

Hello everybody and Happy New Year!

Time flies and it's been already more than a week since the start of 2020. How did you spend your New Year break? I tried to spend mine like a Japanese!

In Japan, *Oshōgatsu* (New Year) is a family time. Unfortunately, my family wasn't able to be here with me, but I'm lucky to have some wonderful friends who invited me to celebrate *Oshōgatsu* with them.

And so I went to visit my friends in Tokyo. We started New Year celebrations on the afternoon of the 31st, with some *toshikoshisoba* (year closing soba noodles) as per tradition. My friend explained to me the reason behind this tradition: Japanese eat soba so their life be as long as the noodles. That makes sense, actually! Since it was still quite early when we finished our meal, we went for an hour for some karaoke. I don't think this particularly is a New Year's tradition here but we really wanted to avoid being outside in the cold for too long, and karaoke seemed to be a good shelter.

The friend I was staying with lives close to Asakusa so we decided to celebrate the New Year in famous Senso-ji temple. As expected, there were huge crowds in Asakusa that night and we needed to wait in a long queue with all the people, every now and then refreshing ourselves with some delicious *amazake* (sweet sake)! Drinking *amazake* is also one of the things you do in New Year time. *Amazake* might be very low in alcohol but this sweet rice drink served hot can warm your up really nicely!

All foreigners not too familiar with Japan beware! - there are no New Year countdown in Japan! The sound of the temple bell ringing, the so called *joya no kane* (New Year's Bell), signaled the midnight and the start of 2020. We were slowly moving with the crowd towards the main entrance to reach the altar after about an hour or so. After paying our respect to the deities we drew some *omikujī* (fortune), curious what's ahead of us in 2020. I got *kichi* - luck. Pretty good, I'll take it! - I thought and felt somewhat reassured this year is going to be really good indeed! Next, we moved to *yatai* (food stall) market set on the grounds of the temple for that night. It was really difficult to choose what to eat so I went again for soba noodles, although this time the fried version, *yakisoba*.

My Tokyo friend - as per tradition and duty - went back to her hometown in Yamanashi prefecture on the afternoon of January 1st to spend the rest of the break with her family. I stayed with some other friends for one more day and came back to Kaminoyama on the 2nd of January very keen to do the *hatsumōde* (first shrine/temple visit of the year) also in one of the local temples. I went to Tsukioka Shrine, close to Kaminoyama Castle. I didn't buy any *omikujī*

there, but I got a beautiful *goshuin* (seal stamp given in temples and shrines) to mark my visit.

I really enjoyed my Japanese *Oshōgatsu*! I was thinking that in many ways it reminds a little bit how we spend Christmas in Poland.

In Japan, *Oshōgatsu* is the most important time of year spiritually and a time you go back to your hometown and spent time with your family. In Poland this is exactly how it is with Christmas, not New Year. Preparations start very early in December when every city is being decorated with Christmas lights etc., people are visiting Christmas markets and do a lot of shopping. It's a very festive but very busy time. Christmas itself is celebrated between the 24th and 26th of December, with the most important event being the Christmas Eve Dinner, the so called *Wigilia*, on the evening of the 24th. Traditionally there should be 12 dishes served. They may vary in different regions in Poland but at least three of them are a must everywhere: *barszcz* (beetroot soup), *uszka* (dumplings stuffed with mushrooms and onions) and a fish, usually it's a carp dish. The menu is long – established thing so it resembles a bit Japanese New Year's *Osechi ryōri*, in my opinion. Among other similarities, for example the tradition of *hatumōde* might be regarded as similar to church visits many Poles pay during Christmas.

On the other hand, when it comes to New Year celebration, it's quite different than in Japan. In Poland, in fact in other parts of Europe as well, you usually party with friends. It may be a house party, a club party, a fancy ball, or a huge concert organized in the city center but it's very very festive! 10 seconds before the midnight countdown starts and at the 0.00 hour everybody's raising a toast to New Year. This is followed by fireworks which in some cities are very spectacular events.

Regardless of the above comparisons, to me Christmas & New Year holiday season is one of the nicest time of the year. I'm really glad I had opportunity to spend it this time in Japan. New experiences and challenges are priorities on my New Year resolutions list. Do you have any New Year resolutions? I've heard in Japan it is not really that popular, however...

That's it for today.

Until next time!

Hanna