

The Next Level

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Sports and Games Translator

Tokyo Pt. 2: Cosplay and Dog Goggles

Tales from the Motherland of Shrines and Games

In summer 2006, I spent six weeks working in what must be one of the most contradictory countries in the world, implementing the German localization of a prestigious RPG project from familiarization to translation and bug fixing on site for a global player from the video game industry.

This assignment took me to Tokyo, where tradition and technology clash like probably nowhere else in the world.

It's only now, over six years later, that I feel mentally capable of digesting my experiences from the Land of the Rising Sun. In this second part of the Tokyo series, I'd like to show you around the city's streets and, more specifically, introduce you to some of the people walking, strutting and strolling them. Forget all you know about fashion. Have your sunglasses at the ready – your eyes are in for a glaring surprise!

It all started with my daily explorations into Tokyo on a workday morning. I had to kill some time before the actual work started (because of the time difference with London, we freelance translators did not start working before 11am so that we were better aligned with GMT and the European team). So I decided to head into the Shibuya fashion district, home of Tokyo's "Champs Elysées," international boutiques and restaurants. This is the haunt of Japanese fashion designers such as Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo – and just down the road from all the freaky cosplay shops. This I only found out later... What first caught my attention was a traditional Shinto celebration with costumed processions in the streets:





Further up the road, on a large square next to the station, there were big dancing groups hitting a stage in quick succession. They all entered through a gate leading out from the Meiji Shrine towards the festival stage, performed ten minutes of perfectly timed high-energy choreography and then melted away into the crowd.



There were about 30 or 40 groups consisting of 20 to 50 people each. The songs played were something between powerful techno and Japanese folklore (as far as I was able to judge).



Now if that's what tradition looks like, you have to wonder: what on earth rebellious teenagers do in this city to shock their parents... This is about as colourful as it can get, right? Well, brace yourselves for cosplay!

The cosplay culture can be described as punk, gothic and manga all rolled into one. Or rather: a pubescent or post-pubescent Lolita rolled into the corresponding costumes. Let me give you some first-hand visual shock experience:



To make tourists and not-so-hip Japanese from out of town shiver with insult to good taste, some added the element of acoustic torture (high-pitched karaoke-style). The perfect dissonance. It was as if listening to Marilyn Manson's version of Hickory Dickory Dock.



Arriving at the office later that morning, I was sure my haul of photographs would not fail to impress my Spanish, Italian and French colleagues. "Hey," I went, "I have a nice place for you to go. You've got to check out those kids at Shibuya..." When I showed them the pics, they just said: "Yeah, unbelievable, aren't they? We saw them this morning too. By the way, did you check out Pet City, where they sell dog fashion and dog goggles?"

You won't be surprised to learn that in the end it was me who asked them for a copy of their image files...



The day we left, we decided to get our lovely project assistant Shizuka a goodbye present she'd remember. And we got it in Shibuya, of course. I still can't work out whether Bugs and Lola are cute or scary.

And the same holds true for the cozplaying youth in Shibuya.



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