

Tessa Sharp – a week in the life of ...

Sunday

Well, Sunday was an early start ... a 4am pick-up by taxi to take me out to the airport at London Heathrow's Terminal 5. "Thank goodness our client has agreed to cover Business Class flights this time!" I think to myself as I walk into the British Airways Business Class Lounge for a relaxed breakfast. The 14 hour flight to Tokyo is looming and I remember how tiring the 9 hour time difference was last time I did the trip to deliver a week's Leadership Development training for one of our global clients.

The flight stretches time and after eating a 3 course dinner with wine – at 10.45 in the morning ... very odd!! – and two films, I'm feeling very bored and wish we're there.

Finally the drone of the engine stops and the cabin is depressurised, releasing us from the stale air into the immaculate and clinical environment of Narita Airport. Feeling somewhat glazed (its 10.00pm to my body), we stagger stiff-legged out to the bright morning sunlight. It's 7.00am Monday morning and we have to find a way to stay awake for the day.

Monday

The hotel is lovely, a small quiet intimate affair, tucked in the back streets of the old part of the city. One of the few parts to retain the quaint, narrow streets of old Tokyo and not destroyed during the bombs of WW2. We meet our client over breakfast and walk the 3 blocks to the training offices. The sun is shining and it's bright and frosty – we blink in the sunlight, trying to shed off the sleeping tablets and the fact that it's 11pm in the UK and we've got the whole day of training ahead of us.

We meet the group of participants, 25 in total, and almost all Japanese, directors and partners. The names are unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce. They all behave very respectfully and sit expressionless in silence – "We'll need to be on our toes to flex with such a different cultural group and to get them to warm up so we can work with them".

The day passes in a daze; introductions, learning objectives; overview of the course; and by the afternoon there's laughter and a little informality now creeping into the room. We close for the day and wander back to the hotel. Totally exhausted from the level of attention needed for the group and the time difference.

Tuesday

The day finally dawns after a difficult and sleepless night. I made the mistake of not taking a sleeping tablet as I was so tired by 9pm, but was wide awake by midnight and clock-watching every hour from there on in. I rose at 4am and logged on – picking up emails and connecting with the office in the UK. So by the time we start, I feel like I've done a full day's work. We buckle down for the day and are thankful that it's such a dynamic and lively programme design. The pace is slower due to a lot of discussion and reflection on cultural differences, but the time passes quickly. We grab dinner in a local noodle-bar on the way back to the hotel. A massive bowl of freshly cooked noodles and meat in a delicious sauce. Prepared in front of you and served with chopsticks – fantastic! Back

to the hotel and we have a big piece of work landed from India. Spend the rest of the evening on the phone to colleagues in the USA talking through potential options and preparing a proposal to excite and delight. Collapse into bed at 9.30pm and sleep naturally until 4am – bliss!

Wednesday

On the way to the offices we discover a Starbucks – very welcome after buckets of green tea from vending machines. I order a large latte and treat myself to a large, chocolate coin – well, it is almost Christmas! The day passes quickly, although I hit the wall after lunch and find I can hardly string a sentence together. Let's just hope the participants don't notice. One of the Lead Partners in the client firm has invited us to dinner tonight, so we go back and shower and I find something vaguely appropriate to wear.

We are taken to a beautiful traditional Japanese restaurant – apparently one of the few remaining in Toyko. We have to remove our shoes at the door and take our seats at low tables on cushions on the floor. We decline the hot sake and stick to diet coke to try to stay awake for the evening. After 12 of the 16 courses of unrecognisable food. (We made the mistake of asking at course 3 what we were eating. It was beautifully presented in small, china bowls, and we were proudly informed that it was fresh, uncooked tuna liver. I wish we hadn't asked!). By course 14 we are both falling asleep (literally), and make our very humble apologies to depart. The chef is so disturbed by our early departure that he comes out of the kitchen to see if we didn't like the food. Loss of face is a big thing for the Japanese and I imagine people considered us very disrespectful, but there comes a point when you simply don't want to end up face down in your sushi in front of your client!

Thursday

This is the final day of the programme. It's been fabulous to see the participants' transformation from the quiet, bowing, respectful group at the beginning of the week, to the informal, laughing and curious group today. Many have made major shifts in their practice and I just hope they'll remember enough of their experience to take it back into their daily work. After a group lunch and much exchanging of business cards we depart back to the hotel, looking forward to a few hours down time before dinner.

There's exciting news from India, our client is really delighted with the proposal and asks us for more of our thinking. We shower quickly and sit to compile a thoughtful and provocative response. Time seems to have gone into limbo and my body has given up trying to work out sleep and meal times.

We walk out into the city and find another Korean noodle bar. No one speaks English and I've no idea what I've ordered, but it arrives hot and colourful and tastes fantastic. Nothing processed, microwaved, or out of a packet here. No wonder no-one looks fat.

As we wander slowly back to the hotel – peeking in shop windows which display ridiculously-expensive prices – our thoughts begin to turn to packing and the long flight back in the morning.

Friday

After breakfast at 7.00am, we grab a taxi to take us to the local bus station where we board a bus to the airport. How different things are here – each bus has a ticket collector, a luggage handler and a

driver. All wear uniforms and white gloves. As the bus leaves the station, the ticket collector and luggage handler stand on the pavement and bow respectfully to the bus.

We board the plane around 10.30am and are greeted by the British Airways cabin crew. A reassuringly familiar welcome. We land around 2pm that day after a 13 hour flight – very odd! The taxi driver is standing at Arrivals and whisks us back along the M25 and M3 to our home in Winchester. As we walk through the front door it's just getting dark around 5pm on Friday evening.

Phew, what a week. This week Tokyo, next week Dallas – what a glamorous life we consultants lead! Our thoughts turn to laundry, packing for Sunday and the long-haul flight.....

