they have. And not all of these are exactly positive ones.



The A-bomb dome in Hiroshima

As we watched a short film about the plane that dropped the A-bomb, the guy next to me had a message that was meant to transcend the conversation he was having with the man next to him in his native tongue. For that he used plain and clear English: "American motherfuckers, sons of bitches," he said. He looked in my direction to see if his words had impacted me. I continued to stare at the video screen as they returned to their native language and conversation. A year in Japan had made me forget what directness and confrontation felt like. I was indeed startled, and I kept my eye on the group he was with as they teetered around us and then passed through the exhibit with an angry energy that was markedly different from others' reactions.

As an expat, hearing comments about Americans is not uncommon—even in the polite, friendly nation of Japan. Just the day before, as we explored a small town called Kurashiki, a woman told us, "Bush is crazy!" after learning our origin. Being abroad through the war with Iraq had provided countless interesting and honest hours of conversations with my Japanese friends. But the anger and hostility that transcended these five words of these strangers seemed directed at me and was indeed new and uncomfortable.

About half an hour later, we experienced a different reaction to the exhibit. As I was engrossed in an explanation of the effects of radiation, my traveling companion pointed out to me that there were a number of secret service agents that had gathered on the floor and were wandering around. A few minutes later, when I looked up from the exhibit I was digesting, I saw that Jon was right. Not only were there a good deal of secret service, there was also a group of reporters and photographers who had congregated.

A few minutes later, Howard Baker, Jr. the US Ambassador to Japan, came through the museum with a mixed entourage of Japanese and Americans, including the translator who explained the exhibits they passed. He came and went, and so did the sense of excitement and wonder that went with him. As we left the museum, a number of photographers were taking pictures of the guestbook that he had signed. We peeked over their shoulders to see his message, and were then called on to read his barely legible English. "With something sympathy and sorrow," he had signed it. We couldn't make out the second word for the reporters, but they were happy to have the other four words and knew their importance coming from an American figurehead.

His visit was reassuring that not all Americans were looked on as sons-of-something-or-rather, and it left me with a greater sense of hope than the angry visitors had done.

Still, as youth often have the power to do, it was not Baker, but a group of American students who we passed a few minutes later that instilled the greatest sense of hope. At that point, we had left the museum and were facing the Centograph, which pays tribute to the individuals who died in the Hiroshima bombing. A group of about fifteen students came up, probably no more than 14 years old, led by a single teacher who could conjure up the image of everyone's favorite teacher as he taught them subtly, effectively and interactively. He pointed to a wreath, which had been placed by the ambassador at the front of Centograph and that bared his name at its center, and asked the students if they knew who he was. After determining he was, in fact, not a bread maker as suggested by a creative, attention-seeking boy based on his last name Baker, the students collectively determined his position and grasped the importance of his visit.

I was privileged to have seen and experienced a lot as a young child, most of which I believe led to my passion and concern for intercultural issues. Still, I never experienced something like Hiroshima. The fact that these kids did experience this difficult reality of America's past, at such a young and open age, and could grasp the larger meaning—that is hope.

Last we visited the new Peace Memorial Hall, which is an interesting reflection on how modern day technology can aid in reflection and growth. The hall, which contains some thirty plus computers and a number of large screens, allows people to search an extensive database of photos and information about people who perished in the Hiroshima bombing. It also contains annotations and documentaries of survivors who lived to tell the horrific story of their past, all adapted to the needs of each visitor. Simply insert your brochure in the slot to the left of the screen, and the computer matches the language to that of your brochure.

It was late afternoon at that point, so we went on to sit across the river from the A-bomb dome for a few minutes and then went to try the local specialty Hiroshima-yaki. After dinner, I sent my last emails from my cell phone before going to a local Vodafone to cancel it. We then headed through the entertainment district of this modern, bustling city to our traditional ryokan and the old couple who run it. We entered our tatami room to find the couple had put two bananas and some fresh green tea in our room.

Hiroshima represents the last stop of my year-long journey in Japan. It seems an appropriate last stop, highlighting the complex relationship between my home and host countries, making a few last important reminders of our cultural differences, and leaving me with a lot to reflect on about a future that transcends my own and that awaits our shaping. ✧

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