

japanese lessons

Harried commuters zipped past my daughter with hardly a glance each morning as we walked, hand in hand, toward a kindergarten on Tokyo's northwest side last summer.

But every so often, passing pedestrians or bicyclists looked startled. They noticed her long blonde hair spilling out of the straw sun hat that topped her Japanese school uniform. They smiled, as if they had just glimpsed something unbelievable.

My daughter, an American 6-year-old, was taking an unusual step. She was attending Japanese kindergarten for two weeks, something her mother and I had put her up to, intent on expanding her horizons.

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My wife and I had no idea how our daughter would react to school life in Japan. We didn't know what fellow students might make of her. We told her only that she'd be going to school in Tokyo while Dad did some work there.

Our daughter had two advantages. She attends The International School, where children study in second languages taught by native speakers. And in Japan, we lived with the Kamata family, a three-generation household that made her feel at home.

Even to an adult, Tokyo has a surreal feel of the sort captured in the movie *Lost in Translation*. "Wow, is this Disneyland?" asked our daughter, confronting a flag-bedecked pinball parlor.

In time, she did experience Tokyo Disneyland, accompanied by her mother, who went to great lengths to make Japan fun. There, and everywhere our daughter went, she got to see that Japanese was a language spoken throughout a whole country, not just by kids in a classroom back home.

She bathed each evening in a deep Japanese tub. She ate everything from miso soup to okonomiyaki, a cross between a pancake and a pizza. She slept on a futon.

Sometimes her unexpected command of the language awed

people. When she casually asked for soybeans in a store, four astonished clerks scrambled to comb the shelves.

Our home-stay family had gone to incredible lengths, finding the right uniform, buying the regulation school knapsack and procuring just the right kinds of lunchbox, markers and other equipment required by education authorities. Mrs. Kamata insisted on making the proper lunch each day, so our daughter would fit right in.

School seemed filled with foreign customs. Shoes came off at the door. The uniform and knapsack hung in the cubby, just so. A pink cap complemented blue shorts and a white T-shirt on the playground. Our daughter put the pieces together like a puzzle.

A few children stared at her or guffawed initially, as if Dorothy had landed in their Oz. But most accepted her with curiosity and friendship.

Some lessons from the trip may take years to sink in as we return to the photo album she shows people at home. But in two weeks, our daughter learned far more than Japanese vocabulary. She understood that although language and customs may differ, making friends is the same the world over. ▼

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