

Beamtime in Japan

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The bus driver makes me understand that we reached the final stop. Then this here indeed must be it: Harima Science Garden City Central Bus Terminal. There is no real terminal building, however, and also the city is not visible from here.

In contrast to what I have read, at this place one does not get the impression that Japan is very densely populated. Only a few cars are passing, and I am the only passenger in the bus at the time we reach the last stop. At least there is a public telephone, so that I can call someone to pick me up. When I wait, I am wondering whether the institute administration back in Germany for reimbursing travel expenses will believe that in Japanese buses no tickets or receipts are issued. (It turned out they do believe two bus rides per journey.)

Arrived at SPring-8 I am kindly received at Users Office. After watching the English version of the very nice and even humorous safety video, I am admitted to the experimental hall.

First impression: lots of space, and really big. Fortunately public bicycles are available for use by users, other than in some synchrotrons of (not really) similar dimensions. Later I try the canteen, which seems to be very good.

Another positive impression also later upon entering the guesthouse room: very comfortable and spacious. The good thing is that all rooms are single rooms, so that there is enough privacy to relax in the short time between finishing work at the experiment and falling asleep. Several appliances are found in the room the purpose of which does not immediately become clear for someone not familiar with Japanese writing. Some are probably related to heating and cooling. A display at the wall says

45°. That can only correspond to warm water. Before touching anything, I try if warm water is coming out of the tap. Fortunately it is, so there is no need to bother about the inscription at the several buttons. The alarm clock is simple enough to operate, so is the television set, and there is no need to heat or cool.

Apropos television: In contrast to other synchrotron guesthouses, there is even television in the room. Very good!

There are no English channels, though; but by just watching the Japanese television program one still gets quite some impression about the Japan outside the quiet rural environment of SPring-8.

Very quiet indeed; the first impression upon arrival has not been so wrong. There is nothing except one Italian restaurant within walking distance. (Luckily some months later Users Office offers the possibility of renting bicycles for outside the experimental hall.)

Any foreigner not having enough cash Yen will quickly notice an additional indication of the remoteness: Hoping for the cash dispenser machines at the automatic bank at Kouto Plaza to cash in money is a severe error for holders of foreign credit cards. The machines discriminate between Japanese and foreign credit cards, even of the same company. It turns out that the closest non-automatic bank with exchange facilities is in Himeji, one hour by bus.

So a trip to Himeji is a "must", not just because of the most famous castle, a UNESCO world treasure. Fortunately, unfortunately a problem at the experiment some days later makes a bakeout necessary, so that there is one spare day for going money-exchanging and sightseeing.

Himeji is really worth the journey! Apart from visiting the castle, streetlife in a Japanese city is a really different experience for someone already tending to identify Japan with SPring-8 and surroundings.

Getting around it becomes clear that there are certain disadvantages when being only able to read Latin characters. A kind of basic optical pattern recognition clearly can help. Astonishingly a lot is written in Katakana characters, which might be a little bit less impossible to learn... But I still can not force myself to a decision.

The final impulse then comes when seeing the ticket vending machine at the bar... Now I definitely decide that it is necessary to learn Katakana. But even with the help of my colleagues at the beamline it takes some time before deciphering the first words alone. But still much later one of the highest challenges in that respect always is the use of the computerized SPring-8 stockroom...

At that point of my short report it is starting to be more than just the first impressions upon going for a beamtime to Japan, so I stop here. This subjective description is surely not complete, and not meant to be representative. I have deliberately excluded all the things related to the experiment itself, and used this opportunity to solely focus on some aspects of working with synchrotron radiation that are usually not found in scientific

publications. Nevertheless these things, as traveling to foreign countries, seeing a lot of different people, seeing other experiments, making new friends, etc., in addition to an environment to make one feel well, are also important for doing a good job. This was all encountered at SPring-8.

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