

随筆

Discovering the Land of the Rising Sun 日出づる国での発見

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1. Background

“What are your thoughts on working in Japan for two years?” This question in 2013 altered my family’s life and took us in a direction that we had not considered before.

First of all, I would like to introduce myself, before telling you about my experience of living in Japan and working at KYB. My name is Christian Scholz and I came to Japan with my wife Janett and our two daughters, four and two years old, respectively. I started my professional carrier at the Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing (BAM) in Berlin by writing my doctoral thesis (PhD) in the field of tribology in 2009. I gathered my first experience in Japan during a one-week stay in Hiroshima for a conference. There I met Nakase-san from KYB’s Basic Technology R&D Center for the first time. Shortly after this visit, Nakase-san and I became colleagues (see Photo 1) at the BAM and over the 3 years he stayed in Berlin also friends. At the end of my temporary employment contract in

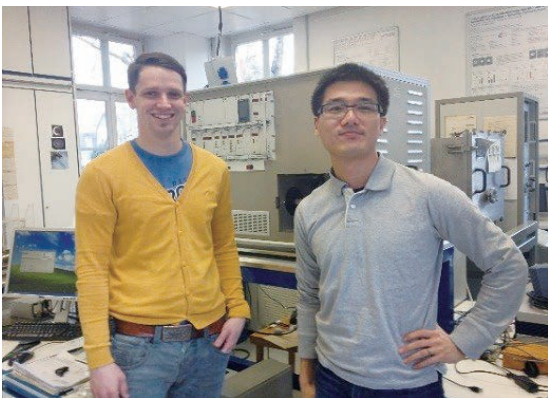


Photo 1 Dr. Takuya Nakase (right) and me as colleagues at BAM.

Berlin I was faced with the question: “What’s next?”.

Surprisingly, I got an exciting and interesting job offer from KYB. After a short discussion with my wife and our families and much longer discussions between KYB human resources department and me, it was decided that we would start a two-year adventure in Japan in 2014. One of the things we did first was to buy several books about Japanese culture and tradition and some guides for living in Japan. Many of the situations described in these books sounded very curious, funny and in some ways unbelievable in our German minds. We started learning Japanese and had a lot of questions which were always kindly answered by Nakase-san and his wife. Still, there were many more things to do in preparing this new experience, including moving and storing our belongings in Germany, finding accommodation in Japan and many small but time consuming and nerve-wracking matters. Luckily, we found a nice house in Yokohama, which I was able to look at when KYB invited me for a look-and-see-trip and final discussion of my contract in November 2013. This was just one of the many helpful things my new company did for us as we prepared for the big move. As we recognized that many families with a German background live in Yokohama, we had fewer worries about moving to a country which is so different from Germany and whose language we do not understand.

Finally we were ready for take-off and on March 16th, 2014 we started our adventure in the Far East, approximately 9,000 km away from our home country. After a long flight we arrived at Tokyo Haneda and received an unbelievably

warm welcome by my new colleagues and the first Omiyage (Japanese souvenir) for our daughters and us. Directly after arrival at our hotel, despite being overtired, I went directly to a furniture retailer together with my new bosses to buy and arrange the delivery of furniture for our new house. It took a week to finish all of the bureaucratic matters, including getting a Japanese Hanko (official name seal), which is necessary to proceed the registration at the citizen's bureau, opening a bank account and getting mobile phone contracts. We were ready to move into our new house. Thanks to the support from KYB, my new colleagues and some expats, Japan started feeling, very quickly, a little like home.

2. Living in Yokohama

Our new home is just a 10 minutes ride by subway away from the Shinkansen station Shin-Yokohama and very close to the German School Tokyo Yokohama, the center of the German community, located. We decided to send our older daughter to the kindergarten of the German School and our younger daughter to a Hoikuen (Japanese kindergarten). We hope that by doing this she will understand and speak Japanese much better than my wife and I. We have already seen great progress from her and sometimes she even starts little conversations with natives.

Before coming to Japan we made it a priority to see and experience as much as we can during our stay. We use the time on weekend or during the Japanese holidays of "Golden Week" (end of April), "Obon" (mid of August) and the first week of the year to discover many places (Photo 2). Not far from our home there are two idyllic places and one of my favorite regions in Japan: Kamakura and Enoshima. Approximately 800 years ago Kamakura was the political and religious center of Japan and you can still see signs of this period when entering the Hachimangu shrine or looking at the Great Buddha statue, Daibutsu. Directly on Sagami Bay we can enjoy the beach and its many surfers and sailing boats as well as delicious, fresh sea food - a contrast to the mega city Tokyo with millions of people, shops and skyscrapers. You can get a spectacular image of Tokyo from the Tokyo Skytree®, located in Sumida-ku. With a heights of

634 meters it is the tallest tower in the world. Whenever walking through the streets of Yokohama, Tokyo or elsewhere in Japan as a foreigner with two blonde girls you will experience the very curios "Kawaii-phenomenon". "Kawaii" means "lovely", "cute" or "adorable" and seems to have an important position in Japanese culture. Especially Japanese women love cute things such as smartphone or bag pendants from famous cartoon, anime or other Manga characters. Walking through Tokyo with our children we can hear this word many times a day. Of course it makes us proud to hear such compliments for our daughters, but it is sometimes a little bit too much for children. That being said, we have also started integrating this word into our German conversations.

It is quite hard to describe what kind of things represent Japan best, but one of these many things contributing to our image of a fascinating and manifold society is Japanese food. When I ask



Photo 2 Discovering Japan in Himeji, Kamakura, Kanazawa, Miyajima, Hakone, Kyoto and Nikko.

my colleagues what sightseeing spots are famous for Kyoto, Takayama or elsewhere they always give me some nice suggestions highlighting local food or drink specialties. You can find travel guides for each region in Japan where only restaurants are described. Once listed in such guides or named in a culinary TV-show most restaurants are fully booked for several months in advance or people are willing to wait for two hours in the front entrance to get a table and try food advertised. Of course, sometimes we do the same. We learned much about Japanese food and really appreciate it as one big part of Japan. Going back to Germany we will miss dishes such as ramen (noodle soup), okonomi-yaki (savory pancake), yakitori (skewered grilled chicken) and not to forget sushi and sashimi, to list only a part of countless types of delicious and super fresh Japanese food.

Whenever someone travels in Japan, whether privately or for business reasons, one thing should not be forgotten before returning: buying omiyage. Omiyage is kind of souvenir, but with a different meaning compared to Western souvenirs. Souvenirs in Europe or America are things a traveler buys for him- or herself to remember the trip, such as key rings, clothes or other things. In contrast, Japanese omiyage typically consist of food produced in the area the trip was taken to. Biscuits, chocolate, mochi (rice cake) or anything you can pack separately into beautifully designed boxes are suitable as omiyage. Normally you can buy these boxes everywhere, but especially in Shinkansen stations (Photo 3). Omiyage is not intended to be consumed by oneself, but rather as a present for colleagues or friends. From my point



Photo 3 Omiyage products at Kanazawa station.

of view, this is a tradition which should be adopted in Germany as well.

3. Working at KYB Basic Technology R&D Center

Currently I am working in the Materials Engineering Section at the Basic Technology R&D Center of KYB in Sagamihara. Every morning after arriving at the office I go to the locker room and change into a white outfit, just like all other employees. This consists of a white shirt, white trousers and white safety shoes for the office (black safety shoes for testing and production areas at the plant). The first days after entering KYB this was really strange for me, but now it is business as usual. Work starts every day at 8:00 a.m. with a special daily routine at the office: music is turned on and everyone in the office starts a stretching routine for 5 minutes, after which there is an audio signaling the start of the official working time. Lunch time from 12:00 p.m. to 12:45 p.m. begins and ends with an audio signal as well. Before everyone starts his work again, a 10 minute meeting in each section is held in which the group members are reminded to take care of their health during working time, a short statement in English what everyone is doing for the day and some official notices by the supervisor. Officially the working day ends at 4:50 p.m., but usually most people work until 6:00, 7:00 p.m. or in urgent cases longer.

In my section there are 20 or so members working on different R&D projects all related to materials science, analysis and testing inside of KYB. My tasks are mainly related to automotive shock absorber development. I do a lot of technical research on environmentally friendly oils for shock absorbers and hydraulic components. In particular, I already learned many things about the development process of shock absorbers. This process includes many material tests and analysis, shock absorber evaluation by using a servo-hydraulic bench tester and also vehicle tests under real road conditions. Fortunately, my colleague Ito-san and I have twice had the opportunity to visit the KYB Suspensions Europe plant located in Ororbia, Spain for shock absorber oil evaluation tests (see Photo 4).

During this time we were kindly supported by



Photo 4 Vehicle tests at KYB Suspensions Europe S.A. in Ororbia/Spain.

the Japanese staff sent from Japan to work in Spain and of course by the Spanish staff, especially Fernando de la Cal, Víctor Barriain and Alex Alonso. We drove several kilometers per day to get an impression how the shock absorber oil can influence passenger comfort and driving stability of the car. It was a great experience for me to see how good the staff of KYB Japan and Spain can work together and to understand the different requirements of the Japanese and the European car markets.

Working in Japan is in some ways really different from working in Germany. In my experience, it seems that it is important for Japanese employees to have many meetings a day as well as technical pre-reviews and reviews. Especially technical pre-reviews held by technical staff and their line managers, which often end in discussions about presentation slides that were already discussed several times before. Apart from the fact that I rarely understand discussions in Japanese, I was always wondering why they are discussing the same content numerous times. I think this may be the way of Japanese business. This is similar to formal business meetings between companies, where it often takes several meetings to discuss everything, plan a cooperation in detail, clarify where necessary and develop a cohesive plan before starting work on any given project. Sure this takes a lot of time, but in the end the cooperation works-unless unforeseen difficulties arise and the discussions have to start again.

After a long meeting, intensive working day, for special events, if a new colleague joins KYB or big



Photo 5 Young Engineers Nomikai in Sagamiono.

changes happen in the department, it is time for a Japanese “nomikai”. The word nomikai stands for a typical Japanese business tradition and means after work drinking party. Mainly around train stations you can find many different types of casual restaurants suitable as a nomikai location. Normally the first nomikai (a nomikai evening often consists of more than one drinking party) is held in an izakaya (drinking establishment that serves food beside of drinks), yakiniku (grilled meat) or seafood shop, where you can enjoy a lot of delicious food and for sure a lot of drinks (Photo 5).

One curious example of Japanese food you can get in yakiniku restaurants is nankotsu or “soft bone”, consisting mainly of animal cartilage. Before coming to Japan I said, that I will try every food I get served during a nomikai even if it looks a little strange... I have thus far. The second nomikai primarily consists of drinking and some small snacks or Japanese noodle soup such as ramen. Sometimes the final location of these evenings is a karaoke bar. The nomikai ends just in time for the last train back home. During events after work the topics of conversations change from business matters to more private ones and you can learn a lot about what the Japanese do in their spare time or on weekends.

4. Japan compared to Germany

Comparing Berlin, Germany’s largest city with almost 3.5 million inhabitants on 900 km², with Tokyo, and its nearly 10 million inhabitants on 600 km², the first big difference becomes visible very fast: less space and three times as many people than in Berlin (not taking the other 30 million

inhabitants of the metropolitan area including Yokohama into account). One question suddenly comes into my mind: "How do millions of people go to work every morning without a total collapse of the city?". It works, and it works much better than in many European metropolises. Trains, subways and even buses are in most cases on time, and on time means punctual to the minute. In my first year of living in Japan only once have I had a train in the morning be canceled on my daily commute and the next train arrived 6 minutes later. I cannot count how many trains were delayed or canceled when I worked in Berlin, but it is not possible to compare it with Japan. This becomes even more apparent when you look at the time table of the Japanese bullet trains, the Shinkansen (high-speed train). Departing nearly every 15 minutes you can trust that you reach your destination at an average speed of 250 km/h on time, even if it is 1100 km away (Tokaido/Sanyo Shinkansen operating between Tokyo and Hakata), which is an amazing feeling. Operating with nearly no delay within a day, these trains are very reliable. That is why many people use these trains for business and private reasons, even if the ticket price is relatively high and no discounts are available. You can only dream of punctuality like this when you use the high speed train, the ICE, in Germany.

When we arrived in Japan, we recognized one thing which is, in a very positive way, completely different to Germany, the service in shops. Whenever you enter a shop all shop clerks start to say "Irasshaimase" often with very amusing voices. "How can I help you?" is not just an empty phrase. The entire staff does everything for you in a shop to make you feel comfortable and to guarantee you the best service. "Always helpful, kind and smiling" is the philosophy of Japanese clerks. When paying for your items the cashier always makes sure to give you enough plastic bags for transportation to get them back home safely, even if you bought only a chocolate bar. The plastic bags may have one more practical use. Since public garbage bins are very rare, you can use them to take your trash back home and keep the streets clean. This attitude of high service is

visible everywhere in Japanese culture. Even when dealing with public transport, there are many people in each station helping you with all problems which might occur. They take care of the passenger's safety on the platform and organize the flow of people during rush hour by instructions via megaphone.

Sure there are many things in Germany we miss a lot besides family and friends. German beer is one example, having a higher variety of tastes compared the leading Japanese brands of the three largest breweries. Also watching and enjoying German football. Moreover the different opinion of work-life balance is sometimes difficult for us. While Germans take their holidays to relax, regenerate (get new ideas for the job) or spend time with family and friends, the Japanese seem to be always worried about taking days off and missing a day at work.

5. Future plans?!

We have now been living in Yokohama for one and a half years and not much time is left. Summarizing our stay here, we would definitely say that it was a very good decision to come to Japan. Getting in touch with a culture so far away and different from Germany was and still is a great experience. There are so many things left to see, discover and taste that the time will run out and the end of our stay will come too soon. Of course in the future Japan will be still a part of our life - a time and place we like to remember with many exciting memories. I would like to thank all members of the Materials Engineering Section for their help and understanding that it sometimes took a little time to understand how things work in Japan. This applies in particular to Kato-san, Kobayashi-san, Tamura-san, Nakase-san and Ito-san who have always supported my research work. Otsukaresama deshita, お疲れ様でした! I already learned a lot about the things described above and I am very happy about this experience.

What we do in future is not yet certain. Our plan is to improve our Japanese language skills more and go back to Germany when my contract ends next year. I really hope that there will be a possibility to continue my work with KYB.

— 著 者 —



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