

Kyoto is Japan's Santa Barbara

TOKYO HAS THE delights and drawbacks of New York City. But from the moment our bullet train arrived in Kyoto, southwest of Tokyo on the main island of Honshu, I began testing the hypothesis that Kyoto is the Santa Barbara of Japan. Though ten times as populous, Kyoto is also a beautiful city favored by mild climate and an association with environmentalism.

Kyoto's environmental label stems from the Kyoto Protocol, the agreement to stabilize greenhouse gases signed by 169 nations (neither the U.S. nor Australia) and in force since 2005. Santa Barbara's association was born with the 1969 oil spill that ravaged our coast and became a call to action.

Kyoto, spared from the worst World War II bombings, has elegant shrines and temples; its history and culture is preserved in intimate, unpretentious surroundings similar to our Presidio and Mission. Kyoto is known for lovely gardens; especially at peak cherry blossom season when a sea of pink and coral blossoms wave in breezes like our undulating Pacific.

Beyond superficial lists and observations, though, I found comparisons exceedingly difficult. Japanese or Western toilets, Amtrak or shinkansen (bullet train), open space or compartmentalization: Kyoto and Santa Barbara comparisons are as complex as East versus West.

The sashimi incident is a case in point. We are a split raw-fish family — two are adventurous eaters, while my son is a vegetarian and I prefer meat cooked.

The adventurers ordered. Our hostess Shinshe served an immense platter of sashimi, including a large-eyed seigo, a young sea bass, freshly butchered and



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artistically served with head and tail each propped up by cucumbers. Shinshe deftly dripped sake into the fish's mouth, causing it to open and close reflexively as if it were breathing. Our sushi-loving daughter shrieked and drew back violently. Emily's reaction so startled Shinshe that she almost dropped the platter. Japanese appreciate and expect this trick indicating the fish's freshness, but most Westerners don't want to see food moving on their plates.

Did I mention the toilets? Traditional Japanese toilets still exist: these look like floor-mounted urinals and require a proficient user to develop good aim and thigh muscles. These stalls typically are vacant unless the Western ones are all occupied. However, Japanese have added technology to Western-style toilets that is a generation ahead of ours, sporting controls so complicated that the wary may be unwilling to sit down.

Japanese "Western" toilets have heated seats — even in train stations and parks. This is a little unnerving at first, but I quickly came to appreciate its advantages. Business done, initially I was perplexed by the variety of buttons beckoning on the control panel by my side.

All were carefully labeled in characters. I took my best guess at the flushing option, and to my horror water started squirting out the toilet. I slammed down the lid, which merely redirected the water between the lid and the seat and onto the floor.

I learned quickly about built-in bidets and other unexplored washing options, including a blow drier. How to flush? The familiar handle on the water tank.

These examples portray Japanese as resource profligate, but in other ways

they are more environmentally aware. Construction zones in the city are equipped with digital readouts displaying the current noise and dust pollution level.

Homes are smaller and compartmentalized, though the traditional ones, made mostly of wood and paper, are energy sinks. Most households hang-dry their laundry, and the toilets (again!) often have an ingenious concave water tank lid equipped with faucet so that clean water replenishing the tank is available for hand-washing.

Though Amtrak is practically shunned, the shinkansen is popular, punctual, and clean. While Amtrak winds through scenic mountains, the shinkansen blasts straight through. We saved time but missed scenery and speculated about the tradeoffs in construction and environmental costs. In this and many other instances I found myself musing, "Is there a right way, or just different ways?"

Underpinning each city we visited and each train or subway we rode was the graciousness exhibited by Japanese with whom we interacted or encroached upon.

Each time we opened a map or squinted at a string of characters, a stranger appeared to our aid. Young saleswomen shyly covered their mouths and giggled at our son's attempt at phrase-book Japanese, but earnestly attempted to accommodate our foreign needs. I'm wondering, would a foreigner find that a contrast or similarity to how Santa Barbarans treat our visitors?

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Karen Telleen-Lawton's Tuesday column is a mélange of local people, nature, events, and observations transporting the reader around the world and back to Santa Barbara. She is a local writer and the author of Canyon Voices — the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon.