

Summary of the Japan trip 2023

On 29 October, 30 expectant participants set off on a week-long study trip to Japan. Here the plan was to gain an insight into both Japanese agriculture and Japanese culture.

Japan may be a slightly unusual destination for Danish farmers, but with 124 million Japanese consumers, and a large import of both pork and dairy products, it is still a market worth diving into. – Japan is a mountainous country, arable land is scarce, - only 11% is cultivated, and the self-sufficiency rate for food is only 38%. So the purpose of the trip was to get direct contact with the Japanese farmers, experience their everyday life, and hear about the conditions they work under in everyday life.

The trip started after an approx. 12 hour long flight by figuring out how to buy a train ticket that could take us to the agreed hotel, and here we got acquainted with the efficient Japanese train system for the first time. The majority of Japanese people are transported by train, and this is understandable, as trains in Japan are precise, efficient and fast. You also feel it when you have figured out the system and get on the train: They are really well filled, and at rush hour you stand like herring in a barrel. But everything takes place quietly, and in good order, like most things in Japanese society. It is said that out of the world's 52 busiest train stations, only 9 are not located in Japan! "The hotel we were installed in was located in downtown Tokyo, and with a room on the 35th floor, there was a fantastic view of the modern metropolis. Especially in the evening, it was an impressive sight with the many lights and billboards, something most participants had ample opportunity to "enjoy", as it was difficult to sleep the first few nights due to jet lag.

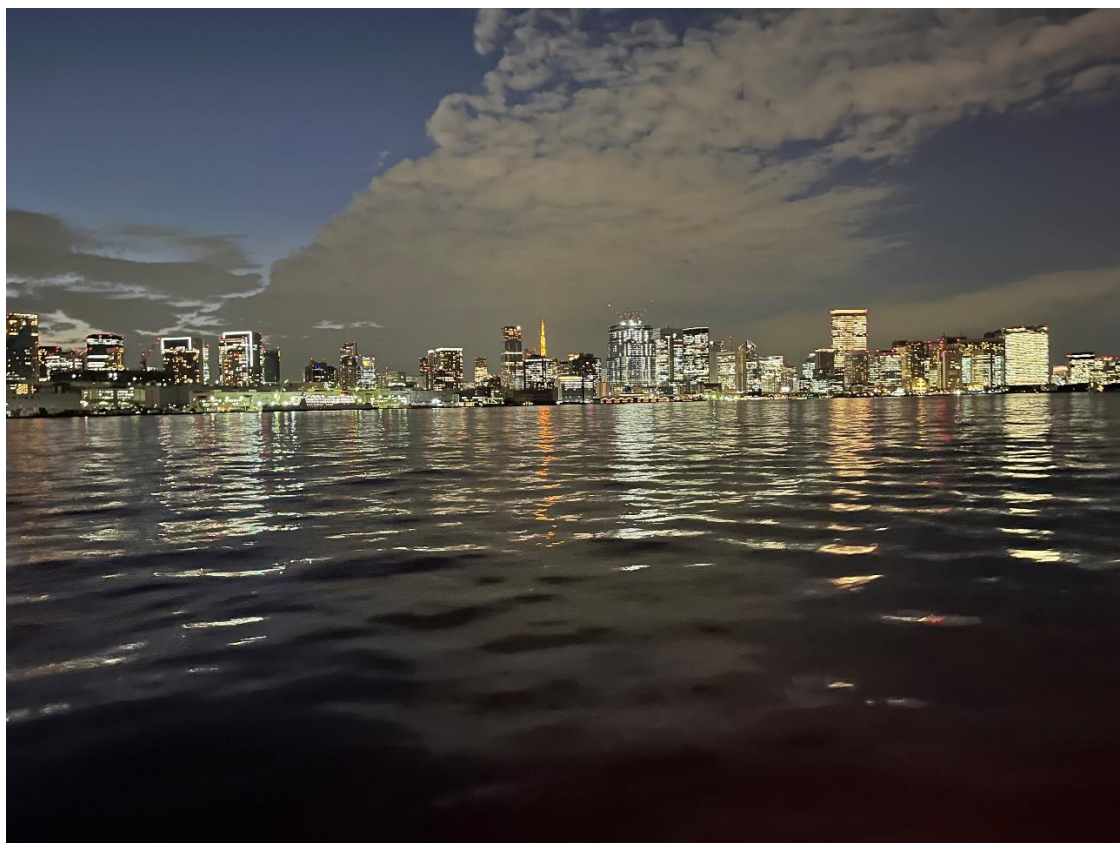
The first program item was a visit to the Danish embassy in Tokyo, where Ambassador Peter Taksøe-Jensen, in a room packed with Danish designer furniture, told about Japan's history, politics and economy. Then followed a presentation on Japan's agriculture in a changing world by Jesper Vibe-Hansen, Ministerial Advisor at the Embassy, and finally a presentation from DC's Japanese representative, Director Hiroyuki Kurahara. Especially the last speech was a little shocking to see, as Danish exports of pork had fallen from more than 250,000 tons in 2004 to now just over 75,000 tons, and this despite an increasing consumption of pork by the Japanese consumer. Part of the explanation was that more and more is imported from the USA and Canada as refrigerated meat, whereas from Europe it can only be exported as frozen goods. Previously, Denmark was the EU's largest exporter from Europe, but this place has now been taken over by Spain. (The presentation can be seen here....Link)

The next visit to Tokyo was at the headquarters of the large nationwide cooperative JA (Japan Agriculture Co-operative), which is a very large and powerful organization in the agricultural sector in Japan. Virtually all Japanese farmers are members of the cooperative, which takes care of both financing (i.e. loans to farmers, guaranteed by the state), insurance, marketing and marketing of the farmers' products (where they have large silo plants and storage facilities), sale of fertilizers and chemicals and agricultural aids, as well as a comprehensive advisory service. They also have commercial and private properties, including agriculture and land, and participate in many social activities in Japanese society. The large meeting room on the top floor of a 27-storey building in the center of Tokyo, also testifies to a very powerful and financially strong organization that really has an impact on large parts of Japanese society, with an emphasis on agriculture of course. – All in all, a good introduction to the trip into "real life", namely a one-day visit to Hokkaido, located in northern Japan.

The evening offered a "Dinner cruise" on one of Tokyo's rivers, where, in addition to a fantastic view, we could enjoy a variety of local dishes, as well as participate in a traditional game of Karaoke. Really a good evening, where we unfortunately missed the five of the group who were stranded in Amsterdam due to problems with the plane, and therefore did not arrive until late in the evening.

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Day two offered a domestic flight of about 2 hours to Hokkaido, an agricultural area in northern Japan the size of Denmark.

At the airport before departure, we greeted our local guide/tour guide Asger Røjle Christensen for the first time, who from that moment accompanied us on the rest of the trip. Asger is a writer and journalist, has been a tour guide countless times, is Japanese married, and has lived in Japan for 13 years. He brought with him Japanese Masumi, 76 years old, and our interpreter, who along the way took everyone by storm with his great energy, his infectious humor and incredible ability to translate even difficult agricultural terms with great professionalism.

The first bus stop on the tour was at Kalm Kakuyama, a large modern cattle farm. Here, as everywhere else we went, we were welcomed by a delegation of at least 5 more or less prominent people, and then shown around the farm by the director of the farm himself, according to several high-ranking employees.



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It was a very modern cattle farm, with robotic milking and automatic feed mixing, and the yield from the approx. 200 HF cows of Canadian origin was at quite a high level around 10,000 kg. Milk/cow/year. During the visit, we discussed a lot of sustainability, which is high on the agenda of Japanese farmers, and this farm really had its own biogas plant, with a 175 KW generator. However, it was not The whole year system

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worked, because in winter it was preferred to send the slurry through a treatment plant, where the "clean" water after the process was led directly into the river. The reason for this was that they did not have storage capacity for the slurry in winter, when it was not possible to run manure on the fields, which were not affiliated with the dairy company. Another special thing was that the cows were sprinkled with dried coffee grounds, which was considered a really sustainable idea, as it was recycled as a waste product and at the same time contributed to a better production in the biogas plant. (which only worked in summer though)

– In general, there was great surprise that we were such a large group (32) when we came to visit, and at the next stop of the day, Hokkaido central Farm, pig farm with 6,000 sows and approx. 240,000 slaughter pigs, we had to figure out how to divide ourselves into two groups, as their meeting room was not big enough for everyone. However, it went smoothly, as almost all the women went with Asger to a nearby supermarket, while almost all men went to the pig farm. Here, however, it was not possible to enter the farm, but the group was given a presentation at the head office. Meanwhile, Asger was the guide on the ladies' tour, and here the local, exotic goods were taken into view, prices were studied and compared, and big eyes were made over 5 liter Whiskey plastic bottles.....

For those who were visiting the pig farm's head office, we got a review of the company's pig production and their results. It was Hokkaido's largest integrated producer, with both feed and primary production, as well as its own slaughterhouse of a total of 7 units in the southern half of the peninsula. (I'm still trying to get hold of the presentation, but it's not yet succeeding, but here's a link to the company's website:

<https://hokkaido-chuobokujo.com/>



In Hokkaido it was beautiful autumn weather, with high sun, clear air, and the most beautiful colors of the many deciduous trees, something all those who did not close their eyes in the bus, could enjoy.

The next day we broke up from the hotel, packed our bags on the bus, and drove to the first visit of the day to Rakuno Gakuen University, an agricultural university... Here we were benched in the lecture hall and heard blah. A post about biogas, environment and agriculture in Japan.

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The university, and in general the Hokkaido peninsula, which houses Japan's most efficient agricultural production, has a strong historical connection to Danish Agriculture, where Asger Røjle, who has written a book on exactly this topic ("Hokkaido - Danish agricultural pioneers in Japan") could tell about the many interfaces between Danish and Japanese agriculture. The conclusion after the meeting with the director and a number of teaching staff from the university was that Japan would certainly benefit from maintaining the close connection to Danish agriculture, where they could not least learn a lot from the great progress that has been made in a number of areas related to sustainability and efficiency in Danish agriculture.

As with all other visits, the séance ends with a group photo with the hosts, and from the bus there was a wave of tenacity to the farewell committee, - this is simply expected and considered good practice by the polite Japanese.



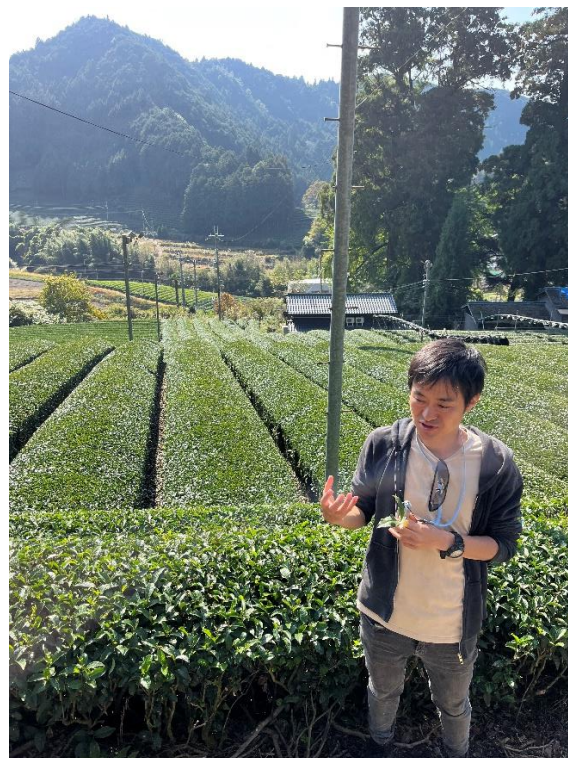
After a good lunch, we headed to the airport, after which the flight took us to Kyoto in southern Japan. Here awaited a nice restaurant visit, a hotel and two whole nights. In Kyoto, the temperature was around 23-24 degrees, so t-shirts and sunglasses were found to everyone's delight.

After an early breakfast, the next day we went to an exciting visit to a young, energetic Japanese couple who grow tea, and have an attached café where guests had the opportunity to taste the goods. The young tea farmer toured the tea fields and answered all questions with great eagerness. All participants were given the task of "harvesting" 5 shoots, which were to be delivered in the café, where his wife received.

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Both spoke excellent English, which is not at all the norm among Japanese. In the café, everyone got samples of the green tea and was asked to rate the different ones in terms of taste. In addition, it was shown how to make a cup of tea by the book, and it is a bit more hassle than when we plop a tea bag in boiling water, was the conclusion. – the 5 shots were finally served to us, dipped in batter and deep fried, - lovely.



The second item on the day's program was a visit to Nakabayashi Wagyu farm, Iga city, the birthplace of the ninja!. Many had been looking forward to seeing the famous cattle, but during the bus the plans were partially thwarted, as a veterinary delegation visited the farm that very day, and when the chief veterinarian heard about the Danish visit, the message was that no one could visit the farm unless you had stayed at least 6 days in Japan before the visit. We could almost meet that, but not quite, so the bus backed close to the boxes with the large heifers, which were then inspected through the window.

Wagyu meat is an expensive delicacy, and reportedly the animals get a very special treatment with beer and massages every day. However, there was little indication of this on this farm, where the fat heifers went indoors on sawdust in boxes of four pieces, and the very marked fat marbling in the meat comes from the special feed mixture consisting of wheat, corn, herbs, grass, seaweed and mash (hence the myth of beer), and since there is very little roughage they get along with very little exercise, this feeding contributes, together with the genetics, to the very pronounced fat marbling, which gives a whole unusually rich taste and tenderness of the meat. And even though the compound feed is relatively expensive, there is probably still good economy in production, as a heifer weighing 800 kg will pay approximately DKK 60,000 to the slaughterhouse.

As a plaster on the wound for the inability to touch the precious animals, at a subsequent meeting with representatives of both the farm, the cattle producers' association, and the regional authorities, salad and wagyu meat were served to everyone, which we grilled ourselves on a small table grill.



The day ended with a restaurant visit, where the menu was once again Japanese, which involves: Many small, delicate dishes, carefully put together to take into account both taste and aesthetics: raw and prepared fish, small pieces of chicken, soups, rice and exciting vegetables. Everyone quickly became familiar with the chopsticks, and the local rice wine was also put to life. Everywhere we were benched in a screened room at low tables standing in a hole. Guests sit on pillows on the edge, and to the great relief of many, we found out on the first evening that there is actually room for your legs under the table, so you do not have to sit with your legs crossed all evening! "There is a time limit on how long you can occupy the room, and a couple of times our rather vocal company was actually quite definitely asked to leave when the time was up. – Therefore, other "watering holes" had to be found for the participants who were not yet ready to see duvets, and it was not always easy to find a bar with room for so many rowdy guests, but where there is a will, there is a way, so it succeeded in a marvelous way every time.



On the last day in Kyoto, the bus tour went to visit the Green Farm Yunoguchi, a plant farm where rice, vegetables and cereals were grown. There was a great deal of questioning, and many comparisons were made between Japanese and Danish plant breeding.....

Probably the most significant difference was the very high state subsidy for crop production, where, for example, the official side is aware of the large burden rice cultivation has on CO2 emissions, which is why you give a subsidy of as much as DKK 16,000 per hectare / year if you grow wheat instead of rice. Here, too, we got the impression of how much influence the large cooperative YES has on farmers' operations, finances and thus decisions. But the farmer was energetic and believed in a good future for his farm, where sustainability also played a big role.





The last trip on the bus brought us to Kyoto train station, a huge one, and here too Asger and Masumi kept track of the troops so that we all arrived on time by fast train departing 15.01. The fast train, Shinkansen, got us at a speed of 300 km/h. (speed record 443 km/h)Back to Tokyo in 2 hours. The train is elegant and streamlined, and inboard you sit on three men's seats, not unlike in an airplane, but with the difference that there is really good legroom. An incredibly efficient way to be transported, and this line carries billions of people annually! And you might want to send people from DSB to Japan to learn something, because the average delay time is **6 seconds**, calculated on the basis of 160,000 trips between Kyoto and Tokyo

"Back home" again, in Tokyo, we were again staying in the same hotel, and almost the same dizzying floor. In the evening we had a farewell dinner, -(fish again, again as someone noted), as this was the last evening of the official program. In fact, 8 participants had already left the party at Shinkansen to continue a few more days on their own, and the next day became departure day for most remaining participants, either on an extended holiday, or home to Denmark. However, most people could manage to participate in a definite sightseeing tour in Tokyo with Asger as a very knowledgeable guide. In general, Asger told about the culture in Japan throughout the trip, and answered with great knowledge all the questions we might have, both about agriculture, school systems, apartment prices, geishas and much more, so the many hours in the bus were certainly not without content.



In summary, it can be said of Japan that it is an incredibly "proper" and well-organized country in many ways: There is no garbage anywhere, - no garbage cans, - you take your waste with you, including cigarette butts and dog hay dumps. If the dog urinates on the street, the owner must rinse it away with water brought for the same purpose. – Agreed times are adhered to to the letter, trains run exactly on time. The Japanese themselves are polite, some of the older bordering on the submissive, subdued and accommodating.

The tour participants were in every way happy, well-mannered, committed, listening,,and with a natural thirst!

Thank you for good company on an eventful, different and intense trip to the distinctive but fortunately peaceful country.

Maren og Tom Axelgaard



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